Research Article

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Exploring one-to-one career guidance: Appointment lengths, guidance models, and existential topics

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Abstract

This study investigates career guidance practice, focusing on the length of appointments, use of guidance models, and exploration of existential topics in one-to-one settings. Data from 84 career guidance practitioners working across diverse institutions and sectors reveal significant variation in appointment lengths and approaches to guidance model usage. The findings show that existential topics – such as career-related anxiety, sense of purpose, and self-identity – are widespread in practice and are viewed as relevant by practitioners. The research offers considerations for future practice and policy.

Keywords: existential, guidance interviews, appointment length, career guidance

Introduction

Although career guidance work in the UK is delivered across multiple sectors and supported by a rich body of research, surprisingly 'little is known about the nature and content of one-to-one career conversations and whether the professional training and current practice in the field are fit for purpose' (Yates & Hirsch, 2022, p.1304). Reid links this to the broader challenge

of defining career guidance, stating that 'definitions typically explain what it *does* rather than what it *is*, as this 'black box' intervention is so inherently complex' (2021, p.96).

In today's changing landscape, the UK is prioritising getting people into work and educating the future workforce (House of Commons, 2025; Department for Education, 2025) and good career guidance is recognised as potentially contributing billions to the UK economy (Phoenix Insights, 2025). Meanwhile, financial pressures are placing constraints on Higher Education (HE) institutions (Universities UK, 2025) and a quarter of English universities are seeing reductions in spending on career development (Roper & Vorley, 2025).

Although artificial intelligence (AI) may offer access to some form of personalised career guidance (Duan & Wu, 2024) humans currently remain vital to the process (Morrisby, 2025). In this context, the task of gaining up-to-date insight into *what* is happening in the 'black box' of one-to-one career guidance practice, rather than simply *who* and *how many* are accessing it, feels timely.

This task has wider significance for policy development, professional training, institutional spending, career education and qualification design, and the ongoing evaluation of career guidance practice. It also constitutes the first stage of data collection for the researcher's PhD action research (AR) project examining the value of integrating existentialism into career guidance within HE. Developing educational resources that meaningfully support such integration and provide usable, valuable tools requires a clearer view of what occurs within the internal workings of the 'black box' of a career guidance appointment. A review of the existing literature suggests that, while some insight exists, further empirical investigation into the structure and processes of one-to-one guidance is needed.

In exploring the 'what' of guidance practice, a theoretical argument has been advanced for the relevance of existentialism to career coaching in HE (Stevens, 2023), and its growing value for practitioners due to the current development of AI in the field (Stevens, 2025b). Given this it is important to establish which existential concerns practitioners are encountering, which occur most frequently, and which are judged to be most relevant to the practice of career guidance. Understanding practitioner interest in further engagement in this area is also valuable.

This article explores the following research questions.

1. What is the length of the one-to-one appointments delivered by career development practitioners (CGPs) in HE (and outside HE for comparison)?

2. What, if any, career guidance models are commonly being used by CGPs in their one-to-one appointments in HE (and outside of HE for comparison)?

3. What, if any, existential topics are CGPs exploring in their work in HE, including which are the most frequent and which they perceive to be the most valuable (compared with CGPs working outside of HE)?

4. What is the level of interest in learning more about existentialism in a careers education context?

Literature review

This section is divided into a review of three relevant areas of existing research: One-to-one career guidance appointment lengths, usage of career guidance models, and existential topics related to career guidance.

One-to-one career guidance appointment lengths

There is a 'surprising lack of literature focused around "length" of appointments' (Reid, 2018, p.9), and the range of lengths that one individual might offer, including at HE level. In HE, it has been observed that appointment lengths are shortening (Reid, 2018), and that the shortening of appointments is in response to an increase in need and demand for services (Frigerio, 2010; Nijjar, 2009) which are resourced by an estimated ratio of careers staff to students of 1:995 (AGCAS, 2021). Alongside this, general restrictions on budgets have placed additional pressure on universities more broadly which have affected staffing considerations (Universities UK, 2025). This has contributed to universities looking at wide-ranging career guidance options to help meet the demand of students, including initiatives such as 'triaging' with shorter initial advice appointments before making referrals for longer appointments (SOAS, 2022), investigating more the value of group career guidance which has a growing body of research supporting its potential in the sector (e.g. Meldrum, 2021; Edwards, 2024), and moving away from the one-to-one CGP model altogether with a student-led 'studio' approach to delivery (University of Liverpool, 2025). Given the financial constraints, time pressures, personal nature of the work, different stages of the intervention i.e. whether it is an initial appointment or follow-up, and other variables affecting CGPs, there may be many factors contributing to the differing lengths of appointments delivered.

