Research Article

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Approaches to the education of career development professionals: Current realities and future directions

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Abstract

This study explores the approaches that are used in the education of career professionals in the UK and beyond. Using a survey of providers of initial education for career development professionals, we gathered data to examine the practice and philosophy of these programmes. We find a high degree of consensus around the key areas of education for career professionals and that this broadly maps onto the framework set out by the Network for Innovation in Career Guidance and Counseling in Europe (NICE). There is strong agreement that the education of career professionals should address theory, practice and professional issues and that there are a range of emerging concerns that need to be addressed more in the future (technology, social justice, working across contexts, and emerging practices). Analysing the survey data, one of the key challenges that emerges is that programmes tend to be more focused on individualistic approaches and that this focus often provides limited space for attention to systemic approaches to career guidance. The study also finds some important epistemic and philosophical differences in the way initial education providers consider the role of theory and its relationship to practice. These issues are discussed and implications for initial education providers and researchers set out.

Keywords: career development, career development professionals, competence frameworks, initial education, training career guidance professionals, professional issues

Introduction

Career guidance describes professional forms of practice which support 'individuals and groups to discover more about work, leisure and learning and to consider their place in the world and plan for their futures' (Hooley et al., 2018, p.20). Such a task is ambitious, and yet, the profession is frequently described as being weakly professionalised, with considerable and ongoing energy invested into how the field can be further professionalised (Bakke & Harjula, 2024; Gough & Neary, 2020; Nilsson & Hertzberg, 2022). The dilemma is what sort of professional education or training should be required or encouraged for professionals undertaking such an important task as helping people to plan their futures, find their way to the good life and make a meaningful contribution to society and the economy. Moreover, what should the nature and scope of this education be and how should it be provided.

National professionalisation projects include a wide range of different processes designed to drive up the level of professionalism within the careers field, including negotiations to forge a regulatory bargain with government, struggles for recognition by the public and other professional groups, and the wider argument for appropriate funding for career guidance services. Such processes are about the relationship between the profession and wider society, yet all of them balance on top of the idea that the career development profession is educated, qualified and capable of delivering high quality and professional services. Yet, the nature of initial education in career development has received very limited attention in the research literature. Consequently, in this article we are going to focus on how career development professionals are educated and consider what this means about how the profession understands itself and its role.

Discussions about the initial education of the profession are often described as questions about the level and nature of the *training* that careers professionals require. Indeed, we used the term 'training' to solicit participants in the study, partially because we recognise that this term is in common parlance. However, in this article we have generally framed what is taking place as the 'initial education' of career development professionals, thereby appearing to take a side in a centuries-old debate of educational philosophy. Dearden (1984) reviews this debate critically noting that training seeks to achieve 'competence or operative efficiency' (p.58) through the development of skill, whilst education 'is a matter of conceptual insight, explanatory principle, justificatory or interpretative framework and revealing comparison. It also involves a degree of critical reflectiveness and hence autonomy of judgement' (p.62). Offering these definitions, it is clear that what is taking place in the initial formation of career professionals includes both aspects of training and education. We would also agree with Dearden that it is important to value both education and training, to be aware of the distinctions between the two and to recognise that in practice they are likely to overlap. So, although we have generally used the formulation of 'education' to describe our object of study, such a decision should not be taken as a denigration of the real and valuable elements of training that exist in all the programmes that we have looked at. Rather than obsessing over two oppositional terms, we prefer to emphasise that the focus here is a theoretically informed *practice*, and the complexity of the theoretical material at our disposal is going to necessitate critical reflectiveness and autonomy.

