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Promoting research and reflective practice in career development

NICEC

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR CAREER EDUCATION AND COUNSELLING

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JOURNAL OF THE
National Institute for Career Education and Counselling

April 2026, Issue 56

Contents

GENERAL ARTICLES

BOOK REVIEWS AND NEWS

GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

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Editorial

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Exploring how ethics, philosophies and principles (EPPs) impact policy and practice in career development

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Introduction

Welcome to edition 56 of the NICEC Journal. The NICEC Journal is a bi-annual publication comprising articles, book reviews and news. Recently the structure was amended to reflect three types of article: research, conceptual and short:

- *Research articles* will be expected to include strong academic content and should be based on new empirical work, or use an established methodology.
- *Conceptual articles* will be expected to include strong academic content and should be based on new theoretical work or on detailed and analytical discussion of key issues, existing theories, new policies or other important issues.
- *Short articles* are intended to attract diverse submissions such as: rapid updates on policy developments; reporting an evaluation of a new service; reflections on practice; and points of views.

In each edition, readers will find articles are identified by type and where there has been a call for a special edition, articles will be categorised under that heading. In edition 56 readers will find articles of all three types.

In making the call for this themed edition we aimed to explore how ethics, philosophies and principles (EPPs) impact policy and practice in career development work. EPPs underpin career development practice, as well as theories and policies, and may be manifest formally in professional development standards, or more broadly in deeply held assumptions or beliefs about the nature of career making and ways to best help clients make progress in their life and work. It is intriguing to consider whether each of us defines what is ethical, philosophically-appropriate or principled from within the career development context in which we operate, or whether there is a broader consensus. Sometimes the terms ‘ethics’, ‘philosophies’ and ‘principles’ are used interchangeably. However, the reader will be reassured at this point to learn that this brief editorial is not about to disappear down the rabbit hole of definition, but instead offer some reflections to set the scene.

Whilst there may appear to be consensus amongst communities of practice, such as the Career Development Institute (CDI, 2024) it is likely that from different historical, social or cultural traditions, EPP may be viewed very differently. I recently listened to a presentation about generation theory, and whether you identify as a baby boomer, millennial or generation zee, the idea that each generation holds different beliefs about the nature of career and career development sounds plausible to me. Career development practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers are inevitably influenced by what they see happening around them, particularly in the world of work, and this changes significantly over time. The apocryphal story, attributed to Heraclitus, that one cannot step into the same place of a river twice, reminds of constant change in ourselves, our environment and our clients. What was true of the career guidance needs of people in the pre-digital age of the early 1990s is very different from that of the Copilot era of 2026. Our personal and professional philosophies are likely to have been shaped as much from our historic, lived experiences of careers work, as from research-led analyses.

Education, training and continued professional development for careers work is also likely to have had an influence on our sense of ethics and philosophical stance. As someone trained in the traditions of *unconditional positive regard* and *client-centredness* (c.f. Rogers, 1951) I assimilated that the gold standard of principled practice was to be non-directive and facilitate the client to make their own decisions, and use their free will, unimpeded by a practitioner’s information-rich views. Knowledge of what clients may actually face in their career journeys introduces an ethical tension into non-directive practice and challenges values learned in training. Many practitioners will recognise the dilemma of aiming to be non-directive when they see a client embarked on a futile trajectory; can it ever be ethical to be directive in such circumstances and how can a practitioner know with certainty what a futile trajectory is? Apparently impossible career dreams do come true.

A less often discussed ethical career guidance practice is that of being an advocate on behalf of individuals or groups of clients. UDACE (1986) listed the activities of guidance, interestingly as verbs not nouns, and included not only *informing, advising,* and *counselling* which might be expected, but also *enabling* and *advocating*. This acknowlegement of a more agentic aspect foreshadowed increasing professional interest in the role of careers work as a catalyst in the promotion of social justice, equity, diversity and inclusion – see also NICEC Journal, edition 55 – and acted as a counter to the passivity of the practitioner in wholly client-centred philosophies.

Another gold standard in ethical careers work is *impartiality*. Impartiality is a well-established goal in both practice and policy and yet it is not easily achieved. Universities that discourage employer presentations from the fossil fuel industries; practitioners opposed to war who avoid discussion about careers in the armed forces; schools and colleges with financial imperatives to recruit students; are simple illustrations of the day-to-day difficulty of making impartiality happen in the real world. Hooley (2023) argues that impartiality is poorly defined and weakly theorised. He describes challenges to the aspiration of impartiality including:

ambiguity, alignment with career theory; and tensions with other ethical values. Impartiality, like non-directiveness, is perhaps more easily observed in its absence; career information, advice and guidance that is partial, or not independent of the interests of other stakeholders, is unlikely to serve the best interests of clients. One solution suggested is that the profession undertake continual examination of biases, preconceptions and prejudices, in order to make those explicit and subject to public scrutiny.

The (CDI's ibid) Code of Ethics, which includes impartiality, was purposed to guide or define ethical behaviour in career development work. It also acts as a form of public accountability and standards setting and contributes to operational policy. In the UK the code has teeth; CDI members who breach the Code will be subject to a disciplinary procedure.

The Code articulates principles such as trustworthiness and fitness to practise alongside competence and [commitment to] continuing professional development. It is interesting to note that the items listed are described as principles. They are:

- Equity, diversity and inclusion
- Accountability
- Autonomy
- Confidentiality
- Competence and continuing professional development
- Duty of care to clients
- Impartiality
- Transparency
- Trustworthiness
- Fitness to practise

Ethics, philosophies and principles are complex to practise, nuanced in policy terms, and probably inter-dependent. It is important to try to make explicit what or who the architects really are. Does a clear consensus of what is philosphically right precede the identification of ethics and principles, or do ethics and principles lead to deeper philosophical understandings? Rigorous, research- and practice-informed commentary has much to do to disentangle EPP in career development.

The authors in this edition grapple with this complexity well and in doing so contribute to what we hope will be an on-going debate about what aspects of EPP can be taken for granted and what should be kept under review. Consensus might be more illusive than we first thought, but all the more interesting for that.

Special collection, ethics, philosophies and principles

In the first article, **Poulsen**, examines the purpose of career education and guidance and how it can be distinguished from ethical principles embedded in professional identity. Writing from a Danish perspective and drawing on Dewey's philosophy of education he argues that the purpose of career guidance can be understood in light of democratic and and educative principles.

The next article from **Borgen et al**, presents a case study from Canada of how a code of ethics was developed, disseminated and renewed as a tool to strengthen ethical fitness. Using a learning model that places emphasis on moving users of the code toward 'unconscious competence' and replacing previous strategies to embed ethical practice described as 'print, post and pray' with a more systematic approach to the challenges of raising and embedding ethical awareness in career development work in a non-regulated context.

A country context is foregrounded in **Post** and **Woldendorp's** account of the tensions between individual freedom of choice and societal collective need in a changing labour market in the Netherlands. Taking both historical and contemporary approaches, they reconceptualise what is a 'good career' and propose that a new balance is achieved between the individual and the common good. Career guidance as a value-driven practice is well placed to facilitate 'responsive career pathways'.

In the next article, **McIlveen** takes a deep dive into the nature of narrative career counselling and vocational psychology viewed through a philosophical and ethical lens. He argues that narrative approaches rely on the co-construction of meaning, and do not confer predictive truth. Writing from an Australian perspective, McIlveen proposes the concept of 'pragmatic idiographic truth' in which counsellor and client build a pragmatic truth that can form the basis of action. Career counselling therefore may not be neutral or value-free and challenging questions remain unanswered.

If the article above is thought-provoking in relation to the client-counsellor relationship, the next one will similarly encourage reflection. Here **Freeman** explores power-sharing and the student voice in careers work. Drawing on a review of literature, Arnstein's Ladder of citizen participation, ethical pragmatism and participatory action research, she proposes a new model of careers work that centre-grounds social justice. Freeman argues that if there is to be movement from student representation to student participation there needs to be a redesign of career education, information, advice and guidance.

In the first of two 'points of view' in this edition, **Colley** provides a thought-provoking article as she re-visits research undertaken at the time of the Connexions career services in England in the UK. She describes how the ethical labour invested in the provision of career advice and guidance with disadvantaged young people during a period of 'austerity' compromised advisers' sense of professional ethics and their personal well-being. Colley draws out lessons relevant to today and challenges us to resist the 'narrowing' pressures of marketisation and government policy.

In the second 'point of view' **Wilkinson** provides what has been described as a love letter to Bill Law. As many readers will be aware, Bill Law, along with Tony Watts, was a founding Fellow of NICEC. Wilkinson uses the well known DOTS model to encourage reflection on professional integrity by raising a series of challenging questions. In this article integrity includes building trust, taking risks, and stepping outside ones comfort zones and doing what we ask of our clients. One particularly provocative question is 'Should I be taking advice from you?'

Next follows an article by **Stevens** who continues to encourage us to focus on guidance interactions. Building on earlier work on existentialism in careers coaching (Stevens, 2023) Stevens reports upon his action research about how one-to-one appointment length and awareness and use of guidance models helps us to understand the 'black box' of career guidance interventions in higher education in the UK.

Moving now to Sierra Leone, the next article provides a practice-based ethical analysis of a pilot to introduce career counselling into secondary schools. Here **Edenberg** describes a 'small state' where resources for career education and guidance are constrained and practitioners' ethical challenges are intensified by structural as much as professional considerations.

As has already been suggested, the education and training of career practitioners confers fundamental, core values and is significant in shaping the sense of EPP in practice. In the next article, **Frigerio et al** report on a survey of the practice and philosophy of providers of initial training in the UK and some other countries. The project arose from work on the Career Development Handbook (Hooley, et al, 2024) and draws upon several frameworks for practice. Findings suggest consensus but also a good deal of epistemic and philosophical difference around the role of career theory and its relationship with practice.

A potentially urgent ethical issue for the training of guidance practitioners concerns whether matters of global concern should form part of practice; climate change and the provision of 'green guidance' being one such issue. In a ground-breaking piece of research **Lucas Casanova** and **Hooley** report on an extensively statistical validation of two instruments to measure practitioners' attitudes, and their perceptions of their clients' attitudes, to green guidance. They contend that the development of these instruments will enable practitioners to reflect upon their own attitudes and competence in the context of the increasing importance of environmental sustainability and the attendant consequences for occupational choice.

General articles

The articles in this section feature practice-led research and development in different contexts; the first three are case studies.

The first article authored by **Bainham** provides a case study of early evidence from the evaluation of the Rise High programme to enhance the career development skills of disadvantaged, under-represented young people in a rural area of England. Findings indicate the programme is effective with many positive outcomes for participants. The model offers insight into the design of collaborative, place-based outreach work in rural settings.

In the second practice-based case study, **Mohammed** and **Wijemuni** report upon the provision of 'meaningful experiences of work' in secondary schools in England, and introduce the PERE (prepare, execute, reflect and evaluate) model as a framework to operationalise governmental guidance (Department for Education, 2025) and the Gatsby Benchmarks (2025). Based on the work of Kolb, the PERE model combines experiential learning, social constructivism and reflective practice.

In the third case study **Mehta** describes a leadership programme in a research intensive university in the UK. The programme, aimed to support the inclusion of under-represented employees, is designed as a career development intervention and demonstrates how career progression is enhanced by inclusive leadership and psychological safety.

In a quantitative, cross-sectional analysis **Michael** reports upon the relationship between, parental attachment, age, academic progress and vocational identity (the dependent variable) in undergraduate students in higher education in the USA. Using both literature and regression analyses, Michael shows that younger students are more vocationally clear than their older peers, and that secure parental attachment, particularly in relation to fathers, has a strong association with vocational identity.

The last article in this edition concerns career development support for people in the age group 60-80 years. **Taylor** draws upon psychological theory and empirical research and proposes ThriveSpan as an integrative, meaning-centred framework to support wellbeing. ThriveSpan focuses on 're-orientation' towards what matters now, and reassuringly for those in this age group, does not characterise ageing negatively, but as a distinctive, dynamic condition.

Finally, the issue finishes off with books review from Michelle Stewart of Carolyn Parry's new book *Supporting achievers to unblock sustainable career success* and Claire Nix's review of third edition of *The Careers Leaders Handbook* and a report from Nicki Moore about NICEC's fiftieth birthday celebrations.

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Special Collection:

Exploring how ethics, philosophies and principles (EPPs) impact policy and practice in career development

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Conceptual Article
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What is the purpose? Career guidance, professional identity and democracy

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Abstract

This article examines how the purpose of career guidance is articulated and embedded in professional identity. Drawing on professional identity theory and John Dewey's philosophy of education, it analyses contemporary articulations of purpose with particular attention to historical Danish policy texts. The analysis shows that contemporary formulations of purpose are often indirect, whereas earlier texts framed guidance as a democratic and educative practice. Although based on Danish material, the discussion speaks to wider international debates about the societal role and purpose of career guidance. The article argues that purpose should be understood as an immanent normative orientation embedded in professional practice.

Keywords: Career guidance, Professional identity, Purpose, Democracy, Ethics, Philosophy of education

Introduction

Career guidance is frequently described through its functions, methods and intended outcomes. In many contemporary policy frameworks, it is expected to support educational and occupational transitions, enhance employability and contribute to broader societal goals.

Alongside such orientations, a growing body of research and professional debate emphasises the wider social and democratic significance of career guidance (Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen 2018, 2019). Recent collaborative initiatives call for the development of critical and socially responsive approaches to career theory and practice (Hooley et al. 2025). These contributions highlight the importance of addressing inequality, precarity and ecological challenges within career guidance.

Within this broader landscape, a fundamental question warrants renewed attention: What is the professional purpose of career guidance? Not only in terms of policy objectives or political commitments, but as a normative orientation embedded in professional practice itself. The present article develops its argument primarily through the philosophy of John Dewey, focusing on purpose as an immanent normative orientation embedded in professional practice.

This article explores career guidance as a formative and democratic practice inspired by John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy. From this perspective, purpose is understood as an immanent orientation that organises professional action and gives coherence to practice. Career guidance is approached as an activity concerned with cultivating understanding, participation and democratic agency through the organisation of experience.

By examining historical articulations of purpose alongside contemporary formulations, the article seeks to clarify how democratic formation can function as a core dimension of professional identity in career guidance. Purpose, understood as an immanent normative orientation embedded in practice, provides coherence and legitimacy to professional action. It articulates not merely what career guidance does, but why it does it, and how its activities are justified in relation to broader democratic values. When purpose is not actively reflected upon and articulated within professional practice, identity risks becoming fragmented and primarily shaped by shifting policy formulations, rather than sustained by a coherent normative orientation. The article is situated in a Danish context, where career guidance has developed in close relation to the welfare state and the education system and has historically been organised as a publicly provided, largely education-based service.