Over 20 years ago, Bimrose et al. identified that there were 'considerable variations in the length of time taken for a guidance interview' from 16 minutes to 1 hour 42 minutes, but that 'the average length of time taken for a guidance interview was 50 minutes' (2004, p.28). More recently, an informal sample of the average appointment length of UK HE careers services (N=32) at the 2017 AGCAS National Conference identified an average appointment length of 34.5 minutes (Reid, 2021). In Yates and Hirsch's (2022) small-scale study of 22 career professionals working in HE institutions in the UK, no standard length was given but careers appointments could be limited to as little as fifteen minutes.

In the related area of UK secondary education, there is also limited data regarding the length – and recommended length – of career guidance interview appointments. This includes individual case studies in secondary level settings which listed appointment times of between 40 and 60 minutes (Careers England, 2019), the Career Development Institute's (CDI's) recommended guidance time of at least 45 minutes for personal guidance interviews to meet the Gatsby Benchmark 8 (Stewart, 2021), and the argument that a 30 minute interview should be seen as a minimum with an hour providing a greater opportunity for the interview to be impactful (Everitt et al, 2018). A separate, but related, argument comes from Whiston et al., (2017) regarding the number of appointments that would be optimal – rather than the specific length – and this was identified as five.

Guidance model usage

Despite their inclusion in the teaching for undergraduate or post-graduate level qualifications in career development, there is little known about the guidance models that are being employed

by CGPs. Career guidance can be viewed as involving two main theoretical areas: Career Theory, which explains how individuals make occupational choices, and Guidance Theory, which supports their decision making through structured approaches (Bimrose, 2013). Without such structure, career guidance appointments offering coaching/counselling can lack grounding and resemble informal conversations (Ali and Graham, 1996).

Kidd et al., found that among practising careers officers 'familiarity with guidance and counselling theories appears to be more influential than knowledge of career theories' (1994, p.385), though their views on the value of guidance models varied, with many dismissing their practical relevance. Frigerio's (2010) small-scale study of 6 student clients involved one-to-one appointments of 22-37 minutes and, although no specific guidance models were referenced, the 4 careers consultants involved did tend to include similar structural elements common to many guidance models, which included clarifying expectations, information giving, active listening, facilitating reflection and summarising.

In Yates and Hirsch's study involving careers professionals structure was generally valued, however only 'a few recalled the specific models' (2022, p.1308) learned in training, explaining that they did not generally 'stick to a rigid format, preferring a loose, instinctive structure' (2022, p.1309) which may have involved amalgamation of models. As in Frigerio (2010), professionals mentioned contracting, information giving and action planning as part of their structures, as well as other elements such as raising self-awareness and providing reassurance. However, practice was broadly atheoretical, lacked overall consistency, and there was a widely shared perception of a need for more training on theories and linking theory to practice. Yates and Hirsch argue that this gap between theory and practice is not necessarily getting any smaller. Given that guidance models are inter-related with career theories and their approaches to basic concepts such as career, employment, or occupation, these gaps also have an effect on the approaches to guidance used (Bimrose, 2013).

One of the challenges facing CGPs is the level of professionalism that is attributed to them and their field (Yates, 2025). Careers development is weakly professionalised in most countries (Hooley et al., 2024), and although some argue that certain careers professional roles in the UK should be regulated (Conway, 2024), currently it is possible to practise as a CGP without qualification. A survey conducted on behalf of Skills England by the CDI of 299 members identified that 63% had a Level 6 or 7 – the equivalent of Bachelor's degree or postgraduate level – careers qualification (Gordon, 2022). When employers were asked whether all the careers advisers they employ were qualified to the level they would like (i.e. were they qualified to level 6 or 7) 75% of them said they were not, and 33% said they were unable to recruit people with the skill levels required (ibid). In 2023, just over 400 people completed the OCR Level 6 Diploma in Career Guidance and Development (Williams et al., 2024). All this points to a lack of clarity about whether CGPs have received formal training in the delivery of career guidance models.