This project emerged out of our work on *The Career Development Handbook* (Hooley et al., 2024). In that volume we set out a broad vision for career professionals, informed by a wide range of frameworks. Key to our thinking have been the *European Competence Standards for the Academic Training of Career Practitioners* developed by the NICE network (henceforth 'NICE framework') (Schiersmann et al., 2012; 2016), however, we have also considered the 11 core activities of guidance developed through the Standing Conference of Associations for Guidance in Educational Settings (SCAGES, 1992), the 'Nine Core Duties' and 'Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours' articulated by the 'trailblazer' group of employers of career guidance professionals in England as part of the development of the apprenticeship standards (Institute for Apprenticeships, 2019) as well as other frameworks such as those proposed by professional bodies including the Career Development Institute (CDI) in England. Each of the frameworks articulates the skills and competencies of career professionals in a different way and emphasises slightly different areas, but all these frameworks describe career professionalism in broad terms as something that is multifaceted and complex. We have also reflected on the overlaps that exist between career development and related professions such as coaching and teaching (Frigerio & McCash, 2013; Hooley et al., 2015).

The existing literature and professional frameworks emphasise that career development work consists of a range of professional functions beyond the trinity of information, advice and guidance (IAG). In fact, such frameworks, particularly SCAGES, tend to view 'guidance' as an umbrella term beneath which a range of methods and approaches are utilised which include counselling, career assessment, careers education and a range of more systemically-orientated practices such as advocacy, feedback into educational and employment systems and forms of campaigning and social justice work.

The NICE framework provides a good summary for this kind of broader conception of the profession and is based around five areas of competence which are described as follows.

- Career information and assessment expert
- Career counsellor
- Career educator
- Social systems intervenor and developer
- Programme and service manager

This kind of broad description of the role and competences of career development professionals is appealing because it offers a flexible approach to career development practice and gives professionals a wide range of tools which they can use to support the career development of others. This way of thinking about career development practice is also attractive as it offers a range of opportunities to engage with groups, collectives and systems, moving career guidance beyond a narrow individualism and opening the possibility for other forms of practice that can contribute to social justice (Hooley et al., 2018; 2019).

In developing *The Career Development Handbook* we realised that while we had a theoretical and conceptual framework for the volume which was supported by our own experience of educating career professionals across a range of higher education institutions, we were unsure as to how this mapped onto the wider practice of those

involved in the initial education and continuing professional development of career professionals. We wanted to ascertain whether our conception of what constituted the underpinning knowledge for the profession and what forms of practice were critical, was shared by others. Furthermore, we were interested in examining what we had missed and whether there were forms of practice that we had not considered.

To explore this, we developed a survey for people involved in the education of careers professionals. We circulated this through our networks in the UK and a small number of other countries. The results informed the creation of *The Career Development Handbook*, but in this article, we wanted to revisit these data more analytically and present what we learnt. We use this analysis to inform wider conversations about the nature of the careers profession, the education of career professionals, and the project of professionalisation.

Following a brief review of what is already known about educating career development professionals, we present an account of the findings from our data. We relate those findings to the extant literature and from there, present our reflections on some key debates in the future education of career development professionals that we believe need to take place. This study makes an original contribution to the understanding of how initial education of career development professionals is organised and particularly to the conceptual and ideological understanding of this activity. Our findings suggest that while there is agreement about the core of this education there are also some important differences with a variety of practices emerging on issues such as public policy, the understanding of education and labour market systems, and the importance of leadership. The study also indicates the existence of hitherto unremarked upon epistemic differences in the ways in which theory and practice is understood and taught. These findings matter both for the discussion of the future of professional education in the field and for the wider debate about what a careers professional is and what practices, theories and values should lie at the heart of their practice.

What we know about the education of career professionals

There is a limited but growing literature which explores the education of career professionals internationally. Some work has focused on what such education should cover, typically emphasising areas such as career theory, career assessment, career counselling, job-search skills, evidence-based practice and relevant policy (Niles, 2014; Pinto, 2012). There is also a range of work which has looked at the development of career guidance education for specific contexts such as schools (Hooley, 2023) and higher education (Brown et al., 2019). This raises important questions about how far career guidance can be understood as a generic competency rather than a contextually situated one. Sultana (2009) also raises a broader question as to whether lists of skills and knowledge fully capture what it is to be a career professional arguing for more open articulations of professionalism which recognise the importance of socialisation and criticality as well as the performance of tasks.