Career guidance has not only been understood as a technical service, but as part of a wider educational and societal project linked to broader ambitions concerning education, democracy and formation. This makes the Danish case analytically relevant for examining how professional purpose is articulated, transformed or weakened over time.

Against this background, the article addresses the following question:

> How is the purpose of career guidance articulated and embedded in professional identity, and how can these articulations be understood in light of democratic and educative principles?

To address this question, the article combines perspectives from professional identity theory with a Deweyan understanding of education and democracy and analyses contemporary and historical articulations of guidance purpose in a Danish context.

Professional identity and purpose in career guidance

Professional identity can be understood as a collective and dynamic orientation concerning what characterises a profession, what it is responsible for, and how its practice is legitimised. As Heggen (2013), a Norwegian scholar of professional studies, argues, professional identity is not merely a matter of individual self-understanding, but a shared and negotiated understanding developed through education, professional discourse and practice. It concerns the question of 'who we are' as professionals and what distinguishes one profession from others.

From this perspective, purpose plays a central role. Purpose does not simply refer to concrete tasks or objectives, but to the underlying justification of professional practice. It connects everyday professional activities to broader societal values and provides a basis for professional judgment in situations characterised by complexity and uncertainty. Purpose thus functions as a mediating concept between professional ethics, professional practice and societal mandate.

While ethical principles regulate how professionals ought to act in relation to those they guide, purpose concerns the broader question of how the profession understands and justifies its role in society.

Similarly, Wackerhausen (2009), a Danish professor of psychology, emphasises that professions are characterised not only by specialised knowledge and skills, but by a responsibility to reflect on the normative foundations of their practice. Professional work is always situated within a societal context and involves ethical and political dimensions. A profession's legitimacy therefore depends, at least in part, on its ability to articulate and critically reflect upon its purpose and role in society.

As professional theory suggests, professional identity is frequently articulated through descriptions of tasks, methods and areas of responsibility, while broader reflections on a profession's societal purpose remain less clearly formulated (Heggen, 2013; Wackerhausen, 2009). In guidance, this tendency can be observed in professional and policy texts that primarily define practice in terms of activities, target groups or ethical conduct in the guidance relationship. While such articulations are important, they do not necessarily amount to a collective reflection on the purpose of guidance as a profession. Rather than suggesting an absence of discussion about the purpose of career guidance, this article approaches the question from a different angle by examining how purpose is articulated and embedded in professional identity. From a professional-theoretical perspective, this raises the analytical question of whether guidance risks being understood primarily as a set of techniques rather than as a profession characterised by a distinct normative orientation and societal role.

Clarifying the relationship between purpose and professional identity is a prerequisite for understanding how guidance positions itself in relation to education, society and democracy, and how professional judgement is exercised and justified in practice.

The development of the guidance field and analytical approach

The field of career guidance has developed over time in close interaction with changes in education systems, labour markets and welfare state arrangements (Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen, 2018; Guichard, 2001). In the Danish context, guidance has been shaped by shifting expectations concerning social inclusion, employability and educational planning, as well as by broader debates about education, citizenship and participation. These developments have influenced not only how guidance is organised, but also the ways in which its purpose has been articulated in Denmark (Poulsen, 2024; Plant, 2009).

In the Danish context, as in several other national settings, the expansion and diversification of the guidance field have contributed to a less clearly articulated professional identity. In Denmark new tasks, institutional reforms and policy priorities have contributed to a situation in which guidance is expected to fulfil multiple and sometimes competing functions. In such a context, questions of purpose become particularly salient. When a profession's purpose is not explicitly articulated, it becomes vulnerable to being defined externally through policy objectives and administrative requirements (Poulsen, 2024).

Against this background, the article adopts a qualitative and text-oriented analytical approach. Rather than providing a comprehensive overview of policy developments, the analysis focuses on selected texts that are analytically significant for understanding how the purpose of career guidance has been articulated in a Danish context over time. These include contemporary legislative formulations and professional self-descriptions found in mission statements and ethical principles articulated by professional associations, as well as historical Danish policy texts in which guidance is explicitly linked to democratic and educative ambitions.

The analysis proceeds as follows. First, the article introduces a Deweyan perspective on purpose, democracy and education, providing a philosophical framework for understanding purpose as an immanent normative principle embedded in practice. Then, contemporary articulations of guidance purpose in Denmark are examined. Afterwards, selected historical Danish texts are analysed, focusing on how they articulate guidance as part of a broader formative project concerned with reflective judgement and democratic participation. The analysis does not seek to explain why certain articulations dominate, but to examine their normative implications. Finally, the article brings these perspectives into discussion, exploring tensions, limitations and critical perspectives. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of treating purpose as an ongoing and contested dimension of professional identity.

Purpose, democracy and education: A Deweyan perspective

To examine purpose as a normative principle, this article draws on the work of the American philosopher John Dewey, particularly as articulated in Democracy and Education. Dewey's relevance lies not in offering a theory of career guidance as such, but in providing a philosophical framework for understanding how purpose operates within educative practices and how such practices are connected to democratic life.

For Dewey, democracy is not primarily a political or institutional arrangement, but 'a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience' (Dewey, 1916, p. 91). Understood in this way, democracy refers to a form of social life characterised by participation, communication and shared inquiry. Education is not oriented towards preparing individuals for a future democratic state but constitutes an integral part of democratic life as it unfolds. In a Scandinavian context, this understanding resonates with traditions of dannelse (Bildung), understood as the cultivation of judgement and participation in shared social life. However, Dewey's account differs from classical Bildung traditions by grounding formation in the continuous development and reinterpretation of experience, rather than in cultural transmission.

A central concern in Dewey's educational philosophy is the relationship between aims and practice. Dewey questions approaches to education in which purposes are defined in advance and applied to activity as fixed targets. When aims function in this way, educational practice tends to be organised around the fulfilment of predetermined objectives (Dewey, 1916; Brinkmann, 2013).

Dewey instead develops an understanding of educative purpose as something that arises within activity itself. By 'educative,' he refers to purposes that foster growth, inquiry and the expansion of experience. In this sense, aims operate as orienting commitments that guide activity while remaining responsive to what unfolds in practice. As he writes:

> In other words, the external idea of the aim leads to a separation of means from end, while an end which grows up within an activity as plan for its direction is always both ends and means, the distinction being only one of convenience. Every means is a temporary end until we have attained it. Every end becomes a means of carrying activity further as soon as it is achieved. (Dewey, 1916, p. 111)

Purpose, in this perspective, takes shape through the situations in which it is enacted. It guides action as a provisional orientation that is continuously informed by experience and open to revision through inquiry.

This understanding becomes clearer when applied to career guidance. Guidance conversations can be organised around achieving a specified placement or transition. They can also be organised as processes of shared inquiry, where experiences, interests and social contexts are explored and interpreted together. In the latter case, the guiding purpose of the activity is closely connected to the development of reflective judgement, illustrating Dewey's point that purposes may emerge within activity rather than being imposed as external ends.

When career guidance is approached as an educative practice in Dewey's sense, attention turns to how participation is organised within the guidance process itself. For Dewey, democratic life depends on forms of participation in which individuals take part in shared inquiry and communication. The democratic quality of guidance therefore concerns how individuals are invited into inquiry, how possibilities are examined, and how social conditions shaping educational and occupational pathways are made part of reflection. Participation is therefore structured in ways that recognise individuals as capable of judgement and contribution.

Dewey's concept of experience further illuminates this orientation. Experience is socially situated and shaped by the conditions in which it unfolds. Educative experiences widen horizons of understanding by connecting personal concerns with shared social realities (Dewey, 1916; Brinkmann, 2013). In guidance practice this may involve examining how educational systems are structured, how labour markets distribute opportunities, or how cultural expectations influence aspirations.

From this standpoint, the purpose of career guidance is realised through how its practices are organised: through communicative processes that cultivate reflection, understanding and participation in shared social life.

Within this perspective, an articulation of professional identity that remains confined to supporting individual decision-making may express an important value, yet it leaves open the question of how the profession understands its collective societal and democratic orientation.

This Deweyan perspective offers a normative framework by directing analytical attention to how guidance practices organise participation, shape experience and cultivate judgment. It therefore enables an examination of whether articulations of purpose in career guidance emphasise externally defined objectives or are embedded in educative and democratic orientations.

Contemporary articulations of purpose

This section examines contemporary articulations of the purpose of career guidance in a Danish context, drawing on legislation, professional self-descriptions and selected international frameworks. While such international formulations are available, they do not appear to function as shared or structuring reference points within national professional discourse, as reflected in the texts analysed here. As a result, purpose is articulated unevenly and often indirectly.

The analysis of these contemporary articulations focuses on recent policy and professional framings of career guidance. Later in the article, earlier Danish formulations from the mid-twentieth century are revisited – formulations in which guidance was articulated more explicitly in relation to democratic and educative ambitions – thereby widening the perspective on how professional purpose may be understood and highlighting how historical articulations of purpose may inform contemporary discussions about the societal role of career guidance.

In current Danish legislation concerning career guidance, purpose is articulated through references to contribution, benefit and system-level outcomes. Guidance is framed as serving both the individual and society, often through broad formulations that emphasise effectiveness, transitions and societal usefulness. A typical formulation states that guidance should contribute 'to the greatest possible benefit for the individual and society' [Danish Parliament, 2024; Danish Parliament, 2021].

Such formulations appear inclusive and uncontroversial, yet they are normatively underdetermined. While they specify that guidance should be beneficial, they do not clarify what constitutes benefit, how competing interpretations of individual and societal interests should be weighed, or which ethical principles should guide professional judgment in cases of conflict. Purpose is thus articulated as a generalised objective rather than as a principled orientation embedded in professional practice. A principled orientation would make explicit the normative commitments guiding professional judgment that is, the values and principles that inform how guidance counsellors interpret and balance individual aspirations, social conditions and institutional expectations. For instance, this concerns how guidance relates individual aspirations to social conditions, and how tensions between personal preference and societal demands are addressed within professional judgment. Without such clarification, practitioners may lack a shared basis for handling such tensions, leaving professional judgment more vulnerable to externally defined policy priorities or administrative requirements.

Importantly, these legislative formulations do not explicitly connect career guidance to broader educational or democratic aims. Concepts such as democratic participation or citizenship, understood here in the Deweyan sense of participation in shared social inquiry, are either absent or only implicitly present. As a result, purpose is framed primarily in functional terms, emphasising outcomes while leaving the normative orientation of practice largely unspecified. The analytical issue concerns the articulation of purpose as a broadly defined external objective that lacks sufficient normative specification to guide professional judgment.

If we turn to the professional community of career guidance in Denmark, it is similarly difficult to find elaborated accounts of a professional identity or sustained reflections on the overarching societal purpose of guidance (not to be confused with concrete political objectives). On its website, under the heading 'Who are we?', the Danish Association of Guidance Counsellors describes itself as 'a nationwide professional association for guidance practitioners' (Danish Association of Guidance Counsellors, n.d.). The association outlines a number of political and professional goals it works towards, such as placing guidance on the political agenda and ensuring access to lifelong professional guidance for all.

However, the association's website does not present a coherent articulation of the professional identity of guidance, understood here as a collective account of the profession's role, normative commitments and societal orientation, or what Heggen refers to as the question of 'who we are as professionals.' In other professions, such articulations are sometimes formulated more explicitly, for example in the professional ideals developed by the Danish Union of Teachers, where the core purpose and normative ideals of the profession are explicitly discussed (Danish Union of Teachers, 2002).

The Danish Association of Guidance Councellors refers to the document Principles for Ethics in Guidance, which it endorses as the foundation for all guidance practice. These principles were developed in 2006 by the now dissolved FUE, the Joint Council for Associations of Educational and Vocational Guidance Counsellors. Here, we move closer to an articulation of professional identity, as educational and vocational guidance is initially described as:

> a process that takes place through an interplay of information, teaching, practical activities and individual conversations, and which can form the basis for choices of education, occupation and career pathways, as well as the living conditions associated with these choices. (Danish Association of Guidance Counsellors, n.d.)

While professional identity may indeed be expressed through the form of practice, the definition offered here describes guidance primarily as a procedural arrangement rather than as a normatively oriented practice. Although the description emphasises individual choice processes, it does not explicitly articulate the broader societal or normative orientation of the profession.

Later, 'the profession's distinctive characteristics' are mentioned, yet these are not further specified or conceptually developed. Under the heading 'Ethics and the good life', it is stated that it is 'a fundamental value of guidance to promote the citizen's welfare and living conditions'. Here, an overarching reflection on the collective identity and purpose of guidance is in fact articulated – an indication of what guidance, in value terms, should work towards: the welfare and living conditions of the citizen.That the ethical principles focus on the individual, both in their definition of guidance and in the values they emphasise as guiding principles for practice, is not surprising. The main emphasis of the principles is precisely on ethical considerations and principles that the guidance counsellor must uphold in the relationship with the individual being guided. However central and valuable principles for ethics in guidance may be, they are not in themselves constitutive of a professional identity. Ethical principles regulate how professionals ought to act in relation to individuals. They primarily concern the ethical conduct of practitioners within the guidance relationship rather than the broader societal role and orientation of the profession as a whole. Articulating a professional purpose, by contrast, involves specifying the collective societal role and orientation of the profession as a whole. While promoting individuals' welfare may express an important value, it does not in itself clarify how the profession understands its broader contribution to society.

In an international guidance context, several attempts have been made to define a professional identity for guidance. The International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) defines guidance as follows:

> Educational and vocational guidance and career counselling services assist people with learning and work decisions across the lifespan as well as conceptualising and understanding their work lives and help them to strengthen their personal agency by developing skills, knowledge, attitudes and values to manage their careers.
>
> (IAEVG, n.d.)

In response to Heggen's question 'Who are we?', this definition provides a relatively clear and coherent answer: guidance and guidance practitioners help individuals with concrete decisions, perceptions and understandings of education and working life, and support individuals' agency. This definition offers a clear and widely recognisable account of guidance practice, emphasising support for individuals' agency and decision-making. At the same time, the articulation of professional identity remains centred on the individual and leaves the profession's broader societal orientation implicit.