The CDI's register of CDPs, the list of professionals who have been awarded the UK-based Qualification in Career Development (QCD), expects those on it to use a range of approaches and techniques for conducting career development interactions with individuals, and that the ethics and principles of career guidance are upheld, including elements such as impartiality and professionalism (CDI, 2024; CDI, 2024a). However, little is known about what specific approaches or techniques are being used, and whether the models that are commonly being taught as part of the Level 6 and Level 7 career guidance qualifications

in the UK that support applications for the QCD are featuring in this practice, and, if so, in what form.

CGPs undertaking Level 6 or Level 7 qualifications are exposed (Yates, 2025) to guidance theories and models. This applies to the Level 6 Oxford, Cambridge & RSA (OCR) Career Guidance and Development Diploma (OCR, 2025) as well as in Level 7 postgraduate diploma (PGDip) courses. In 1994, Kidd et al., reported that on Diploma in Career Guidance courses, students were taught one or more of three main models: 'a non-directive Rogerian model …; an adaptation of Egan's … helping skills model; and a 'content' model, sometimes referred to as the Seven-Point Plan' (1994, p.386).

Modern PGDip courses, such as those at the universities of Huddersfield, Warwick, and Derby, involve exposure to a different, wider range of models. In these courses, students will encounter various combinations of established guidance models including: GROW (Whitmore, 2009), OSKAR (Jackson & McKergow, 2006), Skilled Helper (Egan, 2002), Bedford's FIRST (1982), Hawkins and Shohet's CLEAR (1989), Law and Watts' DOTS (1977), Counselling Approach (Ali & Graham, 1996), Reid and Fielding's Single Interaction Model (2007), Savickas' Career Construction (2005), and more, which informed the list of guidance models provided on the questionnaire in this study. An 'other' option was also included in recognition that there are many other well-established guidance models that CGPs may be using, for example Hambly's Creative Career Coaching (2018).

Existential topics

Existentialism as a term resists easy definition. As Beauvoir observed in her essay 'What is Existentialism?' (2020), she willingly disappointed many when she could not explain the philosophy in a few words. Existentialism is less a single doctrine than an approach to thinking or attitude concerned with human beings as active, embodied participants in a contingent world. We are always in the middle of things, thrown into existence without clear instruction, forced to make sense of life from the position of our own first-person, situated experience. This starting point underpins the existential position that meaning is not given but created, that human beings are self-defining through choice and action.

Across its diverse thinkers – Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, and others – existentialism places human experience, freedom, and responsibility at its core. Pulling together the different threads of existentialist philosophers, Gosetti-Ferencei (2020) identifies three concerns shared across the tradition: the validation of concrete, individual experience over abstract systems; the exposure of inadequate traditional interpretations of life's meaning; and the promotion of free human action toward the creation of new meaning.

As Bakewell (2017) interprets Sartre, to exist is to create oneself continually through action. The existential subject is therefore 'pre-eminently a creative animal' (Dostoevsky, 2006, p.33), a being who, though shaped by circumstance and facticity, is always in a process of *becoming* and remains free in some sense to respond to that situation and thereby invent themselves anew. This freedom, however, carries the weight of responsibility and the anxiety of knowing that one's choices determine one's identity. With this emphasis on figuring out how best to undertake our choices and actions as concrete individuals who are inescapably engaged and entangled in the world (Frankl, 2025), existentialism is a way of doing philosophy, a call to action – a mission that aims to illuminate personal existence (Blackham, 1959).

In applied contexts, existential thought has influenced a range of different disciplines adjacent to career guidance, including: Leadership coaching (Fusco et al., 2015), Executive coaching (Whitman, 2013), Psychotherapy (van Deurzen, 1998), Therapy (Langdridge, 2012), Counselling (van Deurzen, 2001), Stress management (Kongsted Krum, 2012), and coaching more broadly (Jacob, 2019). There is also existing research into its potential relevance to/application in careers work (Winter, 2011), career decision-making (Cohen, 2003), and career counselling (Schulze & Miller, 2004).