A pan-Nordic study of the education of career professionals found that the criteria in the NICE framework were reflected in education programmes across the Nordic region (Andreassen et al., 2019). However, they note that there continues to be a stronger emphasis on individual approaches, with the competencies for working at organisational and societal levels often neglected. A similar comparative study of education in the Czech

Republic, Norway, Slovakia, and Poland by Hooley and Schulstok (2020) also found that education broadly mapped onto the NICE framework although there was little evidence of the development of leadership and management competencies. They also highlighted the growing importance of digital guidance skills and identified key theories that were taught in these countries, with matching theories, narrative theories, learning theories, developmental theories and social justice and sociological theories the most common perspectives.

Other work in this area highlights the influence of public policy funding and regulation on the nature and shape of career guidance education (Gough, 2017). More than twenty years ago McCarthy (2004) argued that internationally there are typically big distinctions in the kinds of initial education and training approach that is used for those working within the education system (which is typically more academic, more formalised and more highly regulated) and those working within the labour market (where education and training are more likely to be scarce and unregulated). This distinction remains recognisable today with schools and the wider education system more likely to seek professionals with qualifications (Hooley, 2023) than those working within public employment services, community settings and other career guidance settings (Lai et al., 2025).

This brief review of key literature tells us that there is some level of consistency in what is taught in career guidance education programmes across Europe and beyond. The NICE framework provides a strong starting point for summarising what such programmes typically cover, although there is good reason to think that some of its competencies, particularly the more individually focused ones, are covered more deeply than others. Furthermore, it is also important to recognise that the education of career development professionals is typically highly responsive to policy directives and that this is likely to mean that training across the different sectors in which career guidance is practiced is likely to be very different.

Methodology

Our study investigated the approaches taken in a range of different career guidance education programmes. It took the form of a survey with both quantitative and qualitative elements which was distributed online. It was aimed at individuals involved in delivering education programmes for career professionals and began by asking for information about the level and nature of the programme, and the pedagogy that was utilised. It also asked a series of questions informed by the literature review set out above, about course content focusing on the following areas: professional issues, contextual issues, career theory, career counselling, career education, information and resources and organisations and systems. In each of these sections a list of potential topics covered by courses was included and individuals were asked to report in relation to their courses whether it was 'a key feature and we cover it to a great extent', it was 'a minor feature and we cover it to some extent', it was not covered 'but we would like to address this', and it was not covered and we 'have no intention to'. A final set of questions focused on what participants felt were the top three things that courses needed to include and which areas they thought were emerging or needed more coverage.

The survey was granted ethical approval by the University of Warwick and hosted on the Qualtrics platform via the University. The survey was distributed through personal contacts of the researchers and via mailing lists including the NICE Network across Europe

and NICEC in the UK. Data were anonymised and stored securely. Respondents had the opportunity to provide an email address if they wanted to hear more about *The Career Development Handbook*, but these data were held separately to the survey data.

There were 21 valid responses: 16 from the UK and 5 from other countries (Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Australia, and Sweden). While a sample of 21 is relatively small , this needs to be understood in the context of the relatively small population of providers involved in the training of career professionals in the UK and beyond. It also represents more than 21 programmes of study as some respondents offer multiple programmes. This sample is skewed towards the UK, and particularly to England which represents an important limitation of the study. It would be good to undertake a similar study in the future which used more robust sampling approaches to engage a wider range of countries. Respondents were free to answer any or all of the questions and partial responses were included in the analysis. This means that in some cases fewer than the full sample of 21 responded to some questions.