Career guidance scholars Hooley et al. (2018, p. 20), drawing on a critical theoretical perspective, define career guidance in the following way:

> Career guidance supports individuals to discover more about work, leisure and learning and to consider their place in the world and plan for their futures. Key to this is developing individual and community capacity to analyse and problematise assumptions and power relations, to network and build solidarity and to create new and shared opportunities. It empowers individuals and groups to struggle within the world as it is and to imagine the world as it could be.

In contrast to the IAEVG definition, this formulation articulates a professional identity for guidance that does not solely concern support for the individual, but also understands itself in relation to groups, communities and society. That is, the context in which individuals are always already embedded. In my view, this definition offers significant potential for reflection on and development of professional identity and purpose in guidance, if taken into dialogue with guidance practice and explored in terms of how it may be meaningfully enacted.

Taken together, these internal articulations show that, alongside the functional language of legislation, contemporary professional discourse also contains normative aspirations concerning identity and purpose. However, these aspirations rarely function as structuring principles for professional identity or practice, and they remain vulnerable to being overshadowed by externally defined objectives articulated through legislation and governance frameworks.

Historical articulations of career guidance as a democratic practice

In a Danish context, where public discussions of the purpose and professional identity of career guidance appear limited today, it is possible to draw on two key documents from the early history of Danish career guidance that engage in principled discussions of the societal purpose of guidance. These are a report from the Youth Commission (1945–1952) on public vocational guidance in Denmark and the so-called 'Blue Report' (1960-61), named after the blue covers of the two-volume report, that formed the basis for the post-1958 reform of compulsory schooling in Denmark.

The establishment of a nationwide public system of vocational guidance in schools took place in the years following the German occupation of 1940-1945, first as a pilot scheme from 1946 in selected municipalities and later as a nationwide provision from 1953 (Plant, 2009). The recommendation to establish nationwide vocational guidance in schools came in particular from the Youth Commission appointed by the post-liberation government, whose mandate was to examine 'the special problems and needs of young people and, on that basis, to propose appropriate measures' (Youth Commission, 1946).

The Youth Commission was highly influential in shaping post-war Danish educational and social policy, and it must be understood within a broader post-war effort to strengthen democratic life in Denmark after five years of occupation. Its chair, Hal Koch, was a central public intellectual in the Danish democracy debate and the author of the influential book *What is Democracy?* (2023/1945), in which democracy is conceptualised as a way of life grounded in dialogue, participation and mutual understanding. From this perspective, democratic institutions alone are insufficient; democracy depends on forms of education and social practice that cultivate democratic dispositions.

This understanding of democracy as a lived and learned practice forms an important backdrop to the Commission's reflections on career guidance. In its report, the Youth Commission frames vocational guidance as an integral part of the democratisation of Danish society. In a democratic society, the right to choose one's occupation freely is regarded as a fundamental right. However, the Commission emphasises that this right has never been fully realised:

> In our democratic society, the right to freely choose one's occupation is regarded as a fundamental right. However, this principle has never been fully realised, as society has never been structured in such a way that free occupational choice for all could be practised. One need only point to the social and economic barriers that exist in our society and that, to this day, prevent many from attaining a position within working life that corresponds to their abilities. In addition, geographical and tradition-based obstacles must be taken into account. (Youth Commission 1946, pp. VIII–IX, author's translation)

Publicly accessible vocational guidance in schools is thus presented as a means of supporting the realisation of this democratic right. The purpose of guidance is to expand young people's knowledge of occupational possibilities as widely as possible, since one cannot exercise free choice without an understanding of what is available to choose from. As the Commission formulates it:

> [Young people must] be provided with orientation and guidance in such a way that occupational choice takes place with consideration of as many occupational possibilities as possible, and not merely those few of which the individual young person currently has an overview. It is precisely in this respect that vocational guidance intervenes. (Youth Commission 1946, p. IX, author's translation)

In this sense, vocational guidance is understood not as an instrument of allocation or control, but as a practice that seeks to broaden experience and support reflective choice as part of a democratic way of life.

An echo of the Youth Commission's understanding of vocational guidance as part of democratisation can be found in The Blue Report, the influential national curriculum guidance for compulsory schooling published in 1960. The report laid the foundation for significant changes in Danish schooling in a reform-pedagogical direction (Coninck-Smith et al., 2014).

The Blue Report includes a chapter on vocational orientation, which was introduced into compulsory schooling with the Danish School Act of 1958. In the analysis presented here, vocational orientation is understood as part of a broader guidance effort, in continuity with the Youth Commission and the Blue Report.

In The Blue Report, vocational orientation is explicitly understood as part of the school's general educational task. It is not limited to supporting individual choice, but is assigned a broader formative purpose that links knowledge, reflection and social understanding:

> Vocational orientation furthermore serves a general formative purpose, not only through civic education as such, but also through concrete knowledge of different occupations and educational pathways. This includes contributing to the counteraction of certain prejudices and misconceptions about occupational conditions that children often acquire from their surroundings, and which both hinder their reflections regarding occupational choice and impair understanding between social groups, thereby making it more difficult to dismantle irrational barriers to free occupational choice. (The Blue Report, 1960, pp. 220–221, original emphases, author's translation)

Vocational orientation is thus framed as an educational practice that contributes both to individual reflection and to understanding between social groups. Insight into occupations and educational pathways is itself considered part of general education and a prerequisite for meaningful participation in a democratic society.

Viewed through Dewey's conception of democracy as a way of life, the historical articulations of career guidance analysed above can be understood as accounts of career guidance as an educative practice rather than as a technical service. For Dewey, democracy depends on individuals' ability to relate personal experience to shared social conditions, and education plays a central role in enabling such connections (Dewey, 1916).

The Youth Commission's insistence on guidance as orientation rather than direction, and The Blue Report's emphasis on vocational orientation as a formative task, resonate with Dewey's critique of externally imposed educational aims. In both texts, guidance is valued not for producing predetermined outcomes, such as specific educational placements, rapid transitions into employment or predefined labour market matches, but for expanding horizons of experience, supporting reflective judgment and enabling individuals to understand the social conditions shaping their lives.

From this perspective, the democratic significance of guidance lies not in its contribution to labour market efficiency, but in its role in organising experience in ways that make reflection and understanding possible. Career guidance becomes a site where individuals can connect their personal trajectories with broader social realities, thereby participating in democratic life as an educative process.

Taken together, the historical texts analysed in this section articulate career guidance as a practice oriented towards democratisation through understanding rather than direction. They suggest that guidance can contribute to democratic life by enabling individuals to relate their own experiences, choices and aspirations to broader social conditions and shared ways of living. This conception points beyond guidance as orientation alone and raises a further question: how might career guidance foster an understanding of how one's experiences and choices relate to democratic and social life as an internal and enduring dimension of professional purpose? It is this question that the following section addresses.

Discussion: Career guidance, democracy and professional purpose

The preceding analysis highlighted how 'understanding between social groups' was articulated in The Blue Report as part of the democratic purpose of career guidance. If such understanding forms part of the profession's normative orientation, its uncertain status in contemporary guidance discourse becomes professionally significant. Also today, 'understanding between social groups' can be understood as being under pressure in Danish society. Danish professors of political science Binderkrantz, Pedersen and Petersen (2024) point to increasing divisions in Danish society. These divisions are not limited to party politics or political blocs, but also concern questions of gender, equality and identity politics. Marked political differences are also linked to geography, such as whether one lives in a large city or outside urban areas.

In a similar vein, Olsen et al. (2021) point to substantial social divides in contemporary Denmark and show how these developments result in concrete physical separation between groups with different levels of education and income. One example is the concentration of higher education and higher incomes in large cities, while lower levels of education and reliance on public welfare transfers such as unemployment or social assistance benefits are more prevalent in peripheral areas.

In a context characterised by increasing division and separation between social groups, the more than 60-year-old reflections found in The Blue Report and the Youth Commission's recommendations on the democratic and broadly educative purpose of career orientation and career guidance may usefully be reactivated in contemporary discussions of the purpose of career guidance. These reflections suggest that career guidance can support the realisation of a democratic way of life and contribute to improved understanding between social groups and ways of living.

The recommendations of the Youth Commission and The Blue Report provide a basis for talking about and thinking about the purpose of career guidance that, in my view, is just as relevant today as it was in 1946 and 1960. Naturally, the language and some of the approaches in the two texts are dated, and the concrete contexts of guidance have changed significantly. However, when reading beyond the historically specific formulations, the texts offer an understanding of career guidance that can still function as a valuable interlocutor in contemporary discussions of the profession's purpose and identity.

In this respect, the Youth Commission's recommendations and The Blue Report align with the understanding of career guidance as emancipatory and transformative found in the work of Hooley, Sultana and Thomsen. At the same time, the two historical texts contribute something further by anchoring the question of the purpose of career guidance as a profession in democracy: as an important element in the realisation of a democratic way of life. In the Danish context, this analysis suggests that democracy may be understood as a central normative horizon for the professional identity of career guidance; an element made explicit in the two historical texts, though less clearly articulated in contemporary professional discourse.

The Youth Commission's recommendations and The Blue Report thus provide examples of how a societal purpose of career guidance can be connected to the concrete tasks and practices of guidance. In this way, they demonstrate how a societal purpose can be concretely embedded in everyday guidance practices rather than remaining an abstract policy objective.

Viewed through Dewey's Democracy and Education, the argument developed above can be understood as an account of career guidance as an educative practice in the strongest sense. For Dewey, democracy is not primarily a political system, but a way of life that depends on individuals' ability to connect personal experience with shared social conditions (Dewey, 1916). Education plays a crucial role in fostering such connections by enabling reflection, interpretation and judgment.

Career guidance, as described in the Danish historical texts, can be understood as precisely such a practice. By helping individuals relate their aspirations, choices and experiences to educational pathways and occupational arrangements, guidance supports the development of what Dewey would describe as reflective experience. Democratic understanding emerges when individuals are enabled to inquire into their situations and to form judgments in light of shared social conditions.

In this sense, career guidance may be understood as a form of career learning grounded in reflective inquiry. Guidance does not simply transmit information or direct decisions, but organises experience in ways that support individuals in interpreting their past experiences, considering possible futures and situating themselves within broader educational and social contexts.

Dewey insists that democratic education cannot be governed solely by external aims or predefined outcomes. When education is subordinated to instrumental objectives, its capacity to support growth and democratic life is weakened. Applied to career guidance, this suggests that its democratic potential depends less on what it delivers and more on how it is practiced: as an open, educative process that cultivates understanding and judgment.

The conception of career guidance articulated in the Youth Commission and The Blue Report also resonates with contemporary critical perspectives that emphasise the humanising and transformative potential of guidance when it resists reduction to employability or labour market efficiency (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2007; Hyslop-Margison, 2002; Hooley et al., 2025). Recent efforts to develop a more coherent body of critical career theory explicitly frame career guidance as a site for examining power, inequality and the political economy of work, and for cultivating forms of agency that extend beyond adaptation to existing structures (Hooley et al., 2025).

What is at stake here is a reconfiguration of the relationship between the individual and society. Democratic understanding involves recognising how lives are shaped by social arrangements, while also acknowledging the possibility of critique and change. Career guidance that fosters such understanding treats individuals as participants in democratic life rather than solely as future workers.

This perspective also clarifies why explicit professional reflection on purpose matters. When the democratic and educative orientation of career guidance is not actively articulated and sustained within the profession, it risks being replaced by externally defined frameworks that emphasise efficiency, transition and system-level outcomes. In this sense, questions of purpose are inseparable from questions of professional legitimacy and responsibility.

Conclusion

This article has argued that questions of purpose are central to the professional identity of career guidance and cannot be reduced to functional objectives or policy-defined outcomes. Through analyses of contemporary articulations of purpose and historical Danish policy texts, the article shows how career guidance has been understood as a democratic and educative practice grounded in normative assumptions about freedom, judgement and participation.

Although the analysis is grounded in a Danish context, the questions raised concerning purpose, professional identity and democratic orientation resonate with wider international debates on professionalisation in career guidance.

A central implication of the analysis is that explicit reflection on purpose is integral to professional identity. Where such reflection remains implicit or underdeveloped, the normative orientation of career guidance becomes less visible and more susceptible to being framed through policy and governance discourses. In this sense, questions of purpose are closely connected to questions of professional legitimacy and ethical responsibility.

Understanding purpose as a normative orientation brings into view how career guidance is justified and enacted as professional practice. From this perspective, democracy functions as the normative framework within which guidance takes place and professional judgment is exercised. Democracy, understood as a way of life, is realised through participation in shared practices of inquiry, deliberation and judgment. Conceived in this way, career guidance contributes to democratic life by shaping how individuals engage with education, work and society as participants in shared social practices rather than as objects of policy or administration.

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Ethics in Canadian career development: Reflecting on lessons learned

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Abstract

The Canadian Career Development context is presented as a case example of how a professional code of ethics can be developed, disseminated, and regularly renewed, as a tool to strengthen ethical fitness. Using the four stages of learning model, the progression from unconscious incompetence through to unconscious competence is examined, illustrating the importance of a systematic approach to building awareness of relevant ethical codes, developing competencies in ethical decision-making, and engaging in open discussions about ethical dilemmas. This case example has applications to the UK and beyond as the challenges of non-regulated contexts, lack of awareness and support from employers and funders, and working under multiple ethical codes are also explored.

Keywords: ethical fitness, ethical practice, career development, career development practice

Introduction

Following a prescribed Code of Ethics is a cornerstone of professional practice (Otterlei, 2018). However, for Career Development Professionals (CDPs) in non-regulated occupations and sectors, regardless of a deep desire to be perceived as professional, and extensive efforts by professional associations and other organisations to provide ethical standards and guidelines, there remains a lack of consistency in awareness of those standards and implementing them into ethical practice. In this article, we offer a brief reflection on our experiences spanning the past four decades within the context of ethics training within the Canadian career development sector in the hopes our insights can support similar challenges facing professionals in the UK and beyond.

The Canadian career development context

Within Canada, since the mid-1990s, there has been a consistent focus on the professionalisation of the career development sector (Godden & Borgen, 2024). Several provincial professional associations were formed to support the emerging profession, with some developing their own unique Code of Ethics (e.g. British Columbia Career Development Association [BCCDA] now Western Canada Career Development Association [WCCDA]; Ontario Alliance of Career Development Practitioners [OACDP], the precursor to the Career Development Practitioners Certification Board of Ontario [CDPCBO]). Early professionalisation efforts included nation-wide consultation to inform the Standards and Guidelines (S&Gs) for Career Development Practitioners (S&Gs; McDonald, 2019), which included a Code of Ethics. In 2018, work began to update and expand the S&Gs and Code of Ethics (McDonald, 2019). This resulted in the first competency framework in the career development sector to align with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and to include clearly defined standards that could be measured and evaluated to confirm entry-to-practice competencies for Career Development Professionals® (CDPs; Nova Scotia Career Development Association, 2026). In December 2024, the National Career Development Certification (NCDC) programme was launched (Hopkins et al., 2025) and, 1 year later, 977 Certified Career Development Practitioners® (CCDP®) have been conferred from 12 of the 13 provinces and territories, with many more applications currently being processed (Career Certification, 2025).