Existential coaching, grounded in the philosophical work of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre, and the psychiatry and psychotherapy of Frankl, places the human condition and the search for authenticity, meaning, and purpose – along with anxiety, finitude, and freedom – at the centre of practice (Hanaway, 2020; Kurtsenovskaia & Yates, 2024). Anxiety, in particular, is a recurring theme in relation to career-thinking across school, university, and early career transitions (IGPP, 2021; HEPI, 2020; McCurdy & Murphy, 2024). Within HE in the UK, CGPs encounter clients facing existential concerns such as uncertainty, lack of self-knowledge, and reluctance to take ownership of choices (Yates & Hirsh, 2025). Hooley et al., note the intrinsic link between careers, uncertainty, and subjective interaction identifying 'careering' as 'a process of managing uncertainty and the chaotic interaction of the individual and the world around them' (2025, p.10).

As Deurzen (2016) writes, the enduring appeal of existential philosophy lies in its confrontation with perennial human questions – How should I act? How can I live a worthwhile life? What does it mean to be? – questions that remain as vital to personal development and career thinking as they are to philosophy itself. These questions may feel abstract or disconnected to thinking about our careers, but, as Camus puts it, it is precisely in the midst of our working lives that the *why* arises, and around any street corner the feeling of absurdity and wonder can 'strike any man in the face' (2005, p.9).

Themes commonly linked as central to understanding existentialism are the creation of meaning, freedom, responsibility, the demand to define ourselves through choices and the anxiety and responsibility this generates (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2020). In light of a review of the literature relating to the central concerns of existentialism, the approach of existential coaching in applied contexts, and the consideration of career guidance as an activity that supports clients to engage in self-discovery, find meaning and fulfilment, and understand the bigger picture (Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen, 2017; Hambly, 2021), the following topics (which also occur in other career theories) can be viewed through an existentialist lens as relevant:

- taking responsibility for one's actions;
- career-related anxiety;
- a search for meaning;
- freedom (or lack of) to act;
- personal identity and sense of self;
- the struggle to be authentic; and
- developing a sense of purpose.

Methodology

The proposal and design of the questionnaire broadly followed the procedure highlighted by Cohen et al., (2017). The number of questions included, the length of questions, and the length of answers required, were deliberately kept short in order to ensure that the questionnaire was as relevant, user-friendly, clear, and quick to respond to as possible so that it is not off-putting for respondents (NHS, 2018). Microsoft Forms was used as the platform for the questionnaire due to its ease of use, lack of cost, and its ability to offer a safe place to store the data digitally in a protected area.

The questionnaire contained a brief consent section in line with the research's ethical approval obtained from the University of Huddersfield which made participants aware of the right to withdraw, the confidentiality of their responses, and the use of the data as part of the PhD research and other potential publications. Prior to sharing the questionnaire, a prize of a £15 book voucher for one winner was offered as an incentive. A pilot was carried out with a small group of King's College London CGPs to check for any areas that were unclear or needed improvement.

There were 10 questions, combining multiple choice, binary choice, and short answer free text. The participants were asked about their job title, the name of the institution or company they primarily work for, the lengths of the one-to-one guidance appointments that they deliver (not including practice interviews), whether they tend to follow any established career guidance model(s) and if yes which model(s) they employed in some form as part of their practice, but if no, why not.

The next questions referred to the existential topics identified in the literature review and asked the respondents which topics they have 'explored with, or observed in, a client one-to-one appointment'. The distinction here is deliberate because topics will not always be explored directly with clients but may be observed as part of the client's presentation, therefore remaining relevant. The participants were then asked which existential topics they explored with, or observed in, clients the most, and which they thought were the most relevant to explore in career guidance work in a one-to-one setting. The final question asked whether they would be interested in learning more about how to explore any of the existential topics in a careers education context.

Convenience and referral (snowball) sampling methods were adopted mainly due to practicality, time, and affordability reasons. Participants for the questionnaire were sought in two main ways – via email and via a post on LinkedIn. Forty-two AGCAS Heads of Careers Education (or equivalent) across a mix of different institution types, including Russell Group, post-92, and Ancient universities, found via the AGCAS directory (AGCAS, 2025) were emailed directly. The LinkedIn post was reposted 22 times by individuals working within the career space. CGP colleagues at King's College London were contacted directly as part of the pilot.