Findings

The majority of courses were reported as at masters level (13) with a lower number at bachelors degree level (10) and a small number at a level below bachelors level (4). This distinction by level has been used to explore some of the data below, but as will be seen the differences in focus by level proved to be fairly limited. However, as the sample size is low such observations should be interpreted carefully. The majority of participants were delivered mainly part time (11), with a further 8 delivering both part-time and full-time and only 2 respondents reporting that they delivered mainly full-time.

A question about the distinctiveness of programmes revealed further diversity of delivery mode as well as content with respondents highlighting a range of features of their programme including flexibility of delivery, the inclusion of placements and work-based learning, online delivery and the provision of dedicated one-to-one tutor support. Although the particularity of the delivery approaches varied between different providers, the overall picture was of widespread support for participatory and experiential pedagogic approaches with examples including developing practice through case studies, peer feedback and small group learning. Two-thirds of respondents reported that they do not use large lectures as a pedagogic approach on their programme. It is likely that in addition to the pedagogic value of small group teaching, many providers also struggle to recruit larger cohorts, but the issue of cohort size was not systematically investigated in this study and may be an area that would benefit from further research.

Overall, there was a high degree of consistency between respondents in relation to the areas that their course covered. Most reported that each topic was either ‘a key feature and we cover it to a great extent’ or ‘a minor feature and we cover it to some extent’ with very few suggesting that they did not cover these topics at all. Each topic is listed below with further discussion about respondents’ engagement with it.

Professional issues

Respondents were asked about the inclusion of a range of foundational professional issues in their courses including core definitions of the field, understandings of the profession

and reflective practice and ethics. All of the 15 respondents who answered this question agreed that the definition of career was a key feature of their courses. The overwhelming majority also agreed that 'why career development services are needed' (13/15), 'the career development profession' (12/15), and 'reflective practice (13/15) and professional ethics' (13/15) were all key areas to be covered. The 'study skills' required for professional education, however, was only a key topic for a minority of respondents (4/10), for 10 it was a minor feature, and for one it was not covered, with no intention to cover it. There was a slightly greater likelihood of masters level programmes including study skills than other programmes.

When asked the open question *'which issues and topics relating to the profession and professional issues do you think it is essential are covered?'* responses most frequently highlighted the importance of ethics, as well as the use of theory to underpin practice. In some cases, the highlighting of ethics was linked to the use of a formal code of ethics produced by a professional association. Career development theories were often discussed as a body of knowledge which 'underpinned' professionalism.

Contextual issues

The second topic looked at the way in which respondents addressed a range of contextual issues in their courses. The vast majority of respondents agreed that *'equality, diversity and inclusion'* was a key feature (13/14) and a smaller majority (11/14) agreed that *'understanding career guidance systems and policies'* was a key feature, and the *'labour market'* (10/14). *'Political economy'*, '*the structure of the education system*' and '*public policy*' were all considered key features by six or fewer respondents, with the majority of responses indicating that they are 'minor' features. The masters level courses were more likely to give greater priority to the area political economy but gave lower priority to other areas including the labour market and career guidance systems.

When asked an open question about what topics are essential, the policy context was most frequently mentioned, with equality and diversity also frequently noted. Specific topics such as globalisation, sustainability, climate change and decolonisation, were all mentioned by multiple participants.

Career theory

In the third topic respondents addressed the issue of career theory. All course providers agreed that *'understanding career context'* was a key feature of their courses (14/14) with an overwhelming majority (13/14) answering that *'understanding the self'*, *'understanding society and structures'*, and *'career learning'* are key features within their courses. Slightly fewer, but still a very high proportion (11/14) considered *'ways of connecting theories (e.g. critical theories and systems theories)'* to be a key feature. There were no real differences in the responses given by those teaching masters level programmes in comparison with those teaching lower level programmes suggesting that all providers felt that career theory was important.

When asked an open question about what topics are essential, comments commonly stressed that teaching a range of different theories is important, often highlighting how they fall within different historical and theoretical perspectives. One participant, for example, states how it is important to:

understand the history and major themes of career development theory and to understand how these relate to wider disciplines.