However, except for the province of Quebec, certification of CDPs is not required across Canada – certification remains voluntary (Godden & Borgen, 2024) and not fully embraced by employers or funders. As CDPs enter the sector from various other professional backgrounds and fields of work (Bezanson et al., 2009; CERIC, 2025), it is not safe to assume that they are operating from a shared code of ethics or standards of practice. As with the UK, although they tend to bring many transferable skills with them and their diverse work experience can be very valuable in supporting their clients' career exploration and development, their transferable skills may not be specific to the career development sector. Even at the leadership level, there is inconsistency in terms of attachment to the sector. Many leaders have been appointed from within and have a significant level of front-line experience, but may not have had any formal training in either career development practice or programme management; other leaders have been imported from other sectors and may bring well-developed leadership and management competencies but have little specific grounding in the theories, ethical principles, or standards of practice for CDPs (Pickerell & Redekopp, 2025).

Although the career development sector has made headway in Canada, despite having an established code of ethics for two decades, awareness of the code and formal adoption by organisations and/or professional associations remains mixed. Further, in Canada, there is currently no formal mechanism for adjudicating ethical issues, nor are there penalties for ethical breaches unlike in the UK where the Career Development Institute's (CDI) Ethics and Professional Standards Committee (EPSC) maintains the Code of Ethics and manages the complaint process (CDI, n.d.). In Canada and other contexts without a system in place for reporting and adjudicating ethical complaints, there is no clear consequence for unprofessional behaviour or other ethical violations.

'We don't know what we don't know': Why a code of ethics matters

Otterlei (2018) highlighted how ethical guidelines were among many components that make a profession just that – a 'profession.' The development of profession-specific ethical guidelines contributes to supporting the broader trust and legitimacy of the sector, as well as to maintaining quality assurance – an important element for publicly funded, client-focused industries like career development. Ethical codes have long been viewed as a method for balancing accountability to the public with the need for professional autonomy (Frankel, 1989).

The four stages of learning model originally developed by Noel Burch of Gordon Training International in the 1970s (Leader Lab, 2023) acknowledged that all learners begin in a state of not recognising their own incompetence – they are in the zone of *unconscious incompetence*. In this zone, they are not seeking new knowledge; neither are they concerned about acquiring new skills/competencies, nor consulting about ethical dilemmas, as they truly believe that all is well. This is imperative when discussing the importance of a Code of Ethics to the day-to-day practice of CDPs. Without exception, the CDPs whom we have taught, mentored, and worked alongside over the past several decades have all considered themselves to be both competent and ethical. We have yet to find a CDP who has a desire to harm their clients, their organisation, or their profession. However, ethical breaches and violations occur daily in practice, across occupations. One source reported that over 40% of working Canadians have witnessed an ethical violation in their workplace, yet less than half of them reported it (Tedesco, 2013). Within the career development sector, when asked what ethical codes they follow, many working CDPs are unaware of any formal codes to guide their work. Instead, they respond with statements like 'my personal code,' 'my internal compass,' or 'our organisation's code of conduct.'

Revisiting the four stages of learning model, the second stage is *conscious incompetence*. Sometimes this stage is reached through reflection (i.e. that internal compass indicates that something did not go as planned). Often, however, it is through observations by, or conversations with, others that ethical concerns surface. Such observations or conversations may be either informal or formal; for example, they may result from scheduled supervision or evaluation, invited consultation, or uninvited feedback from colleagues or clients. Regardless of what brings incompetence into consciousness, it is generally an uncomfortable experience. It is not uncommon for people in this stage to become defensive, deflect the feedback, or make excuses. It is only by working through this stage, to the third stage, conscious competence, that positive change will impact future practice.

Beyond 'print, post, and pray': Strengthening ethical fitness

A common criticism of ethical codes is that organisations, professional associations, and sectors simply print them, post them, and then pray that nothing goes wrong (Ethics Resource Center, 2009). However, in an unregulated field, as career development is in many parts of the world (including much of Canada), one needs to step back even further in building ethical fitness. Such *fitness* includes ensuring awareness of ethical principles and standards of practice that are intended to guide the day-to-day work of CDPs, setting personal and professional boundaries to help avoid ethical dilemmas, and engaging in skill development to help address dilemmas when they occur.

Ethical codes are not useful guides to practice if CDPs are unaware of their existence. Because CDPs come from a variety of professional backgrounds, it is important to introduce a Code of Ethics early on, before the CDP even begins to see clients. It needs to be a key component of orientation for all employees within the organisation, so that everyone is aware of expected standards and the process for addressing ethical dilemmas and concerns.

Whether or not CDP certification is a requirement or voluntary, training on ethics and a formal evaluation of competency developed through that training, is essential. Our experience in Canada has demonstrated that if a professional association required a 10-hour ethics course, individuals pursuing certification sought out the bare minimum to meet the certification requirement; they would not take a 20-hour course. When our national certification removed the training requirement, focusing solely on demonstration of competencies through a structured interview and examination, interest and enrolment in even the 10-hour courses dropped significantly. This illustrates the important role that sector leaders, funders, and employers have in ensuring that CDPs are aware of ethical principles and standards and consistently engage in ethical practice.

However, beyond a solid introduction to ethical practice, keeping ethics top of mind and strengthening ethical fitness requires ongoing training and support. Within Canada, we have used a wide range of mechanisms to do this, including blogs and newsletter articles published by professional associations and career development thought leaders. Conference presentations (including pre- and post-conference workshops) have offered important opportunities for ongoing ethics-related professional development, especially when introducing the revised Code of Ethics, launched in 2021. Integrating ethics as a topic in introductory training for CDPs and offering ongoing continuing education training through webinars, in-house workshops, lunch-and-learns, and online discussion groups have, together, contributed to raising awareness and building ethical competency.

Moving anyone from an ethical place of conscious incompetence to conscious competence, however, requires safety and mutual respect. As mentioned, the tendency for someone who has become aware of their own incompetence is to become defensive, closed to further feedback, and inclined to hide. CDPs do not intentionally set out to be unethical. Rather, they encounter ethical dilemmas, where there is no clear 'right' answer. If they feel safe, and if they have been trained to expect dilemmas, to seek supervision, to consult with others, and to openly discuss the dilemmas they face, they can engage in conversations that will offer them multiple perspectives and opportunities to try out different ethical solutions and, also, to reflect on what worked well, what did not, and how a similar situation could be handled better in the future. This, of course, requires that there are qualified supervisors and managers to facilitate those conversations. Given the diversity of career pathways to the career development sector, many managers/supervisors may be unfamiliar with the Code of Ethics and ill-equipped to support their employees to effectively navigate ethical dilemmas.

It is not 'one and done'

The fourth stage of the four stages of learning model is *unconscious competence*. This can be a challenging stage, especially for managers and supervisors who are unconsciously working to standards that they cannot clearly articulate to others; this is a bit like asking your grandmother to share a favourite recipe with you – she adds ingredients so naturally that she cannot list them or specify quantities!

For ethics to effectively influence day-to-day practice, ethical codes need to be regularly reviewed and adjusted to reflect changes within the profession and society overall. As already noted, the original Canadian code (published in 2004) was revised in 2021. It is currently undergoing another revision, with a specific focus on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and will be linked to other relevant sections of the current Code of Ethics and the National Competency Profile. From feedback at an initial focus group on the draft section on AI, CDPs stressed the need for a handbook with examples and scenarios of how to work with ethical dilemmas (i.e. to put the Code into action). With these changes, a new round of awareness-building will be needed – new blogs, articles, conference presentations, workshops, and revised courses.

In addition, given the diversity of roles and work settings where Canadian CDPs are employed (Blanchard & Taylor, 2024), many CDPs are concurrently working under multiple codes of ethics. For example, a career educator within the K-12 educational system may also hold their teacher certification and thus be subject to both the ethical codes for teachers and CDPs. The same situation can arise with CDPs who are also certified as a Chartered Professional in Human Resources (CPHR) or Certified Vocational Rehabilitation Professional (CVRP). Further, many CDPs hold certifications through international bodies (e.g. International Coaching Federation). The appropriate navigation of multiple codes of ethics and other jurisdictional legislation presents an added layer of complexity.

Some of these certifying bodies require dedicated ethics training as part of their credential management and recertification processes; however, at the moment, Canada's national certification programme for career development professionals does not. Ethics remains one of the required core competencies, but it is not privileged.

Conclusion

The Canadian experience is not unique; it has many similarities to the career development landscape in the UK and other international contexts. We offer this reflection as an example of the complexity of setting ethical standards within the career development sector and integrating those standards into the day-to-day practice of professionals with widely differing educational backgrounds, roles, and responsibilities. As the four stages of learning framework reminds us, 'we don't know what we don't know.' To strengthen ethical practice, a solid foundation that includes an ethical code that fits for the contemporary context is essential, but insufficient. Widespread awareness and acceptance of that code is crucial, with ample access to safe training and supervision where ethical dilemmas are normalised and ethical decision-making can be practised. However, without mechanisms in place to ensure consistent and universal use of that code, and to address complaints about ethical violations and breaches, abiding by any Code of Ethics will remain voluntary and difficult to monitor and sustain.

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What constitutes a good career? A vision of responsive careers and choices in the broader interest

Conceptual Article

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Abstract

This article examines the tension between individual freedom of choice (personal fit) and collective necessity (social fit) against the backdrop of the current labour market crisis. Whereas the focus has historically shifted from social necessity to personal self-development, shortages in crucial sectors are now forcing a moral and political revaluation of what constitutes a 'good career'. The authors advocate the development of responsive career paths that explicitly link individual desires with societal interests. Through value-driven guidance, a new balance can be found between personal meaning (personal fit) and the solidarity necessary for a sustainable society (social fit).

Keywords: Fit, freedom, solidarity, values, responsiveness

Introduction and context

In the Netherlands, David van Lennep (1896-1982) is considered one of the pioneers of psychotechnics, the precursor to occupational and organisational psychology. He was the founder and first director of the Utrecht Bureau for Career Choice in 1925, the predecessor of the Dutch foundation for psychotechnics NSvP. The underlying idea of this bureau was that people and occupations should be a good fit and that understanding people's personal characteristics was the basis for such a 'suitable' career choice. Van Lennep was strongly inspired by the ideas of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre's existentialist philosophy emphasised the freedom *and* responsibility of human beings to give meaning to their own lives. A salient detail is that Sartre's radical ideas resonated so deeply in Van Lennep that he travelled to Paris immediately after the liberation in 1945 to meet Sartre and arranged the first lecture by the French philosopher in the Netherlands (Berkelaar, 2015).

Freedom of choice in education and career as advocated by Van Lennep is still relevant today but has also been critically discussed in recent years. In the Netherlands for instance, a growing number of articles in national newspapers and magazines show a pledge for the restriction of free choice in career and education, to combat labour market shortages. These news items reflect an increased tension between individual and collective interests. The same tension and discussion can be found in for example France (CESE, 2022) and Germany (BIBB, 2023). Over the past 100 years, we have become accustomed to our (Sartrian) freedom of educational and career choice, emphasised by a pioneer such as Van Lennep. However, due to the current labour market crisis and sectoral shortages, that acquired freedom now seems to be reaching its limits. After all, one of the consequences of these shortages is that the continuity of certain sectors is being jeopardised. The most acute shortages are clear: healthcare, technology, education and the energy transition (European Commission, 2023). The 'security of supply' in these sectors is under pressure, with impact for everyone in their daily lives. Will I still get maternity care? Will I find an installation technician for my faulty boiler? The fact that this service continuity will remain a key focus in the coming decades is evident, for example, from a forecast of staffing requirements in healthcare. By 2040, approximately 1 in 4 Dutch people will need to be working in healthcare to meet demand (Neurink, 2023). Based on the most recent Skills Forecast, Cedefop states that shortages in healthcare and long-term care will continue to exist in most of European countries (Cedefop, 2023).

Freedom of choice under scrutiny

The central thesis of this article is that the freedom to choose our studies and careers will have to be critically examined in the coming decades. Our individual freedom of choice must be linked to the necessity to maintain collective and sectoral continuity in the labour market. The relationship between individual freedom and collective responsibility requires further coordination, dialogue and fundamental (policy) choices. This relationship is not a contradiction, but a common and shared interest. It is both a complex and urgent challenge that affects the immediate interests of all citizens. The theme of freedom raises new questions, such as:

- can individual choices be easily guided or 'nudged' by policy?
- should it primarily be a moral appeal to individuals to steer their careers in a *certain* direction, or should the government discourage *certain types of work*?
- What consequences does this new relationship between freedom and responsibility pose for professionals in the careers field?

This article is structured as follows:

- We begin with a historical perspective on careers and career choices, outlining the shift from social fit (working based on social necessity) to personal fit (working based on individual wishes and values). We then zoom in on the current context: the structural shortages in the labour market, the increasing mismatches and the political debate on steering career choices.
- We continue with an exploration of the moral and political dimensions of work and careers. What do we mean by a 'good career'? How can we connect personal and social interests in a way that is future-proof and meaningful? These questions lead to a plea for value-driven career guidance, in which values, meaning and solidarity are given a central place.
- Finally, the practical applications are explored. What courses of action are available to professionals and policymakers? The article concludes with some examples of possible solutions and suggestions to guide the debate and action in the coming years.

Careers: two types of fit

Careers take place at the intersection of the individual and the society. On the one hand, there is the supply of labour, i.e. the choosing pupil, student, worker or job seeker. On the other hand, there is the demand for labour: a set of tasks, based on a job, organisation or employer. Considering the theme of this article, a career can be understood as a tension field (Meijers & Wijers,1997), namely between the individual's freedom of choice at the micro level and the context at the meso (e.g. organisational needs) and macro levels (societal needs). What is necessary and useful in the collective sphere (e.g. professionals for green jobs) is not necessarily in line with what people want or are able to do at the individual level of work and (vocational) training.