In 2025, the precise number of individuals working as CGPs is not known. Within HE, AGCAS works with around 160 institutions and 3,000 individual members (Rocketreach, 2025). This fact provides a practical metric for sample size within the HE space. Following the 10% rule which provides a quick estimation method (Sathyanarayana et al., 2024), the

aim was to get respondents from a minimum of 16 different HE institutions which represent a range of different student and staff population sizes, student demographics, and CGP role titles. The decision to open up the questionnaire to any CGP who wished to complete it – rather than exclusively those who work in HE – was made in order to ascertain if there are any significant differences in the nature of the responses of those practitioners working in different sectors or educational stages.

On reflection, these data would have been richer had they captured the level of careers qualification the respondents had. It is also important to note that the participants were self-selecting and therefore not precisely representative of the CGP population as a whole. However, respondents from a wide range of sectors and institutions were involved which ensures a sample that represents a broad range of practitioners, especially in HE.

The final sample responses were downloaded from MS Forms into an Excel spreadsheet for statistical analysis. A manual approach to analysis was deemed sufficient given the small number of questions, minimal qualitative data, manageable sample size, and simple statistical calculations (Robson & McCartan, 2016). For the one qualitative question, there were only 14 responses which made it straightforward to review them using a basic thematic coding analysis which followed a classic set of moves i.e. coding, reflection, commentary, chunking etc. (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Results

In total, 84 CGPs completed the questionnaire. Respondents work for a variety of institutions and companies, with some working in more than one space, including secondary schools (n:6), further education (FE) colleges (n:4), higher education (HE) institutions (n:61), private organisations (n:5), local government (n:2), and self-employed private practice (n:9). The 61 respondents (73%) who work in HE work across 38 different HE institutions with 15 Russell Group universities (including 1 Ancient university) and 23 post-92 institutions represented. The biggest single institution represented was King's College London (KCL) with 12 respondents (14%). KCL is the institution at which the researcher themself works. Thirty five different job titles were identified, with the two most common being Careers Consultant (n:24) and Careers Advisor (n:12), then followed by Career Coach (n=6) and Careers and Employability Advisor (n=6). What follows is a summary of some of the key findings from the questionnaire.

Appointment lengths

Respondents reported delivering a wide range of appointment lengths ranging from as little as 15 minutes to as much as 90 minutes. The majority of respondents (61%) are delivering more than one length of career guidance appointment. Only 2 respondents reported no specific length of appointment delivery stating that what they delivered depended on the client's needs in some way. Non-HE practitioners more commonly reported delivering longer appointments than their HE counterparts.

Table 1: Comparison of appointment lengths delivered

Category	Overall (n=84) [mins]	HE Practitioners (n=61) [mins]	Non-HE Practitioners (n=23) [mins]
Mean	38.8	34.7	48.8
Median	35	30	50
Mode	30	30	60

Table 2: Comparison of most common number of different appointment lengths delivered

Number of Appointment Lengths Delivered	Overall (n=84)	HE Practitioners (n=61)	Non-HE Practitioners (n=23)
1 length	39% (n=33)	41% (n=25)	35% (n=8)
2 lengths	39% (n=33)	41% (n=25)	30% (n=7)
3 lengths	11% (n=9)	8% (n=5)	17% (n=4)
4 lengths	6% (n=5)	7% (n=4)	0
5 lengths	0	0	9% (n=2)

Guidance models

Eighty-three per cent (n:70) of respondents stated that they tend to follow established guidance model(s) in their one-to-one appointments. 16% of respondents who worked in HE (n:10) did not tend to follow established guidance models, compared to 17% of non-HE respondents (n:4). Qualitative reasons given by those respondents not following established guidance model(s) (n:14) were organised into three themes: (1) 36% – I do not use them because I don't feel they are useful/applicable, (2) 36% – I use different model/s or approaches in varying combinations, or (3) 29% – I am not aware of them or still developing my ability to use them. HE practitioners were more likely overall to use more guidance models in their appointments than those working in non-HE settings.