Participants also emphasised the teaching of theory in relation to practice and noted that it was important that the teaching of theories examines how they 'could be linked to practice'. However, at the same time, comments relate to the way that theories cannot be assumed to be universal, with one participant stating that 'no one theory or idea about career or engagement in the world of work works for all individuals, communities or countries', and another emphasising the 'application of theories in different international and community contexts'. One comment specifically highlights the importance of the 'decolonisation of career development theory too and… situatedness and theory allegiances.' We take this to mean acknowledgement of the differing epistemological assumptions underpinning theories that have developed in disciplinary and cultural contexts.

Other participants view the teaching of career theory more epistemically and highlight the importance of individual students developing a coherent approach to their integration of theory which inevitably requires them to emphasise some theories that resonate with and inform their practice philosophy whilst rejecting or de-emphasising others. For example, one respondent highlights the importance of an integrated and coherent theoretical approach: 'we expect students to develop this understanding and to develop their integrated approach'. Another highlights the importance of individual reflection in developing students' approaches: 'we take the approach that understanding of career and its drivers starts with ourselves and this is why we consider reflectivity and reflexivity essential to understanding theory and shaping new ideas'.

Alongside career theories, some comments also reflect on utilising wider bodies of theoretical knowledge including transition and motivation theories.

Career counselling

In the fourth topic, *'career counselling'*, all respondents (14) felt that *'why we work with people one-to-one'*, *'contracting'*, *'active listening'*, *'questioning'*, *'models of counselling* and *coaching'* were key features. Just half of the participants who responded to the question (7) reported that *'counselling and coaching online'* was a key feature, with the rest identifying it as a minor feature, and one identifying that it is not covered but that they would like it to be. Again, there were few differences between those delivering masters level programmes and those delivering lower-level programmes.

In the qualitative comments, participants highlighted a range of different concepts in addition to those listed including: non-directiveness, action planning, working with diverse (and challenging) client groups. The terminology in some of the comments points to specific ways of understanding processes of guidance which may not be shared by all participants – for example, simply, some respondents refer to 'coaching' exclusively, while others use terms like 'guidance' or 'counselling'. It is not clear how far these differences denote variations in terminology and how far they speak to any broader epistemic differences that are beyond the scope of this study. Other distinctive terminology that indicates potential epistemic differences including one comment which highlights motivational interviewing and solution focussed techniques, another highlighting the importance of understanding 'the unconscious' and another highlighting a focus on 'group counselling, collective counselling and counselling in communities'.

Career education

In the fifth topic, *'career education'*, 10 or more respondents (out of 14) reported that the following were key features: *'how people learn about careers'*, *'the value of group work for career development learning'*, *'careers education'*, *'session design (using learning outcomes and devising activities)'*. Eight suggested that *'key contexts for careers education e.g. schools, universities'* was a key feature, and fewer than half of the respondents agreed that *'group counselling'*, *'assessment for learning'*, and *'career learning online'* were key features, with the majority suggesting they were minor features or not features. Master level programmes were somewhat more likely to cover group counselling, assessment for learning and career learning online.

Qualitative comments focus on the practical elements of delivering group work, including session design and assessment. A number of comments relate to contextual elements of career education, with one identifying the 'importance of embedding employability in the curriculum', and another similar comment about 'embed[ding] career learning into all opportunities including subject teaching', while another highlights that they do not focus on this topic to a great extent because 'we currently deliver the practitioner qualification, not the Careers Leader so these topics are covered to a lesser extent'. This comment reflects distinctions in school-based practice in England between different career roles which separates roles in career counselling and programme leadership (Andrews & Hooley, 2017).

Information and resources

In this sixth topic, out of 14 respondents, the majority agreed that *'why does career and labour market information matter'* (11), *'integrating information into practice'* (10), *'finding and using resources'* (9), and *'career assessments and other tools'* (8), were key features of their courses. There were no real differences between masters level programmes and lower level programmes in this area. The most common point mentioned in the qualitative comments is the importance of being critical when engaging with LMI and evaluating the quality of resources.