Careers relate to the classic question 'Who does what and on what grounds?' (Law, 1981). This question concerns the division or allocation of labour: the distribution of certain work ('what') among certain people ('who'). In this article, we will primarily view the division of labour as a matching issue. The interrelated concepts of matching and Persons-Environment (P-E) Fit can be traced back to Frank Parsons (1909). He developed a theory of matching that is considered one of the milestones in careers theory and practice. Matching theory has often been criticised for its reductionism and limited view of the dynamics between individuals and their working environment (Post, 2019). Nevertheless, the concept of P-E fit remains influential in practice: many career guidance methods and HR tools are based on it. Matching is therefore still relevant, but from a more dynamic perspective (Edwards, 2008).

The concept of matching offers us starting points for an analysis of modern careers from the perspective of suitability, fairness and labour market shortages. A thorough and innovative elaboration of the concept of 'fit' can be found in *Just Work* by political philosopher Russell Muirhead (2004), in which he distinguishes between two types of fit: social fit and personal fit. Because both types of fit offer an important conceptual framework for understanding the tension between freedom and responsibility in careers, they are explained in more detail below.

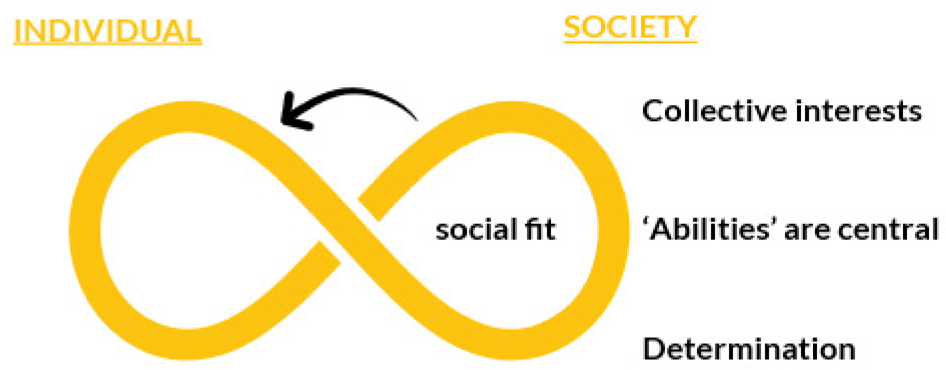

Figure 1. Characteristics of social fit

The concept of *social fit* (figure 1) revolves around the alignment of individual capacities with social tasks, with the aim of contributing as much as possible to the common good. The emphasis here is not on individual preference, but on social necessity: the 'choice' of work that someone does is largely determined by what society needs and what someone is considered 'suitable' for. Historically, this idea has its roots in Plato, who argued that people *should* fulfil a fixed role in society based on their natural aptitudes — and that a political system could serve as a justification for this (Waterfield, 2000). In Plato's time, social fit therefore also had this character of (external) determination, and the scope for choice was very limited.

In modern societies, markets have partly taken over this role: they distribute work based on labour demand, efficiency, effectiveness and profit, usually without coercion. Nevertheless, structural limitations remain in our time: individual preferences, fair remuneration, human dignity and freedom are of secondary importance in many jobs (Christie et al., 2021). Social fit therefore still has strong downsides in our time. External determination or limited scope for career choices form the basis of social fit: people are primarily deployed based on their usefulness and value to the greater good, i.e. society and the economy.

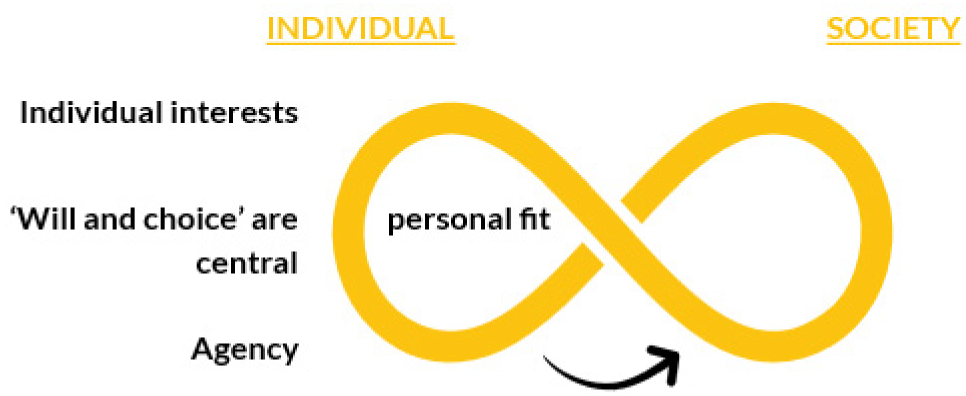

Figure 2. Characteristics of personal fit

Personal fit (figure 2) emphasises the extent to which work matches the needs, desires and values of the individual and focuses on what the work means to the individual. It recognises that even in a socially useful role, a person can still feel unhappy or empty if the work does not offer room for personal growth, autonomy or meaning. Working within your role ('having to') is not enough: the work must also match who you are and what you need to flourish ('wanting to'). The relationship with *freedom* is essential in this concept: personal fit emphasises that people have a right to work in which they can be themselves and develop. It opposes the idea that people can be used solely for external goals – such as productivity or collective utility – without regard for their inner lives. Central to this is the democratic value that every individual has a life of their own to live. In this respect, personal fit is closely linked to concepts that we will encounter later, such as (moral) autonomy, career self-management and individual dignity.

Social fit and personal fit are both opposites and complementary; they can also be applied simultaneously. The current labour market crisis, in which there are various mismatches in the quantitative and qualitative alignment of labour supply and demand, sharply highlights the tension between social fit and personal fit. Social fit is primarily based on the macro and meso levels of a society: what is needed to ensure the continuity of the supply of products and services? What are the staffing needs in certain sectors and/or regions, both now and soon, and how do educational institutions and intermediaries in the labour market respond to this? Personal fit concerns the micro level of individual career development, throughout the entire career, in which choices are made based on personal preferences and considerations. Personal fit optimises individual desires and imposes those desires as expectations and demands on the content, conditions and returns of our work.

The distinction between social and personal fit reveals that work and careers are complex and multi-layered phenomena, in which sometimes conflicting interests and forces come together.

Social and personal fit: a brief historical perspective.

There is an evident relation between Muirhead's classification of social and personal fit and society in general, including its political structure. After all, careers and life courses are always framed within the context of political and social (power) relations. This concerns the question of how careers and career services are embedded in a political order and how that structure influences or exerts power over both the individual opportunities and possibilities of citizens and the role perception of professionals in this domain (Watts, 1996).

Historical circumstances strongly influence this societal and political order and the personal beliefs concerning work and careers. In the period from antiquity to the Middle Ages, when social fit was the dominant guiding principle of careers, the social and political order was rarely, if ever, questioned. People accepted the order and hierarchy created by God or by the political elite. Before the advent of modern science in the 16th century, reality was generally seen as a meaningful and coherent whole, in which humans also had their natural place and function. In that order, everything had a fixed essence and purpose (telos). As a result, social roles – such as those of man or woman, and certainly also one's profession – were considered natural and unchangeable and were regarded as fixed from birth. This descriptive order, one's social position at birth, coincided with what one *was supposed* to be, the normative order, i.e. political or religious morality. This coalescence of the descriptive and normative order is typical of this period. As a result, there was relatively little tension or discrepancy between social fit and personal fit.

Gerald Sailmann's study *Der Beruf* traces the cautious emergence of thinking in terms of personal fit (Sailmann, 2018). He mentions that one of the first texts to reflect the spirit of personal fit was written by Levinus Lemmius (1505-1568), a prominent Dutch physician, philosopher, botanist and writer of the Renaissance. We find the first traces of thinking in terms of personal fit in this quote:

> Therefore, lest anyone commit himself imprudently, he must take time to consider what profession of life he wishes to enter before accepting it. In this deliberation, everyone must consider his own nature to see whether, in addition to the diligence required by his profession, he can also persevere steadfastly in the same life. (Sailmann, 2018, p. 73).

The demands and requirements of the profession ('diligence' and 'steadfastness') are here tactfully linked to individuality and desire ('his own nature' and 'willingness to enter'). Lemnius saw the choice of a profession as an individual act of will, requiring prior consultation and self-examination. These new ideas about the role of natural aptitude and a well-considered choice were an important step away from a career choice determined purely by birth or divine decree (social fit) towards personal fit.

In the centuries that followed, this 'free choice of profession' evolved into a fundamental right based on individual aptitude, characteristics and self-determination, which is considered essential for personal well-being and social integration. In the 19th century in particular, a steady shift took place in the social hierarchy in Western Europe. *'La carrière ouverte aux talents'* (*'A career open to talents'*) is a famous statement by Napoleon and primarily reflects his own career, in which he gradually rose from an impoverished aristocratic background to become emperor (Drentje, 2021). In addition, his statement reflects the optimistic and emancipatory spirit of a new era, in which social position was determined not so much by ancestry as by talent and achievement. Education became a key driver in this period.

From the 19th century onwards, personal fit gradually became the dominant starting point for citizens' career orientation. This transition was reinforced during the 20th century by the sociological process of individualisation. As a result of structural developments in society, the decisive influence of collective institutions (church, trade unions, political parties) and traditions declined, while individual freedom of choice increased. Life courses became less predictable and offered more room for choices and reflection. Paradoxically, this meant that the individual freedom that was gained, at the same time became an obligation and a necessity. *'We are condemned to freedom,'* Sartre says. And he adds: *'we have no choice but to choose'* (Sartre, 1948, p. 33).

In 2026, we are well accustomed to this acquired freedom to want, be allowed and be able to choose our school, job and career. Technological, political and socio-economic developments have led to an increasing emphasis on career self-management, both voluntary and 'forced'. In the first quarter of the 21st century, this development has continued towards the increasing importance of Lifelong Learning and Development (LLD), driven by the growing dynamics of the labour market. This recent definition of LLD clearly expresses the 'ubiquity' of this need for development: '(pro)active development of qualities throughout life, based on one's own interests and values, for a sustainable contribution to society, one's health and happiness, for now and in the future' (Kuijpers & Draaisma, 2020,

p. 6). It requires citizens to constantly reflect on the classic career questions: what do I want, what can I do, and what steps should I take in my working life?

Labour in crisis?

Although the current labour market crisis cannot entirely be attributed to the coronavirus crisis, the pandemic was certainly an important catalyst. The crisis brought shortages into sharper focus and created the structural tightness that we have been experiencing in Europe since 2021-2022 (Eurofound, 2022). These shortages are caused by a combination of demographic changes (such as ageing and dejuvenation), an accelerated economic recovery after the coronavirus pandemic and an insufficient influx of new workers (Marois et al., 2025). As a result, sectors such as healthcare, technology, education and ICT are unable to fill their vacancies, leading to social problems such as healthcare waiting lists and delayed construction projects (OECD, n.d.). From our combined perspective of career development and division of labour, the crisis can be interpreted primarily as a combination of a *quantitative* mismatch (not enough people for certain jobs) and a *qualitative* mismatch (not the 'right', i.e. suitable people for certain jobs). The inflow, throughflow and outflow of personnel in certain sectors and regions is far from optimal and is leading to all kinds of urgent bottlenecks.

Parallel to and certainly fuelled by this shortage, there is a lot of attention in the public debate for the so-called *'systemic relevance'* of certain professions and sectors. The value of occupations and sectors was highlighted in a new way during the pandemic: some occupations proved to be 'essential' and 'crucial', i.e. indispensable for the functioning of society. In the wake of this distinction, the concept of 'bullshit jobs' was coined by anthropologist David Graeber (2018). Graeber defines a bullshit job as a job that the employee himself believes does not make a meaningful contribution to society. Although the scientific basis for the concept is disputed (Pot, 2022), the term bullshit job is very popular in the public debate. In the eyes of many, certain jobs (the food delivery worker or the 'umpteenth coach') add little or no value to the collective.

The shortages and scarcity have therefore resulted in jobs, occupations, sectors and career choices being increasingly scrutinised, both in a positive sense ('essential') and in a negative sense ('bullshit'). We are asking ourselves more sharply than in previous decades what the added value and usefulness of certain work is. Should we discourage jobs that we no longer *want* to do ourselves, such as greenhouse horticulture, as advocated by De Beer (2022)? And if there are so many shortages, should we encourage people who do work that does not seem useful or necessary, such as meal delivery drivers, influencers or 'YouTubers', to look for more useful work in healthcare or construction? Ballafkih argues that it is high time for moral choices in labour market policy (Ballafkih, n.d.). By this he means fundamental decisions about which occupations and services are essential, and which are less important, given the increasing staff shortages. In his view, this requires public debate about what society still wants to have done and what we do not need. If we, as a society, can no longer do everything, we must focus on doing what matters, Ballafkih succinctly summarises the solution. So, the new question seems: *'How do we move from bullshit jobs to bull's eye jobs in a tight labour market?* (NSvP, n.d.-a). These inevitable choices are certainly not easy, because they involve difficult trade-offs between, for example, the energy transition, accessible healthcare and combating cyberterrorism.

Policymakers and politicians can no longer ignore the crisis and the structural mismatch: there is a need for a policy philosophy that not only supports individual careers but also takes broader social interests into account. Many policy and management philosophies in the labour market and welfare state assume that citizens are independent actors who are responsible for their own fate, status and (career) development (Mounk, 2017). In line with the political climate of liberalism, the national government provides relatively little guidance on the *content* of career or educational choices, in the hopeful assumption that individual choices will automatically lead to collectively desirable outcomes. More specifically, the labour market relevance of individual choices is not always explicitly guided.

The political order: individual and community

In the foregoing, we have explored the tension between meaning and freedom at the individual and psychological level and utility and necessity at the economic and collective level ('the common good'). In line with Muirhead's classification, this is a tension between self-interest and personal fit on the one hand and the general interest and social fit on the other. This tension has always played a role in careers. We find a useful expression of this in a text written by Karl Marx at the age of 17, in which he discusses these two seemingly opposing interests. Marx argues that it is up to individuals to choose the position in society that suits them best and from which they can best elevate themselves and society.

> But the chief guide which must direct us in the choice of a profession is the welfare of mankind and our own perfection. It should not be thought that these two interests could be in conflict, that one would have to destroy the other; on the contrary, man's nature is so constituted that he can attain his own perfection only by working for the perfection, for the good, of his fellow men. (Marx, 1835, p. 5).

