'Oh Whoops, What Have I Done?' Understanding the Changing Guidance Needs of Full Time, UK Resident Masters Students.

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Introduction

In the Winter 2003 edition of *Career Research and Development* we reported early findings from a project commissioned by the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU), investigating the guidance needs of full-time, UK-based Masters students (Colley and Bowman, 2003). We have been tracking four full time UK students on each of six different Masters courses since October 2002. The 24 students were studying in two universities: one pre-1992 institution we have called Redbrick, and one post-1992 institution we have called Provincial. The courses we drew our sample from were:

- **Vocational courses** linked to or required for a specialised occupation:
  Interpreting – for skilled linguists, to train them in interpreting.
  Applied Sciences – strongly linked with an engineering industry.
  (Both at Redbrick University)
- **Semi-vocational courses relating to a broad occupational area**
  Graphic Art – aimed at those with an established, or those aspiring to establish a practice.
  Business – a 'conversion' course for those who have not studied the subject before.
  (Both at Provincial University)
- **Non-vocational courses**
  Philosophy – mostly students continuing their undergraduate subject at the same university.
  Classics – also attracts mainly students from the same university.
  (Both at Redbrick)

In the first article, we analysed students' career decision-making on entry to the course partly in terms of routines and turning points in their careership (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996). We also discussed a more diagnostic approach using Bedford's 'FIRST' model as a heuristic device for understanding students' guidance needs according to their degree of vocational focus and the apparent certainty of their career pathway. Our initial analysis raised the following issues for Higher Education careers service policy and practice:

- resources were scarce in relation to this particular student group and there were enormous differences between the resources available in the two Universities in the study

- the emphasis on careers services as a placement service for employers had a negative impact on the students' perceptions of provision

- the needs of students who were vocationally unfocussed might be better served by allowing them to discuss their perceptions of leaving University before focussing on occupational choice or labour market entry

- career service provision, including websites, could benefit from taking a more needs-based approach that recognises the decision making process, rather than assuming that a decision has been made.

Both in the article and in the interim report from the study we discussed the implications of our analysis of the first interviews for careers guidance practitioners (Bowman *et al.*, 2004). The second round of data, reported here, confirms that analysis, but also takes us beyond it.

This follow-up article is based mainly on the second round of interviews with the students, towards the end of their Masters courses in 2003. In this round of interviews we focused on the students' experiences of the course, the guidance and advice they had sought and received over the year, and their perceptions of formal guidance provision. Here we present tentative findings and recommendations in three key themes:

- The Masters year as period of career transition
- Guidance needs, provision and use
- Implications for guidance in Higher Education (HE).

The Masters year as career transition

The second round of data suggests that the students have experienced the Masters year as a period of career transition. While most saw the Masters, in part at least, as a way to position themselves with more distinction among the general graduate cohort, few had followed linear pathways. For most, their initial expectations on entry did not prefigure how they actually progressed or their planned destination at the end of the year. Moreover, their experience of the Masters course was closely bound up with other aspects of their broader lives. We adapted the typology of 'routines' to this year of transition, and our analysis suggested four groupings in our sample:

1. **Confirmatory and socialising transitions:** for 8 students (mostly on vocational and semi-vocational courses), the Masters year had reinforced their original decision. It had socialised them into the norms and expectations of the Masters course and the labour markets they were targeting, including academia. Generally these students had maintained the Masters as the central focus in their lives, either minimising distractions away from the course, or finding their other interests and commitments coherent with studying their subject area. These students were trying to use the end of their course as an opportunity to progress into occupations related to their course and three of these students had successfully found work.

2. **Confirmatory transitions:** 7 students (all on non-vocational or semi-vocational courses) shared their focus this year between the Masters course and other interests, though both had reinforced their identities. Wider interests and concerns in their lives seemed to have greater influence on most of their post-Masters plans, which were generally tentative and short-term, including temporary or freelance work, or 'gap years' using 'any old job' to save money for a few months in order to travel. Postponement of longer-term career plans was an important feature of some of these students' decisions once again. Some were forced to defer their plans through lack of money for longer-term goals, whereas some desired deferral to allow them to travel, hoping to get a clearer idea of what they wanted to do next. There was some potential for dislocation in these students' interim plans.

3. **Contradictory/evolving transitions:** 5 students (across all types of courses) had experienced problems within the Masters course, giving them a sense of 'not fitting in' and causing them to reconsider their options. All completed their course but took steps to move into other areas, evolving beyond the Masters into new territory. While this had involved a period of unease during the year, these students had pulled their experiences round. They had used the Masters to move on, often by moving away from what they had previously perceived to be a certain pathway, using their other interests as a guide.