Organisations and systems

The seventh topic looked at how far career professionals are educated to engage with organisations and systems. In general, the level of agreement that this was a key element of the education provided was much lower than in previous topics. In only two items more agreed that they were a key feature than a minor feature (8/14), these were: *'external partnerships e.g. working with employers'*, and *'guidance in different kinds of organisations'*. Two items were split fairly evenly between being seen as a key and a minor feature: *'internal partnerships e.g. working with academics and teachers'*, *and 'creating development and improvement plans for your organisation'*. In three cases more respondents agreed that they were a minor feature or not a feature than agreed that they were a key feature: *'moving into leadership positions'*, *'different kinds of leadership and management (e.g. leadership styles, being led by a careers professional or another professional)'*, and *'influencing and shaping organisations'*. It is notable that the elements that attracted the least agreement were the elements around leadership and influencing organisations.

There were some important differences between masters level provision and lower-level programmes in this area. Masters level programmes were more likely to emphasise influencing and shaping organisations and leadership. Lower-level programmes, in turn, were more likely to emphasise how to practice guidance in different kinds of organisation and creating development and improvement plans.

The qualitative comments from two participants highlight that the 'leadership' elements are not felt to be so appropriate because their education focuses on careers advisers, and there is a separate careers leaders education and training programme (as above, this relates to the English context): 'Leadership is especially [relevant] when training Careers Leaders. Career leadership needs to be linked to those training as Careers Advisers and this is a different but complementary role', and: 'again some of these topics relate more to a careers leader role however working with stakeholders, networking is all important'. While the role of careers leader is an important one, it is illuminating that these respondents do not view leadership as a key part of the careers adviser/career development professional role.

Overview of important topics

Practitioners were also asked to identify the three issues that they felt were most important for the initial education of career development practitioners to include. Coding this data, there was significant consistency around: career theory, guidance practice, and professional issues (the latter including elements such as reflective practice and ethics), each receiving seven or eight mentions. The politics of careers work received five mentions. Less commonly cited areas were social justice, working collaboratively and labour market information (two each). Some other items such as sustainability, group work and academic rigour were mentioned by only one respondent.

This suggests that there is a fairly strong level of agreement around how participants view the core areas of focus for the education of career professionals. Career professionals need to understand career theory, how to deliver a range of forms of practice (with a strong emphasis on one-to-one approaches) and be clear on their professional role including issues such as professional boundaries and ethics. A minority also emphasise a need to understand the wider political and policy context of the work. Beyond these four critical areas there is less consistency in what forms the core of professional education.

Participants were also asked an open question 'what new areas and innovations would you like to see included in the training of career development professionals?', and analysis of their answers identified four key areas: technology, social justice, working across contexts, emerging practices. Firstly, there was a high level of agreement that new technologies were shaping both the environment in which people are developing their careers and the nature of career development practice. Consequently, it was reported that in the future the education of career professionals would need to develop their understanding of the role of new technologies.

Secondly, many participants articulated that in the current geopolitical and economic context there was a need for careers professionals to be alert to issues of social justice and how these can be addressed in their practice. This included increasing professionals' awareness of developments in the future of work, issues related to sustainability, precarity, work-life wellbeing and the decolonisation of careers work. Thirdly, respondents emphasised the importance of career professionals being able to work across a range of

contexts rather than just in one or two contexts. So, qualified career professionals need to be able to work with both young people and adults and be able to address people in all life stages and contexts including both those in work and outside of work. This includes a capacity to work with organisations and systems to help people to successfully build their careers.

Finally, participants also raised several issues which related to the core areas of focus for their programmes, but where they felt new challenges or debates were emerging. These includes issues around what constitutes client centredness, the use of emerging theories and how theories can be integrated into professional identity and practice and the implications of the growing body of research on efficacy and what it means for both the advocacy of the profession and practice.