The optimistic tone of this quote indicates that, in Marx's view, the tension between personal and public interest is a misconception. He strongly believes that personal fulfilment and lasting happiness ('perfection') can only be achieved through selfless dedication to the welfare of all humanity. For Marx, this is the highest level of 'dignity' that a profession can offer. On closer inspection, the young Marx's view, which presupposes the natural harmony between self-interest and the common good, can be characterised as rather rosy. Individual and collective interests can surely be conflicting and give rise to heated discussions, as the public debate on essential and bulllshit jobs clearly illustrates.

In the eyes of political philosopher Michael Sandel, the dominant political climate of (neo)liberalism over the past 80 years has caused us to lose sight of what our common interest and collective identity actually consists of (Sandel, 2012). The overbearing governing philosophy of economic and democratic liberalism deliberately leaves a great deal of freedom and choice to the individual. This type of freedom is also referred to as negative freedom, i.e. as little government interference as possible. Trust in the free market, a central feature of (neo)liberalism, reinforces individualism, i.e. the focus of citizens primarily on their own interests and autonomy. A second effect of (neo)liberalism and market forces is that it banishes moral discussions ('what is the right thing to do or choose?') from the public domain as much as possible, based on the guiding principle that everyone is able to determine what is best for themselves. Markets do not exhibit morality in the form of 'pointing fingers'.

Sandel argues that this broad political space for individual self-determination and sovereignty weakens social engagement. Discussions about collective values and the common good are avoided. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama recently pointed out these downsides of (neo)liberalism sharply and argues that our freedom needs to be redesigned (Fukuyama, 2022). We must seek to restore the balance between individual autonomy and common values, as well as between economic freedom and social protection.

This plea for a new balance ties in seamlessly with the vision on labour, division of labour and solidarity that Lisa Herzog expresses in her book *Die Rettung der Arbeit* (Herzog, 2019). She argues that an individualistic view on labour, characteristic of economic models, neglects the fact that we are highly dependent on each other and that our work is embedded in a complex and coherent system of division of labour. From this more systemic perspective, the division of labour can be understood above all as a principle of solidarity, whereby individuals are socially dependent on each other's expertise and skills. There is no doctor without a nurse, and vice versa, no contractor without an architectural draughtsman; the dependencies are endless. Herzog sees this shared and social nature of labour and our mutual dependence as both the foundation and the Achilles heel of our solidarity.

Translated to our theme of modern careers, this means that the division of labour ('who does what?') could be used as a source of positive interdependence and cohesion, which refers to community and solidarity. Careers, although primarily individual phenomena, are also connected to the meso- and macro levels and the systemic dimensions of our working world. If we want to reverse the one-sided emphasis on self-interest and (excessive) individualism, we will have to discuss the other side of the coin: the general or public interest. More specifically, recalibrating our freedom, with greater attention to the general interest, requires an in-depth, critical and moral dialogue about our collective values. After all, freedom must always be weighed against other values, such as privacy, prosperity and justice (Roessler, 2021). A crisis, such as the one currently affecting the labour market, exposes this complexity and layered nature of our moral reality and calls for unity, coordination and fundamental choices. This means that normative and moral questions are inevitable and that we must seek shared answers. These normative questions are contained in the core theme of this article: what constitutes a good career?

Focusing on scarcity?

An increasing number of publications argue that young people's initial study choices should be influenced in the direction of sectors experiencing shortages. In 2025 the Dutch thinktank 'Denkwerk' published a report called *Kiezen én Delen* (*Choosing ánd Sharing*) (Baarsma et al., 2025). This report examines the answers to questions such as: is the Netherlands capable of simultaneously realising the many social challenges and ambitions of the coming decades (in sectors like construction, climate, and health)? Do we have the financial resources, the right people and enough space to do so? DenkWerk states, that without active government intervention, it will not be possible to maintain broad prosperity and achieve the necessary changes. The market alone will not solve the challenges. One of the necessary changes concerns steering the supply of education programmes. A quote from this report:

> In the long term, the Netherlands must steer towards training for occupations relevant for society. Currently, young people base their choice of study mainly on

> interest, with little regard for labour market opportunities. This does not solve the shortages in, for example, construction and healthcare. Moreover, free choice of study leads to a waste of talent for ambitious sectors. (Baarsma et al., 2025, p. 45).

According to the authors of this report, one of the concrete solutions to the shortage is to introduce a *numerus clausus*, i.e. to limit the number of places available for courses with poor prospects on the labour market.

Given the complexity of the matter, a perhaps less drastic route would be to provide labour market information (about e.g. job opportunities, wages, career prospects) during the school period. Research does indeed indicate that providing good labour market information encourages young people to choose studies and courses with better job opportunities and income prospects (Fouarge et al., 2016). They also develop higher expectations about pursuing education, are more likely to choose further education and are willing to switch to a track with better prospects. This leads to better labour market outcomes: a greater chance of finding work, a higher wage, and less regret about their choice (Hofer et al., 2020). However, this research also shows that personal preferences are decisive: interests dominate the choice.

The moral dimension of careers

If external control of educational choices through policy measures and government intervention is so complicated and, moreover, has relatively little effect, we would perhaps be better off focusing on the self-direction of those choosing their studies, work and careers. This brings up questions like: how can the choosing individual be actively and voluntarily encouraged to choose a career in the 'right direction'? Are there approaches available or conceivable that bring together the individual and collective interests?

With this question of 'the right choice', we enter the realm of ethics and morality. In exploring this question, we can benefit from the ideas of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. He has conducted a thorough study on the origins of our modern self-concept and has provided indications of how we can organise our lives and careers in an autonomous and authentic way, without falling into detached atomism ('every man for himself') (Taylor, 1992). It is important to note that his perspective is considerably broader than the societal relevance of career choices. His thinking focuses on creating a fulfilling life that gives value, meaning and significance. In that sense Taylors thinking is in line with the ideas of Van Lennep.

A moral orientation in life and work is inevitable, according to Taylor. We cannot help but use a yardstick to determine the extent to which our lives are 'good' in the ethical sense. This also applies to our careers, of course. This moral orientation always takes place against a '*horizon of meaning*'. This is a historically determined framework of collective values. Sartre argued that we create these values and horizon of meaning ourselves (Sartre, 1948). In Taylor's view however, they are given and exist independently of us. We are born and grow up in a world that is already full of meaning. This horizon therefore forms a socio-dialogical background and a meaningful framework of collective values within which we develop our identity and moral orientation. Gradually, we develop a moral map, individuals form their specific '*strong evaluations*', based on interaction with others. These are reflexive judgements that relate to the unique values and principles of the individual.

Strong evaluations are not only about preferences, but also about what is important and meaningful in life and what *kind of person* one wants to be. They are therefore essential for the formation of identity, individuality and responsibility.

Taylor thus sees the emergence of values as a highly interactive process, a dynamic between humans and an *already* existing horizon of meaning. Sartre's freedom, openness and free choice are too empty for Taylor and do not provide meaning. Authenticity and autonomy involve discovering and articulating your own identity; a process that is a balance between finding yourself (active) and creating and discovering yourself (creative).

With the help of these concepts, Taylor articulates his difficulty with the radical individualism and negative freedom discussed earlier. For him, this is too one-sidedly focused on self-expression and self-interest. Moreover, freedom should not only be a possibility ('opportunity'), a 'door that is open', as in the case of negative freedom. Freedom is only real when it is realized ('exercise'), that is, when we 'walk through the open door'. True freedom is positive freedom; we must also be able to actively use and achieve our freedom to be truly free. This positive freedom is not a passive state, but an autonomous, active and dynamic conquest and an art of living that is focused on the good life (Gescinska, 2012).

Value-driven career guidance

Taylor's ideas offer a useful conceptual framework for understanding the current tensions surrounding careers in a different way. In Taylor's vision, it is about the tension between, on the one hand, the dimension of our positive freedom of choice, strong evaluations and authenticity and, on the other hand, the dimension of our collective needs, values and horizon of meaning. Following in the footsteps of Taylor and his kindred spirits (e.g. Rosa, 2021), we can translate the emphasis on individual values and the stronger focus on the common good into the field of guiding young people and adults in their studies, work and careers. The starting point here is that this guidance should not be exclusively about one-sided self-interest, but that we want to connect the individual and the collective.

The moral question 'What constitutes a "good" career?' is, in Taylor's view, a relevant, legitimate and unavoidable question. We should even ask ourselves this question to be able to develop a yardstick and evaluate the choices we make in our own careers and those of others. As professionals in the field of careers, we certainly do not need to abandon the ideals of freedom, autonomy and authenticity. In fact, self-management and staying true to yourself are very prominent issues in the professional guidance of people in relation to work and careers.

In our search for 'the good' in work and career, we can be inspired by the answer given in passing by Tony Watts to the question 'What is a career?' He states: 'It's all about finding spaces to work in. That's what a career is ideally about: people finding spaces where they can use their talents and do something they believe in' (Hooley, 2014, p. 40). We note that in this normative ideal of a career ('ideally'), Watts explicitly links ability ('using your talents') to *desire*, i.e. interests, meaning and, above all, values ('doing something you believe in'). In line with our arguments and Taylor's thinking, this second component, that of our values and beliefs, becomes more important in times of crisis and scarcity.

Since the inception of the field, attention to people's desires has been an important pillar of career guidance. Clarifying interests, values and meaning during counselling sessions is a very common and established approach within career guidance and occupational and organisational psychology. There is an extensive theoretical and methodical foundation for the application of these components in these fields.

The good news is therefore that we do not need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to guidance based on individual interests, values and meaning. However, looking ahead, we should ask ourselves if we need to put more methodical emphasis on societal values, needs and interests. Are there existing initiatives, projects or policy measures that are applicable? What new approaches can we come up with to stimulate a deeper and more value-driven orientation towards the 'right career' for individuals and to establish a better balance between personal fit and social fit?

The challenge for policy, theory and practice: shaping responsive careers

The field of career guidance and human resources cannot turn a blind eye to the impact of (sectoral) shortages and the challenges they provide. It should position itself as a crucial part of a *system of responsive career development and guidance* in the educational and labour market and the welfare state. The importance of responsiveness in practice, governance and policy has been reinforced by the labour market crisis. Responsiveness is the ability to respond adequately and in a timely manner to signals, needs and changes in a particular field of work or policy area (Movisie, 2021). In line with this responsiveness, career guidance must therefore focus more strongly on stimulating so-called *responsive career paths*, which respond flexibly and adaptively to the changing needs of both the individual and the broader context, such as the organization or society (Future Skills Centre, 2021).

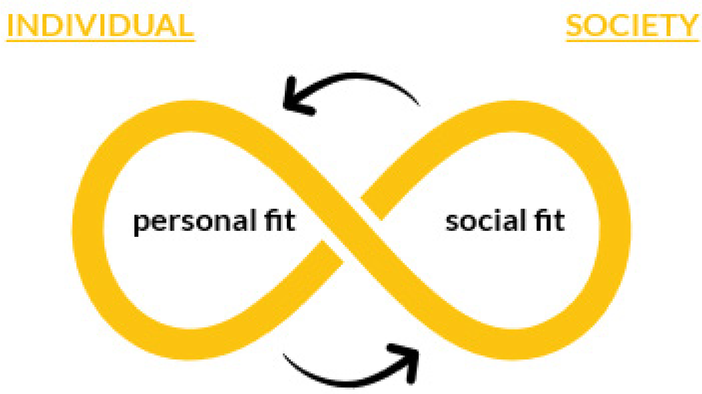

Figure 3. Responsive careers

The central feature of responsive careers (figure 3) is that they combine personal fit and social fit and relate and align them with each other. In responsive career paths, choices are informed by both (information) perspectives: what the individual wants and can do (personal fit), and what is useful, necessary and possible at the macro and meso levels (social fit). Ideally, this ensures a balanced approach, in which both personal interests and the general interest are explicitly addressed. Because the danger of one-sidedness remains.

Shaping this responsive career guidance is a crucial challenge for the field in the coming years. In many respects, this is still uncharted territory, and this challenge requires practice, education, policy, research and science to join forces. To illustrate this, we briefly will describe four examples in which this responsiveness is pursued and where a stronger emphasis is explicitly placed on social fit, the broader interest or a better world.

1. More attention to social fit in the deeper layer of desire

If we want to strengthen and enrich the personal fit with the social fit, we can work with clients on a deeper level of interests, meaning and values. We thus offer them the opportunity to become aware of their 'strong evaluations', in Taylor's terminology, and put more emphasis on the question what added value the individual wants to contribute to the world of work. This is not to encourage the client to make a choice that is useful and promising, but uninspired. Personal fit remains the guiding principle. But by placing greater emphasis on the moral and societal dimensions of career choices the client is invited to choose a wider perspective and to bring more balance to those choices. Lusch (2018) explored the question of morality and goodness in the practice of career guidance and provides us with relevant and practical suggestions for this. He encourages career professionals to look beyond the basic question 'What can or should I do with my career?' and to ask deeper or underlying questions, with explicit attention to the contribution to the greater whole:

- What kind of world do I want to live in?
- How can I contribute to this?
- How can I use my skills and knowledge to benefit others?
- How can I work together effectively for my own well-being and that of others?

2. The application of labour market information and skills tools

A second example places greater emphasis on social fit by paying more attention to labour market information and skills-based matching. This approach is beneficial to the creation of responsive career paths. They make it possible to map both personal fit and social fit in a much more refined and detailed manner. Skills-based matching implies that skills form the basis for job mobility rather than matching based on occupations (Post & Woldendorp, 2023). Skills classifications, such as the European ESCO and CompetentNL in the Netherlands, and associated matching tools increase the transparency of (inter)sectoral mobility and support targeted transitions to promising occupations and sectors with labour shortages. In addition, forms of skills validation, such as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or skills passports, make informal or elsewhere acquired skills visible and valuable (Ballafkih et al., 2022). If the danger of an overly technocratic and insufficiently people-oriented application of these tools is recognised, optimal use of these digital tools can provide people with fine-grained opportunities to switch to work in crucial or shortage sectors.

3. Working in the broader interest

The third example is the Dutch 'Working in the broader interest' programme set up by the NSvP to highlight the need for socially useful work (NSvP, n.d.-b). It can be seen as placing greater emphasis on the public interest in career choices. The programme subsidises projects that connect businesses with crucial social sectors, for example through staff exchanges. The 'smart reservist model for social professions' is a fitting example, in which people are on standby for sectors such as healthcare and education in addition to their regular jobs. Professionals are encouraged to step outside their comfort zone and use their knowledge and experience for the benefit of society, for example by combining a job in construction with work in the armed forces. In the various activities of the programme the emphasis shifts from exclusively individual career paths to a more responsive model in which social needs, collective goals and personal meaning go hand in hand.