4. **Dislocated transitions:** 4 students (across all types of course) had found the year to be a dislocating experience. One vocational student reacted against sexist discrimination she perceived on the course and in the related industry. Others had applied to high-profile graduate training schemes and been repeatedly rejected. Although they enjoyed their Masters courses, these students found themselves unable to reconcile traditional graduate opportunities with their own identities and vague desires for enjoyable and varied work. However, they lacked career management skills and had been unable to resolve these contradictions by evolving in a new direction during the year. All 4 were unclear about their future plans.

Our initial analysis showed that a significant number of students entered their Masters course with clear vocational focus and/or expectations of relatively certain pathways beyond it (Colley and Bowman, 2003). These expectations had been disrupted to a large extent, irrespective of the students' vocational focus to begin with. This implies even greater differentiated needs for guidance in this group than our initial data suggested.

All of the students still hoped to distinguish themselves in the labour market through gaining the Masters credential. In particular, those targeting mainstream graduate jobs were attempting to construct themselves as 'pickers and choosers' in the labour market. They hoped to join 'selector' companies with glamorous products (such as mobile `phones), and to avoid becoming the objects of 'recruitor' companies whose products (such as soap powder) they perceived as 'dull'. Nearly two thirds of our sample viewed their careership predominantly in terms of alternative lifestyles inconsistent with employment-led goals and the mainstream graduate labour market. However, many of the students were restricted through lack of economic, social or cultural capital.

For most of the students, movement into the labour market appeared pragmatic and partial. Even where the Masters courses seemed quite tightly focused on a particular vocation, when compared with apprenticeships (for example) it was clear that employers were relatively loosely involved with the qualification, bearing none of the responsibility or risk for student achievement and progression. There does appear to be a particular labour market for Masters students, but as careers advisers pointed out, it is limited and segmented in technical and specialised areas, both in industry and academia.

Guidance needs, provision and use

It is common for guidance to be focused around decision-making on entry to and exit from educational courses. However, our data suggests that students are engaged throughout their Masters course in a process we have termed 'transitioning'. In coining this term, we are attempting to capture the strategic agency they demonstrate in trying to position themselves

advantageously in various fields. It is key to developing an understanding of full time Masters students' changing guidance needs.

Guidance needs

At the time of the second interviews some of the students who had been vague about their plans at the start of their courses remained vocationally unfocused. They had poor career management skills and had made little or no progress in developing their career plans over the Masters year. Others had hoped that their vocational course would focus and direct their progression but they had failed to do adequate careers research beforehand. These students were now questioning their original intentions, the expectations they held of the course and their desire to work within this particular field. Some had gradually lowered their sights to more typical graduate 'starter' jobs, including the possibility of 'underemployment'. Others had more whimsical ideas about their future options, although these were not necessarily unrealistic, particularly for those from privileged backgrounds with significant capital. Their career hopes were often that 'something will turn up', but most were not well equipped either to generate such serendipity or to take advantage of its occurrence. They displayed poor career management skills, and some were still in denial of the transition they would have to make in the future.

Some students had had clear vocational focus to begin with. The Masters they chose had been especially attractive because of their strong links with an associated industry. However, during the year students discovered just how few openings were available to them. Although the Masters might have been *necessary*, it was by no means *sufficient* to gain entry to desired positions, resulting in considerable disillusionment for some. These students were ill-prepared to re-orient themselves to alternative opportunities. Issues of equal opportunities arose for one female student in a male-dominated field, but she had no idea that she might seek help with these.

A small number of students had found themselves growing comfortable in the academic community. Some saw academia as a safer, more meritocratic environment than the labour market outside education. However, these students found it difficult to get impartial information about how to apply for funding and where to study for their PhD, during the course.

The five students who had been successful in gaining positions by the time of the second interview had either pursued an originally clear vocational focus, or refocused as their transitions evolved. They had made good use of previous work or educational experience and the social capital this had generated along with the cultural capital developed through their educational successes. They displayed well-developed career management skills to pursue these opportunities and to generate and respond to happenstance if need be.

Guidance provision – perceptions and use

There had been no careers education in-put into any of the six Masters courses in the study. Instead, courses focused on providing opportunities for students to build industry, practitioner and academic contacts. However, this varied considerably across the courses. The two vocational courses at Redbrick University brought prestigious employers into the course and provided opportunities for students to network with them and apply for jobs. Applied Sciences at Redbrick was the only Masters course in our sample that provided detailed destinations information for its students and they found this very helpful. The semi-vocational Graphic Art course at Provincial University had provided some opportunities for students to showcase their work and network within the industry. The Business conversion course had provided no support for students' career progression. Academic courses at Redbrick provided teaching experience and PhD study opportunities for a few. For all the students the demands of course work and exams often clashed with career management activity. They found it especially difficult to gear up for the recruitment cycle in November when their courses had only just started.