Reflections on the data

The data presented above shows some clear patterns in the initial education of career development professionals. In many ways there is good reason to be positive about what we have found as it shows that most of the issues that we and the wider literature have identified to be important are well covered. However, there are also some areas for concern and reflection. So, in this section we use the data to provide us with a jumping off point for further reflections on the nature of initial education for career development professionals.

Firstly, the data indicates some notable aspects of course delivery with the tendency for respondents to emphasise that they focus on small group teaching rather than large lectures. We see this focus on small group teaching as positive and closely related to both the inter-personal nature of careers practice and the requirement to develop professional and interprofessional working skills. Learning to talk about practice and participate in educational discussions and settings is being emphasised through this kind of approach to teaching and learning. However, we also note that courses taught in this way are often relatively small and have particularly high staff student ratios, and so in the new public management context of universities (Neilson & Hertzberg, 2022), these courses might attract negative comparisons of cost of delivery. We suggest that for future consideration, it is worth paying more attention to not just the content of programmes but also the pedagogic processes that lend themselves to the development of the necessary knowledge, skills, behaviours and ways of being for professional practice. The role of particular 'signature pedagogies' in forming professional identities (Shulman, 2005) raises questions about the process through which careers practitioners are socialised into their professionalism through the practices and values implied in the learning environments that we create (Frigerio, 2024).

The data also provides important insights about the content of courses. It demonstrates that context is important, and that, despite some limited international mobility in higher level study, much practitioner initial education is framed by the structures of the profession in a particular country. The data presented here primarily illustrates this in relation to the policy and structures of the career development sector in England. One example of this is the way in which the emergence of the careers leader role in recent years in English schools (Andrews & Hooley, 2017) has shaped the education of all career development professionals, including those that are not careers leaders, in ways that may serve to narrow the role of those whose role is to be 'careers advisers' supposedly without a leadership role.

Despite the clear importance that public policy has in framing both the career development profession and the opportunity structures within which career development professionals work, there are areas of the context that seem to be surprisingly neglected in the education of career development professionals. There is, for example, a relatively low level of agreement that *the structure of the education system* and *public policy* are or should be included in courses. This is perhaps influenced by the assumption that students should hold basic knowledge about their national systems, and policy contexts, prior to beginning initial education and that they will enter employment within their own national context. It also arguably extends from alignment with professional, statutory and regulatory frameworks that operate at nation state level. Whilst these have value in terms of professionalisation discussed earlier, they mitigate against the sort of international and comparative material that develops a global and more critical outlook. This is not to say an 'international' focus is entirely absent in our data – but it appears in certain ways, most notably in relation to career theory, and differences in international applicability of theory and decolonial approaches, rather than a real engagement with the idea that careers practitioners may wish to move and work in other countries, or that there might be valuable learning in thinking about how wider public policy contexts (education, labour market and welfare) systems and practices are organised in other countries and frame career guidance practices.

Our data also shows that although career development theory and practice are commonly identified as a key focus, there are possible philosophical and epistemic differences in approach – e.g. some use the terminology of coaching, some of counselling, some of personal (one-to-one) guidance; while some utilise specific concepts or models such as psychodynamic and unconscious processes, and others on other models such as solution focused techniques. When considering theory, there is also some lack of clarity over how theoretical perspectives are taught, and whether they are taught discretely, and historically, or whether, and how, they are 'integrated' both theoretically and into practice.

The picture that emerges is that career guidance education teaches an eclectic range of theories, often focusing on their different applicability to practice. Some respondents focused on the applicability of different theories to different situations, treating theory pragmatically, as proposed by Yates (2020), as a toolkit from which different tools can be selected in response to the problems experienced in practice. Yet others viewed theory differently. The data in this study therefore suggests that there are some important differences around whether theory should be deployed pragmatically as a toolkit or viewed more philosophically. It would be valuable to undertake deeper research in ways that could uncover and explore these epistemic differences. Critically this raises the question as to whether we are all proceeding from a common body of theory, whether we understand this body of theory, and indeed the concept of 'theory' in the same way, and whether the existence of a relatively high level of consensus about topics and techniques actually belies some deeper theoretical and philosophical divergence within the profession.