4. Green guidance

A fourth example is the emergence of 'green guidance' (Lucas Casanova et al., 2025). This is career guidance that explores how it can contribute to tackling climate change and the environmental crisis. It involves addressing issues such as sustainability, social justice and environmental awareness in the guidance process, with the aim of encouraging people to make sustainable choices. This approach is in line with the critical-emancipatory approach to careers and career guidance, as advocated by Sultana, Blustein, Hooley and Thomsen, among others (COCAG, n.d.). It does not only seek to understand through research and science, but also to actively improve the world of work and education. In addition to individual action, it focuses on collective action.

These four examples are by no means exhaustive. A description of other examples can be found in Post (2026).

Conclusions

In this article we have chosen a perspective that combines career development with the division of labour and solidarity. We conceive careers primarily as fields of tension, in which various contradictions and layers (micro, meso and macro) are simultaneously at work. The current labour market crisis reinforces these contradictions and compels us to make both sharper political and moral choices and to engage in professional and ethical reflections on what desirable and 'good' careers are. There are three conclusions we want to draw.

Firstly: our individual freedom of choice needs to be recalibrated. The current labour market crisis and shortages in vital sectors such as healthcare, education and technology are forcing us to reexamine the freedom that we have taken for granted over the past hundred years. A 'good career' can no longer be exclusively about *personal fit* (what do I want and what makes me happy?) but must be inextricably linked to *social fit*: what society needs to ensure the continuity of essential services.

Our second conclusion is that careers are inherently moral and political. The debate about 'bullshit jobs' versus 'essential occupations' illustrates that we can no longer ignore these dimensions. The way freedom has been shaped in the (neo)liberal political climate of the last 80 years is one-sided and out of balance. We must look for a new balance between individual autonomy and our shared values, as well as between economic freedom and social protection.

Thirdly: the future calls for responsive career paths. We must understand the division of labour as a positive and vulnerable source of solidarity and interdependence. The call to policymakers, scholars, professionals and citizens is to promote responsive careers that respond flexibly to the changing needs of both the individual and society. This requires ongoing dialogue regarding our common interests and the courage to make fundamental choices about how individuals use their talents for the public good. Career guidance needs to position itself as a crucial component in a system of lifelong guidance to facilitate these responsive career pathways. As a value-driven and innovative practice it has the potential to refine and invent methods and instruments that combine personal and social fit.

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A philosophical consideration of career counselling: Pragmatic idiographic truth

Conceptual Article

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Abstract

This article is an exploration of career counselling through a philosophical lens, highlighting its epistemic and ethical dimensions. Career counselling is a technology of the self, reliant on narrative constructions that pragmatically function as enabling fictions rather than predictive truths. The concept of 'pragmatic idiographic truth' is proposed to describe narratives validated through lived experience and consequences. Ethical reflection is positioned as integral to practice, challenging assumptions of neutrality and emphasising counsellors' roles in shaping vocational narratives. Philosophical perspectives illuminate the existential demand for agency and responsibility in navigating work and life.

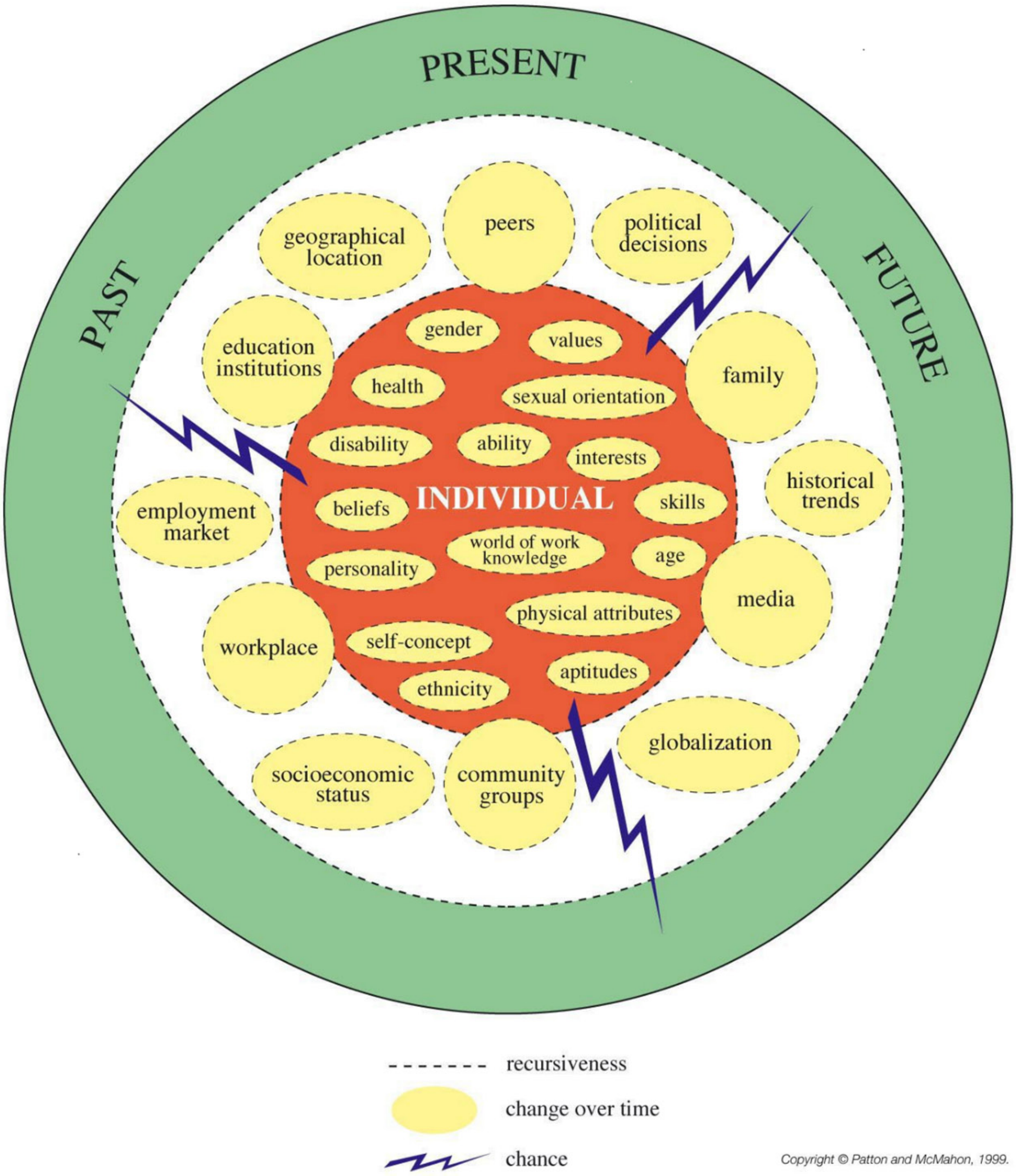
Keywords: career counselling, philosophy, pragmatism, postmodernism, life design, narrative

Introduction

As a professional practice, career counselling aims to support individuals making sense of educational choices, work-related choices, and transitions through the lifespan, especially individuals facing disadvantage while entering, remaining within, and adapting to precarious labour markets. Career counselling involves fostering individuals' insights into the psychological, relational, cultural, and structural factors that shape their understanding and experience of education, training, and transitions into and through the world-of-work.

These aims are typically framed as serving the individual, yet these aims and the individual are inseparable from broader social, cultural, and economic influences (Patton & McMahon, 2021). As depicted in Figure 1, the systems theory framework (STF) of career (Patton & McMahon, 1999, 2021) conceives of the individual constituted amidst myriad intrapersonal, interpersonal, social, cultural, and economic influences. Thus, the individual cannot be understood in isolation from contextual influences. Contemporary theoretical perspectives on work and career, notably the *psychology of working* (Blustein et al., 2023), explicitly acknowledge the context-dependent individual by locating education, work, and career within structures of inequality, economic precarity, and constrained opportunity rather than within individuals alone with themselves. I, too, recognize context-dependency; however, here my emphasis is not upon contexts per se. Instead, my focus is on the construction of narratives of identity within and between clients and practitioners who are striving to understand and meaningfully act within their contexts.

Figure 1. Systems Theory Framework of Career



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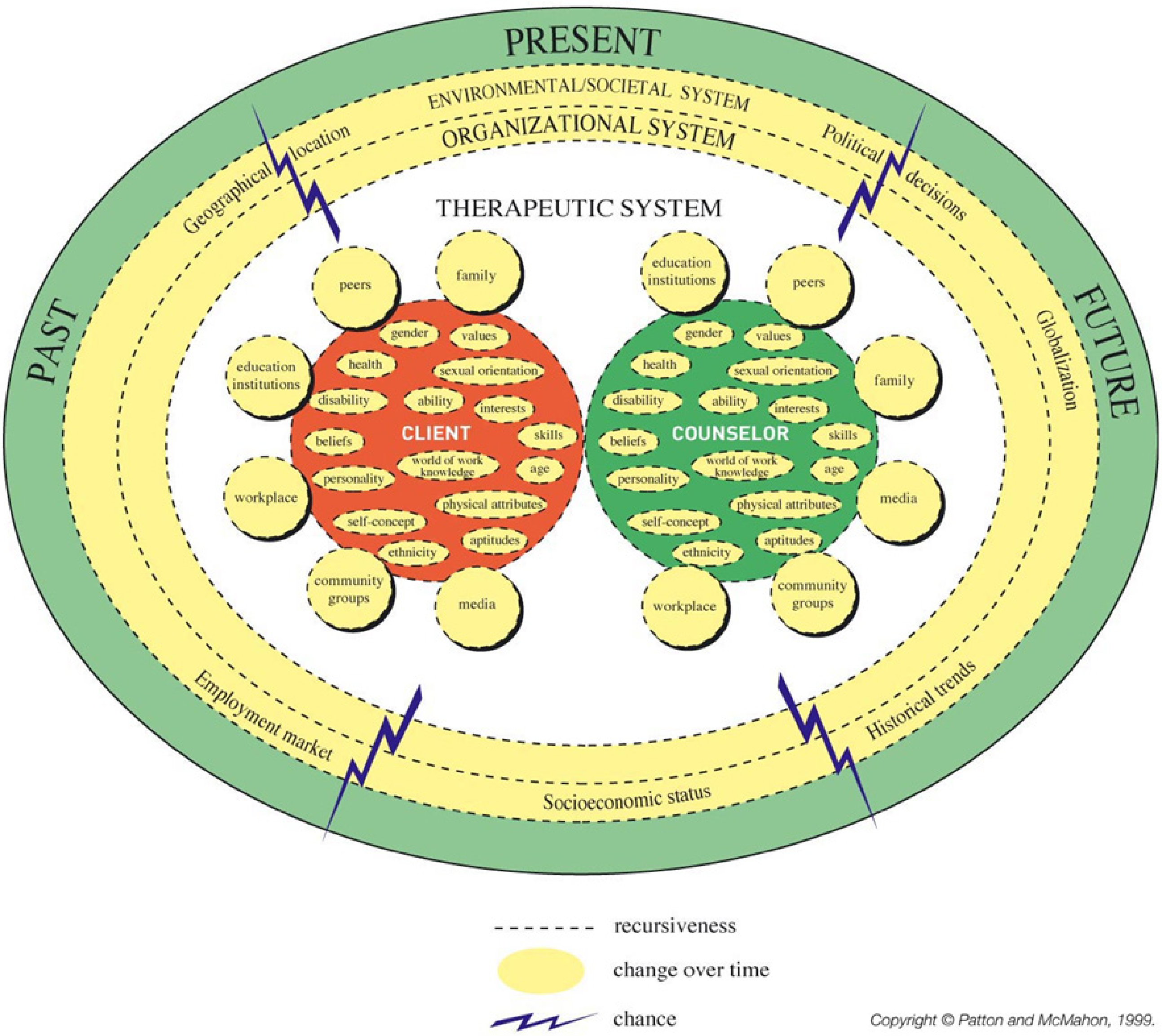
When considered in a wider systems perspective (Patton & McMahon, 2021), career counselling functions as a socio-economic practice that operates at the intersection of individual agency and systemic influences identified in the STF. Thus, there is also another intersection to consider: that of the client and the practitioner. Both client and practitioner, as a dyad, bring their systems of career influences into the psychological space of counselling, as depicted in Figure 2 (Patton & McMahon, 1999). The working alliance (or therapeutic relationship) formed between them is the crucible of their interactions and, ultimately, the effectiveness of counselling (McIlveen & Choat, 2023; Milot-Lapointe et al., 2020). This confluence of systems of influences not only requires analysis for the sake of the client, but also analysis of practitioners who brings their whole person to the relationship and how counselling methods are delivered. As an ethic of reflexivity, practitioners should be consciously aware of their conceptions of the individual, narrative identity, and contextual influences. After all, practitioners' conceptions—unconscious and conscious—affect how they practice.

Figure 2. The Therapeutic System



 Adapted from: Patton, W., & McMahon, M. (2021). Career development and systems theory: Connecting theory and practice. (4th ed.). Brill.

Toward an ethic of reflexivity

A thorough analysis of the practitioner-in-systems-of-influences requires explicit integration of ethical reflection into career counselling theory and practice. Addressing this challenge requires more than additional evidence or procedural innovation about the evident effectiveness of career counselling (e.g., Milot-Lapointe & Arifoulline, 2025; Whiston et al., 2017). Practitioners will continue to refine and consolidate their methods and theoretical foundations through systematic inquiry and research which is consistent with established *paradigms* (Kuhn, 1996) until something new comes along. Instead, the analysis calls for an *ethic of reflexivity* (McIlveen, 2015b) and reconceptualisation of the epistemological assumptions that guide counselling practice, recognising knowledge as provisional, experience-based, and person-specific. An ethic of reflexivity requires practitioners to assume moral responsibility for how their theoretical perspectives, values, and social positioning shape narratives through which clients interpret and 'design their lives' (Savickas et al., 2009). When understood in this way, an ethic of reflexivity enacted by the counsellor can provide the orienting framework within which career narratives are formed, evaluated, and revised. Such an orientation invites both counsellor and client to engage with questions of value, responsibility, and integrity with greater transparency, establishing career counselling as a practice concerned not only with effectiveness and outcomes, but also with the lifelong challenge of living a good life.