Table 3: Comparison of the number of guidance models employed by those using them in some form as part of practice

Category	Overall (n=72)	HE Practitioners (n=51)	Non-HE Practitioners (n=21)
Mean	2.75	3	2.2
Median	3	3	2
Mode	3	3	1

All of the guidance models listed as tick box options on the questionnaire – GROW (Whitmore, 2009), OSKAR (Jackson & McKergow, 2006), Skilled Helper (Egan, 2002), Bedford's FIRST (1982), Hawkins and Shohet's CLEAR (1989), Law and Watts' DOTS (1977), Counselling Approach (Ali & Graham, 1996), Reid and Fielding's Single Interaction Model (2007) – were

employed by CGPs in some combination. A range of other models and approaches to guidance were also recorded in small numbers in the free text 'other' option, including – '*Solutions Focused Therapy'*, *'Positive Psychology Approaches'*, *'Nancy Schlossberg's 4 S Transition Framework'*, *'Savickas Career Construction Theory'*, *'Super's Life-Span'*, and *'Creative Career Coaching'.* A small number of respondents (n=5) included career theories such as Planned Happenstance and Chaos Theory in their responses to what guidance models they employed.

The top 4 guidance models respondents employed – GROW, Skilled Helper, DOTS, and Counselling Approach – were employed significantly more than any other models. The only other models outside of the top 4 to be employed by more than 2 respondents were the Single Interaction Model employed by 10% (n=8), OSKAR by 8% (n=7), and FIRST by 7% (n=6).

Table 4: Comparison of top 4 most commonly identified guidance models employed

Most Common Guidance Models	Overall (n=84)	HE Practitioners (n=61)	Non-HE Practitioners (n=23)
GROW (Whitmore)	60% (n=50)	67% (n=41)	39% (n=9)
Skilled Helper (Egan)	48% (n=40)	44% (n=27)	57% (n=13)
DOTS (Law & Watts)	43% (n=36)	43% (n=26)	43% (n=10)
Counselling Approach (Ali & Graham)	39% (n=33)	46% (n=28)	22% (n=5)

Existential Topics

100% of respondents (n:84) stated that they had explored at least one of the seven listed existential topics with, or observed them in, their appointments. 98% of respondents (n:82) identified two or more existential topics, 94% (n:79) identified three or more, 81% (n:68) identified four or more, 55% (n:46) identified five or more, 39% (n:33) identified six of more, and 27% (n:23) identified all seven.

Table 5: Comparison of the number of existential topics (maximum 7) explored, or observed in, one-to-one appointments

Category	Overall (n=84)	HE Practitioners (n=61)	Non-HE Practitioners (n=23)
Mean	4.9	4.8	5.2
Median	4	5	5
Mode	7	7	4

Career-related anxiety was the most commonly identified existential topic with 79 out of 84 respondents stating that they had explored it with, or observed it in, their one-to-one appointments. The four most commonly explored or observed existential topics (Career-related anxiety, Developing a sense of purpose, Personal identity and sense of self, Taking responsibility for one's actions) were also the top four selected as the topics *most* explored with, or observed in, one-to-one appointments, and the *most relevant* to explore in career guidance work in a one-to-one setting.

Table 6: Comparison of existential topics explored, or observed in, one-to-one appointments

Existential Topic	Overall (%)	HE Practitioners (%)	Non-HE Practitioners (%)
Career-related anxiety	94%	97%	87%
Developing a sense of purpose	83%	85%	78%
Personal identity and sense of self	76%	75%	78%
Taking responsibility for one's actions	73%	69%	83%
Freedom (or lack of) to act	60%	52%	78%
A search for meaning	58%	51%	78%
The struggle to be authentic	48%	51%	39%

73% of respondents (n:61) said that they would be interested in learning more about how to explore any of these topics in a careers related context, with 24% (n:20) stating that they may be interested, and only 4% (n:3) stating they were not.

Shorter versus longer appointments

As a further point of comparison, those CGPs (n=27) that delivered solely shorter appointments – up to and including a maximum of 30 minutes – were composed almost exclusively (96%) of those working in HE (n=26). In this group, 22% did not tend to follow guidance models (n=6) which is higher than the overall population at 17% and those who also offered appointments over 30 mins (n=57) which was 14% (n=8), although there is no clear theme in their qualitative responses as to why.

When comparing the numbers of existential topics, those that delivered solely shorter appointments identified a mean of 4.5 existential topics, a median of 4, and a mode of 3, compared to a mean of 5.1, a median of 5 and a mode of 7 for those who also offered longer appointments. The biggest differences in the proportions of the existential topics identified was 'Personal Identity and sense of self' which was 19 percentage points higher for those delivering longer appointments, and 'A search for meaning' which was 15 percentage points higher for those delivering longer appointments.