One area of concern we see in our data is the relatively limited role that was afforded to organisational and systems work as well as leadership, programme management and impact and evaluation. This is perhaps unsurprising and mirrors international findings from similar studies (Andreassen et al., 2019; Hooley & Schulstok; 2020). The failure to engage with the theory and practice of such organisational and systems work is interesting because the politics of career is highlighted as an important issue to be covered in initial education, and social justice, organisational issues and the changing digital context are all identified

as emergent areas. All these areas arguably require career development professionals to develop a greater capacity to engage with organisations and systems, and develop competencies in wider forms of practice beyond those that focus on individuals.

The limited engagement with organisational and systems work could be simply a question of knowhow, with educators uncertain how best to address these emergent areas. If this is the case the provision of new curricula and resources might help. On the other hand, it may be that national level policies, structures and frameworks conceptualise the role of the career professional more narrowly than the more expansive conceptions developed by the profession in documents such as the NICE framework. For example, the Cambridge OCR (2025) *Career guidance and development level 6 diploma* omits group work and units relating to leading and managing career development work in an organisation from its set of core modules. The Gatsby Benchmarks (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014) also arguably position career professionals within an individualistic frame, ceding organisational and systemic responsibilities to teachers and school leaders. More fundamentally it may speak to a deeper-seated commitment to individualism at the centre of career development practice.

Overall, and in line with the literature, there is broad endorsement in principle of the holistic view of the role and duties of career professionals enshrined in the NICE framework. However, in practice, the individually focused personal guidance work has primacy in initial education programme for career development practitioners and this runs the risk of squeezing out some of the leadership and systemic areas of professional capability.

Conclusions

Our research shows that the academics, trainers and teachers involved in the education and training of careers practitioners have a strong level of agreement on what should be core in this education: career theory, guidance practice, and professional issues. However, underneath this overarching agreement, differences appear in how far certain topics are considered 'key' or 'minor'. Issues of public policy and the organisation of education and labour market systems, and key roles such as leadership and management are less often viewed as central to course content. Furthermore, the qualitative comments indicate potential epistemic differences in the ways in which theory and practice is understood and taught. There is potential for further exploration and critical discussion about these areas, especially in the context of debates about professionalisation.

In the final parts of the survey, it is also notable that social justice was identified as a key emergent area for courses to address, and to do this effectively serves to reinforce the case for a more multi-level framing of career development practice. It is our belief that professionalising campaigns for practitioners need clarity and visibility of the organisational and systemic dimensions of the role. This can be linked to conversations about pay and credibility and that initial education providers have a role to play here. If we are to summarise this position it is that we need both further introspection, critically evaluating our own profession and professional education to develop our own clarity and ensure ongoing development of the profession, and also further commitment to externally communicating the breadth and impact of the role of career professional.

Writing *The Career Development Handbook* and discussing it with readers has renewed our commitment to developing professional capability in many ways, from formally

accredited education programmes to informal capacity building activities through peer to peer and workplace learning opportunities. This study highlights that while there is substantial agreement amongst providers around the key areas for the education of career professionals, significant discussions of the role of the career development professional and therefore about the focus of initial education remain. New areas of focus will require a reordering of curricula, new frameworks and new resources. There is considerable scope for providers to work together on this, in spite of commercial pressures to compete for viability. At the very least, explorations of our signature pedagogies will support us in developing programmes and learning by comparison from larger adjacent professional areas such as teaching and social work. We hope that this article can stimulate further discussions and support the ongoing evolution of professional education in the field.

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