Careers services had been accessed by some of the students at Redbrick University and by one student only at Provincial University. These students used the service primarily to refine their job application skills, especially writing CVs. The students who used this type of support viewed it positively, and peer example and recommendation were key in take-up of this service. Some students used the careers centre to obtain information about employers, but were less satisfied with this aspect of service provision and those with less focus felt overwhelmed by the volume of information available. Those on vocational courses felt the careers service could not provide the detailed 'insider' information their tutors possessed.

Others had made no contact with the careers service, and several did not know where it was or how to access it. Career guidance was still perceived as irrelevant by many of these students but often for different reasons. For some, one negative experience of statutory guidance provision at school had been enough to deter them from using formal careers services for good. Those who were unfocused continued to see the careers service as only for those who had focused on a clear occupational choice. Those who were already focused relied on their courses, tutors and social networks as more useful. Some of the students who changed direction over the Masters year were faced with a difficult situation and a new set of unexpected decisions to make. The title of this piece is taken from a quote that captures the need one student had to be able to admit that she was questioning her original decision to take a particular vocational course:

If I'd liked this I'd be an engineer for the rest of my life. But I didn't. And I think too many people do something like this and don't think 'Oh whoops, what have I done?' And they end up being miserable alcoholics. I think it happens and I don't really want to go down that route. (Alice, Applied Sciences)

However, Alice would not use the careers service because she felt it was too closely associated with the institution and would put pressure on her to continue with the course or pay back the money. She felt isolated and marginalised. Consequently she floundered towards the end of the year, making plans to move into work as different from applied sciences as possible, without advice or guidance.

Some of the students had used other sources of information. Graduate Prospects and other websites were used to access job vacancies, but had not proved useful so far. Careers fairs were seen as offering too limited a range of opportunities to be relevant. Internet search engines, newspaper vacancy pages, professional associations, email vacancy notification systems and industry-specific mailing lists were used, but also with no results by the time of the second interviews. Family members and friends provided information, advice and contacts, but seemed to have less influence on exit from the Masters than on entry to it.

Some implications for guidance in HE

There appear to be gaps in the provision of career education, advice and guidance from the Masters courses and the careers services at these universities, and in these students' use of available resources. Our sample is necessarily small and the suggestions below should be treated as tentative. However, we have presented these findings to HECSU and careers advisers from a number of different universities, and received strong support for the implications highlighted here.

- Liaison between careers services and course tutors could help develop career guidance provision in appropriate ways. Masters courses could collect and disseminate more accurate and longer-term destinations information. It would be helpful for tutors to understand triggers for referring students to guidance services. Masters courses charge substantial fees, and top-slicing might contribute to resourcing some career education and guidance provision. However, embedding careers education within courses may not be helpful, since such a large proportion of our sample changed direction.

- Full-time Masters students are the one group that policies for funding guidance in HE do not appear to recognise or resource, despite the fact that our sample shows a variety of unmet guidance needs. Careers services may need to pay more attention to marketing themselves to this group, including

better explanations of the needs they can address and the different types of help they offer. Quite small interventions in students' induction might make a significant impact on student use of guidance provision. One interview with a careers adviser who had worked with other Masters students in Redbrick University suggested that students respond positively when guidance is presented initially in terms of an academic and theoretical framework of career theory which may appeal to their self-understanding.

- Branding provision for Masters students may help to signal that their specific needs are recognized. Furthermore an emphasis on the impartial, client-centred role of careers service provision might attract students who are experiencing difficulties, either with their transitions away from their original goals and/or the focus and culture of course provision. There may also be a need for careers services to address issues of equal opportunities and provide support for students who encounter discrimination. Many students are seeking alternative careers and lifestyles outside the mainstream graduate labour market, and have some of the greatest needs for guidance. Holistic approaches to guidance, and expertise on the pursuit of less standard career routes, would equip services to help this group better. Appropriate use of ICT, including needs-based websites and confidential e-mail guidance may also be useful for this group. In both ICT-based and face-to-face guidance, narrative approaches may be particularly effective. This project provides a wealth of case study data from which to develop such material.

Where does the study go from here?

In the second phase of the research, which began in March 2004, we are tracking the students beyond their Masters course, interviewing them again four to eight months after they finished their courses, and once more a year later. We are also interviewing employers and significant others in their lives over this period. We already know from the third round of interviews (across both phases of the study) that many of the students have changed or adjusted their direction again, following the completion of their courses. We will be using the data from the third and fourth round of interviews in the future to discuss the ways in which students progress from full time higher study into work (or not), and how their experiences and use of advice and guidance change over time.

References

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Notes:

Readers can obtain more detailed working papers and the Interim Report from Helen Bowman at the address below or via www.leeds.ac.uk/lli, click on Publications.

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