Table 7: Comparison of most commonly identified existential topics: Shorter vs. longer appointments

Existential Topic	Overall (%)	CGPs with maximum 30 minutes appointments (%)	CGPs with over 30 minutes appointments (%)
Career-related anxiety	94%	96%	93%
Developing a sense of purpose	83%	81%	84%
Personal identity and sense of self	76%	63%	82%
Taking responsibility for one's actions	73%	67%	75%

For those who offered solely shorter appointments, the mean number of guidance models used was 2.1, the median was 2, and the mode was 3. This compares to a mean of 2.4, median of 3, and mode of 3 for those who offered longer appointments also. There were also differences in the guidance models employed, with Skilled Helper being more popular with those delivering longer appointments, and DOTS more popular with those delivering solely shorter appointments.

Table 8: Comparison of most commonly identified guidance models employed: Shorter versus. Longer Appointments

Most Common Guidance Models	Overall (n=84)	CGPs with max 30 mins appts (%)	CGPs with over 30 mins appts (%)
GROW (Whitmore)	60% (n=50)	63% (n=17)	58% (n=33)
Skilled Helper (Egan)	48% (n=40)	26% (n=7)	58% (n=33)
DOTS (Law & Watts)	43% (n=36)	56% (n=15)	37% (n=21)
Counselling Approach (Ali & Graham)	39% (n=33)	44% (n=12)	37% (n=21)

Other notable differences in guidance model use was 14% (n=8) of those who delivered longer appointments employed the Single Interaction Model compared to 0% of those who did not, and 21% (n=12) of those who delivered longer appointments employed 'other' models compared to only 7% of those who did not.

Discussion

In recognition of the limitations of the data, caution is exercised here when discussing conclusions, in particular those concerning groups of participants – e.g. HE/non-HE CGPs – because of the variety of different titles and workplaces represented within each group, the comparatively small number of non-HE CGPs represented in the findings and their wide range of guidance settings, as well as the limited number of school-based advisers who took part. Bearing this in mind, the data from the questionnaire highlight several areas for further research, as well as implications that are of interest to academics and practitioners in the field.

The majority of CGPs, regardless of title, workplace, or appointment length, are not following one guidance model, and most are adopting a combination of 3 different established models. The reasons for this, and how this works in practice, including which elements from which models are being combined, provide interesting areas for further research. This variation and number of models may reflect a mature, pluralistic profession capable of adapting theory to context, but it may also indicate a lack of confidence, standardisation, or consensus on the theoretical underpinnings of effective career guidance.

Those respondents working in HE typically employed more guidance models as part of their practice. This could reflect commonalities, such as the nature and level of their training, the demands of working in HE settings with HE clients, or their perceived expectations of clients looking for a different level of service. These suggestions offer more areas for further research, particularly qualitative research aimed at gaining a better insight into practitioners' choices.

Overall, 17% reported not using established guidance models, but only 4% explicitly because they were not aware of them. This could point to a minority of CGPs taking the kind of 'atheoretical' (Yates & Hirsch, 2022) improvisational approaches to guidance that would benefit from further professional training or support, or perhaps indicate a dismissal of their practical relevance in career guidance settings as reported in Kidd et. al (1994). Either way, CGPs in general in that category are in the significant minority which pushes back against the idea that practitioners commonly dismiss the relevance of guidance models. For those working outside of HE, the most common number of guidance models employed was 1 (38%). This is a significant difference to those working in HE, but with such a lack of homogeneity in terms of title and guidance setting within the group it is difficult to draw clear conclusions as to why this might be.

A notable feature of the findings is that the topics that can be viewed through an existential lens are widely present in client interactions regardless of sector or setting, with 100% of respondents having encountered at least one topic. This exploration or observation spanned a wide range of respondents' job titles indicating that it is not only Career Coaches who engage with existential topics, but also Advisers, Consultants, Officers, Leads, Counsellors, and more. This challenges some of the existing distinctions made in guidance work between these titles, and their perceived activities. There is also significant interest across the different titles, sectors, and settings, in exploring these topics further in a careers education context.

Of the existential topics, career-related anxiety, questions of purpose, identity development, and issues of personal responsibility were particularly prominent. This raises the question of whether current practitioner qualifications, ongoing career professional development, and professional frameworks sufficiently acknowledge and prepare CGPs to address these foundational human concerns, which appear to be highly prevalent within, rather than peripheral to, work in one-to-one guidance. There is broad consensus and recognition amongst respondents that the existential topics that they are most exploring with, or observing in, their clients are also those that they deem to be the most relevant to career guidance practice.

94% of respondents encountered career-related anxiety, rising to 97% of those working in HE, demonstrating the ubiquity of clients' anxiety in one-to-one career guidance. There could be a wide range of factors driving this, including labour market precarity, the development of AI, the uncertain future of the international world order, the climate crisis, achievement pressures, cost-of-living realities, and more. More research into clients' perceptions of this would be useful to help address any potentially related issues, and to consider how best to approach the topic in ongoing professional development opportunities.

There were differences between the respondents practising in HE and non-HE regarding the types of existential topics encountered in their one-to-one appointments. For example, respondents outside of HE were more likely than their counterparts to identify topics relating to freedom and meaning, whereas HE practitioners more frequently reported issues connected to authenticity and anxiety. Bearing in mind the research's limitations, this poses more questions for further research, including whether these distinctions reflect any wider patterns or demographic variation, institutional expectations, or differing interpretations of the professional role in each context.

When comparing appointment lengths, respondents delivering only shorter appointments tended to explore slightly fewer existential topics (mean 4.5 versus. 5.1). This raises

questions about whether shorter sessions restrict reflective space, reinforce more transactional approaches, or are being used for different purposes such as follow up sessions. Also, those CGPs delivering only shorter appointments had notable differences in the specific guidance models they employed, with only GROW enjoying similar levels of employment. There are further research opportunities on why this is, and whether this is due to any perceived applicability or value of employing certain models over others in shorter/longer timeframes.

The data does suggest a potential link between delivering longer appointments, wider model use, and greater exploration of existential topics, which, given that 96% of the CGPs who offered a maximum of 30 mins appointments worked in HE, raises strategic questions for further exploration in the sector: do current HE service structures limit CGPs and their clients in favour of speed and output, and, if so, what is the impact of this on the provision and support available for university students? With the mode and median HE appointment length at 30 minutes, more research is needed to establish whether this timeframe supports meaningful exploration, especially when existential topics such as identity, purpose, and responsibility arise so frequently.

Conclusions

The findings of this study provide valuable insight into the 'black box' of career guidance practice, shedding light on the extent to which existential concerns permeate one-to-one work with clients. The results prompt critical reflection for policymakers, strategic leaders, academics, and managers across the education sector and beyond regarding whether current, and future planned, careers provision sufficiently accommodates the depth and complexity of the issues that practitioners are addressing. In particular, the high prevalence of career-related anxiety, especially in HE, raises important questions about institutional priorities, including ethical decisions around funding, service design, links with other student support services, and the growing consideration of AI-based guidance alternatives.

The findings also carry potential implications for the design and content of Level 6 and 7 career guidance qualifications when linking underpinning theory to the lived reality of practice. Practitioners report a clear desire to learn more about how to explore existential topics in a careers education context. Given the interdisciplinary nature of career guidance, and the potential to view careers work as a philosophical activity (Stevens, 2025a), the integration of existentialist lenses and perspectives – and potentially other branches of philosophy – in order to explore these topics warrants further exploration.

The data suggest that for career guidance tools to be as widely practical and applicable as possible, they should be responsive to the time constraints of appointments (often 30 minutes or under, especially in HE), and flexible enough to complement a variety of guidance models, particularly the guidance models most commonly employed (GROW, Skilled Helper, DOTS, and the Counselling Approach). These considerations also potentially offer insights into effective resource design for contemporary careers education more broadly.

Finally, the complexity of the issues identified reinforces the ongoing argument for further support with professionalisation within the careers sector. The breadth of existential topics observed in respondents' practice underscores what CGPs already know, even if the public may not (CDI, 2025), that effective career guidance entails far more than supporting CV

development, interview preparation, or the transmission of labour market information. Rather, it requires the capacity to engage with clients' foundational philosophical concerns about being human. For practitioners, this study reinforces the scope of the work they do, offers many stimuli for further research, and provides important avenues for professional reflection and development, particularly in relation to understanding and responding to career-related anxiety, and researching clients' perspectives on these existential topics.

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