Philosophical reflections provide the conceptual resources needed for an ethic of reflexivity. By situating career counselling within a philosophical framework, practitioners can better support clients to confront uncertainty, responsibility, and meaning in a world of work that offers few guarantees. For this reason, the future development of career counselling depends not only on theoretical and methodological sophistication but also on engagement with philosophy. Ethical inquiry, for example Aristotle's (1976) analysis of human flourishing, offers a conceptual foundation for examining the values that underpin career counselling for the good life. Although moral philosophy and ethics have exercised enduring influence on many scholarly domains, its systematic application to career counselling remains scarce and underdeveloped. Likewise, other branches of philosophy (e.g., epistemology, political) are rarely given overt attention in the literature of career development.

Addressing this omission represents an important next step for the field. To that end, in this article I address two perplexing matters (for me at least) with some trepidation, for:

> He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long enough into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you. (Nietzsche, 1886/2003; Aphorism § 146)

First, I grapple with the nature of narrative truth; then I consider how that narrative lived as *pragmatic ideographic truth* empowers the individual to reclaim itself, if courageous enough.

These two interlinked issues have intellectually tormented me since my readings of postmodern literature (e.g., Foucault, 1972; Rorty, 1999) and narrative psychology (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Sarbin, 1986) destabilized my hitherto settled psychological understanding of the individual. For example, if an individual's experience of personal identity is constructed in language (as discourse/narrative) and dialogue with self and others, how can the individual objectively think about itself without using the very language (discourse/narrative) in which it is constituted? 'Thinking therefore I am' is not an entirely satisfactory solution because I cannot think about myself without using the language (discourse/narrative) that constitutes my thinking about myself. Am I just an automaton, an embodiment of discourse from which I cannot transcend? How can I know if I am a duck or a rabbit (cf. Wittgenstein, 1968)? And if I cannot discern whether I am a duck or a rabbit, then how can I ethically engage in career counselling which purports to facilitate individuals' exploring their identities in and through discourse/narrative which constitutes themselves and the world-of-work? Then I stare into the abyss.

Here, staring into that abyss, I do not purport a solution to the problem of not knowing answers to those questions. Instead, as an act of ethical reflexivity, I commit to a process of trying to understand how I construct the problem-to-be-solved and the questions to be answered, all the while admitting that my capacity to understand is constrained by the language and discourse in which and by which I am constituted as a sentient being.

On narrative truth

Søren Kierkegaard's (1843/1967) observation that human existence is retrospectively interpreted while prospectively enacted captures a central tension in career counselling. In some ways, this notion is like living one's life going forwards while looking backwards to know where one has come from, as if stumbling along in moments of life anxiously anticipating unseen traps and snares. Likewise, clients are asked to commit themselves to future possibilities even though such commitments can only be grounded in interpretations of prior experience. Career counselling therefore operates within an unavoidable epistemic limitation: it supports decision-making and action in the absence of definitive knowledge about future outcomes. In practice, this limitation means that career counselling is organised around a reflective examination of biographical experience as a means of orienting future action. Counsellor and client jointly review patterns of meaning shaped by psychological, social, and cultural influences, not to discover fixed vocational truths, but to generate interpretations that render the present intelligible and the future actionable. On this basis, possible directions are imaginatively formulated, tentatively endorsed, and pragmatically tested in everyday life.

This approach to career development theory and career counselling is representative of the 'narrative turn' (Rossier et al., 2021) and is exemplified by career construction theory (Savickas, 2013, 2020) and narrative career counselling (McMahon & Abkhezr, 2025). Whether (narrative) career counselling resolves Kierkegaard's existential dilemma is open to question. Career counselling can facilitate forward movement only as far as clients acknowledge that projections derived from past experiences are inherently provisional because the past may be re-interpreted at any time in the future. Therefore, future-oriented narratives are best understood not as reliable predictions, but as negotiated commitments sustained by hope, courage, and a willingness to act without guarantees.

Counselling that takes life as retrospectively interpreted while prospectively enacted is existentially fraught. David Hume (1748/2007) questioned whether inference from past experience can justify expectations about what will occur next. His scepticism rested on the observation that humans are psychologically inclined to infer causation from temporal proximity or repetition, even though such inferences lack logical necessity. The mere sequencing or co-occurrence of events does not, by itself, warrant conclusions about cause and effect. Yet humans routinely impose causal explanations on patterns they observe, mistaking habituated expectation for justified knowledge.

But can we—humans—live our lives otherwise? Do we not need some albeit imperfect beliefs of and reasons for what is prospectively real and likely to occur in life to get out of bed and carry on? Thus, despite the torments and privations of context, meaningfulness and reasons to keep going forward into an unknown future life are essential (cf. Frankl, 1959/1984).

Philosophical and psychological accounts of how humans conceive of and experience time provide a useful foundation for understanding contemporary narrative approaches to identity and career development. Heraclitus's (500 BCE/2001) river metaphor—that one cannot step into the same river twice—captures an ontological claim about human existence: stability is illusory, and life unfolds as continuous change. Identity, in this view, is not a fixed essence but an ever-shifting configuration within processes of becoming. Similarly, William James (1890/1952) perspective on lived experience proposes that the human stream of consciousness is structured temporally, with thought unfolding as a continuous flow rather than as discrete, isolated moments. The perception of sequence—of one experience following another—provides the psychological basis for coherent thought, explanation, and meaning. People actively seek continuity across experiences, not simply because it is logically sound, but because it enables understanding and orientation in an otherwise fragmented stream of events. Psychological continuity, therefore, arises not from sameness over time but from the experiential linking of successive moments. This linking of experience is a will to meaningfulness, of understanding the now and anticipating the future while comprehending life retrospectively (Kierkegaard, 1843/1967).

Despite the philosophical weaknesses of inductive reasoning (Hume, 1748/2007), individuals continue to live as if the future can be anticipated through narrative continuity. Human life is organised through stories that connect remembered experience with imagined possibilities, even when such connections exceed what logic can securely justify. Narrative psychology resolves this philosophical conundrum by explaining how individuals sustain a sense of self amid ongoing change. From this perspective, identity is constructed through autobiographical narratives that integrate interpretations of the past, understandings of the present, and anticipations of the future (McAdams, 1993). Narrative identity does not negate instability; rather, it provides a sense of coherence by organizing lived experience into an intelligible temporal sequence.

Career construction theory (Savickas, 2013, 2020) draws directly on this narrative logic by conceptualizing career development as a process of meaning-making rather than prediction. Careers are understood as evolving life stories authored through action, reflection, and adaptation in response to changing personal and contextual conditions. Rather than uncovering objective truths, narrative career counselling facilitates the construction of provisional meanings that support engagement with education, work, and life. In this sense, narrative counselling produces forms of truth that are pragmatic and therapeutic rather than demonstrably predictive. These narrative constructions function as *enabling fictions*: they allow people to interpret their past, maintain a sense of identity in the present, and commit themselves to action in the present and future, despite uncertainty.

Pragmatism—most prominently articulated by William James (1907/2000)—may be used as an epistemological stance toward personal meaning and generating enabling fictions. Within this framework, truth is not conceived as correspondence with an objective future but as a provisional orientation shaped through lived consequences.

> Pragmatism, on the other hand, asks its usual question. Grant an idea or belief to be true, it says, what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash value in experiential terms… Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events' (James, 1907/2000, p. 88).

Regarding career narratives and identity, I refer to these enabling fictions as 'pragmatic idiographic truth'. They are practical (pragmatic), personal (idiographic) proofs (truth) for understanding self and the world and acting accordingly. Career counselling exemplifies this stance as far as it relies heavily on interpretive engagement with a client's biographical history to formulate plausible directions for future action. Such reliance reflects the fundamentally inductive character of counselling practice and the attendant vulnerability highlighted by philosophical critiques of induction (viz., Hume, 1748/2007).

From a pragmatic perspective, ideas and beliefs acquire the status of truth through their effects rather than their origins. The central question is not whether a belief accurately represents reality in an abstract sense, but whether it proves viable in guiding action and sustaining experience over time and in contexts which test the validity of beliefs. Truth, in this view, emerges through its practical consequences. Ideas are validated through what they enable individuals to do, feel, and become in their contexts which may foster this personal truth or prevail against it.

This pragmatic orientation applied to career counselling foregrounds interpretation and reinterpretation as the primary means by which meaning is established in and through narratives. Clients selectively recall, reshape, and sometimes imaginatively reconstruct elements of their life history to sustain coherent self-understandings. Through dialogue, counsellor and client jointly develop narratives that function as provisional explanations of the past and tentative commitments to the future. These narratives are not verified once and for all; they are continually tested through subsequent action and experience.

Once a narrative orientation is adopted, individuals often attend selectively to experiences that appear to support it. Psychological research has long documented this tendency toward *confirmation bias* (Nickerson, 1998), particularly in interpersonal contexts where expectations subtly shape perception and interaction. When experiences align with the guiding narrative, confidence in its validity strengthens. When contradictions arise, individuals may search for alternative confirmations that preserve coherence rather than abandon the narrative altogether.

James (1907/2000) acknowledged that new interpretations rarely replace old ones wholesale. Instead, people tend to adjust existing belief structures incrementally, preserving continuity while accommodating change. What counts as a satisfactory explanation is therefore never absolute; it is judged relative to the person's values, expectations, and tolerance for disruption. From this standpoint, pragmatic idiographic truth is always partial and adjustable—a matter of degree rather than certainty.

> New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving this 'problem of maxima and minima' (James, 1907/2000, p. 31).

Such openness to revision places individuals before an existential demand: to act without guarantees and to assume responsibility for interpretations that could, at any point, prove inadequate. As Søren Kierkegaard (2002) observed, commitment requires courage precisely because understanding never fully determines willingness. Yet without such commitment, identity and agency risk fragmentation. The tension may be resolved by smoothing narratives; that is, to organize experience so that discordant or troubling events are reinterpreted in ways that preserve a sense of continuity, intentionality, and personal coherence (Bruner, 1990). Thus, as a 'therapeutic lie', pragmatic idiographic truths enable actions.

Career counselling must therefore create a milieu in which clients can invest trust in the narratives they co-construct, not because those narratives are incontrovertibly true, but because believing in them enables action. In this sense, career counselling serves as a crucible for pragmatic idiographic truth, supporting individuals to engage creatively and resiliently with education, work and life amid uncertainty, rather than remaining immobilised by the anxiety of indeterminacy.

The ascendent individual in context

Career counselling can be understood as a form of self-related practice that participates in the shaping of identity and social positioning within socio-economic context. Drawing on Michel Foucault, career counselling may be viewed as a *technology of the self* (Foucault, 1988) through which individuals are invited to work on themselves in ways that align personal conduct with prevailing social norms and economic arrangements. The life-design paradigm for career counselling (Savickas et al., 2009) exemplifies this orientation by offering narrative and adaptive resources through which individuals actively compose vocational narratives and identities (i.e., pragmatic idiographic truths) suited to fluid and uncertain labour markets.

The notion that the helping professional operates as a neutral technician has become increasingly untenable. Just as psychoanalysis is no longer understood as a value-free procedure conducted by a detached observer, career counselling cannot plausibly be framed as an intervention delivered by a morally neutral expert. As depicted in Figure 2 (Patton & McMahon, 1999), client and counsellor bring their respective individual career influences to their dyad which is embedded within contextual influences. Career counsellors inevitably participate as interpretive and evaluative agents whose questions, assumptions, and preferred narratives reflect implicit views about what constitutes a worthwhile and meaningful life (e.g., emancipatory communitarian approach; Blustein et al., 2005). Whether acknowledged or not, these ethical orientations shape the counselling process.

Accordingly, appeals to relativism—often associated with postmodern and social constructionist traditions—offer limited refuge. A reflexive stance requires recognising: first, that empirical research, however rigorous, cannot exhaustively justify the tacit aims embedded in counselling practice; second, that the narratives co-created in counselling function as provisional sense-making devices rather than literal truths; and third, that the counsellor's own commitments inevitably inform judgements about direction, possibility, and value. Ethical engagement is therefore not an optional overlay but an intrinsic feature of practice.

These considerations place the construction of self at the centre of ethical inquiry in career development. Contemporary vocational theory conceptualises selfhood not as a fixed entity but as something progressively shaped through activity and choice, moving from being acted upon to acting intentionally and ultimately authoring one's own life trajectory as self-as-actor, self-as-agent, and self-as-author (Savickas, 2013, 2020). Authorship, in this sense, entails heightened agency as well as increased responsibility. The individual who assumes narrative control over their career must also bear responsibility for the risks, uncertainties, and potential failures such control entails.

Yet such authorship unfolds within labour markets and government policies which are detached from and indifferent to individuals' lived experiences, anxieties, and aspirations. Although qualifications, competencies, and skills remain necessary for employability, they are insufficient for addressing the deeper anxieties that accompany vocational decision-making, learning, and earning a decent living amidst the uncertainties of economic and political trends. As Søren Kierkegaard (2002) argued: assuming responsibility for one's own life requires courage when confronting the unknown, for somewhere 'between understanding and willing lie excuses and evasions' (Kierkegaard, 2002, p. 262). A person must either cling to their own constructed truth—however illusory—or risk descending into madness, where every experience threatens to appear as contradiction, bringing with it the terror of a psychological collapse of the very sense of self.

From a Stoic standpoint articulated by Marcus Aurelius (2011), the image of the individual as a performer fulfilling a role offers a useful ethical orientation toward work and life. Stoicism emphasises disciplined acceptance of circumstances that fall outside personal control, coupled with focused commitment to the responsibilities one can discharge. Rather than treating adverse conditions as personal affronts, the Stoic ideal encourages measured engagement, restraint in complaint, and satisfaction derived from performing one's duties conscientiously. Marcus Aurelius articulated this ethic by urging citizens to act according to the requirements of the common good without seeking recognition or sympathy: 'Don't work as a miserable drudge, or in any expectation of pity or admiration. One aim only: action or inaction as civic cause demands' (Aurelius, 2011, p. 86). Given that economic, political, and employment conditions may not always be optimal for an individual at a point in time, taking a Stoic attitude to prevailing hardships is not an easy ask of any person.

Nonetheless, adopting a Stoic orientation may reduce the psychological burden associated with occupational hardship by reframing unavoidable difficulties as part of one's life rather than as personal injustice. Indeed, the psychotherapy based on stoicism, Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (Ellis & Dryden, 2007), has been effectively integrated into career counselling to support clients' challenging beliefs that diminish their esteem and motivation (e.g., Otu & Sefotho, 2024).

Friedrich Nietzsche (1878/1994, 1886/2003) insisted that individuals are ultimately responsible for shaping their own lives.

> Will a self. Active, successful natures act, not according to the dictum 'know thy self', but as if there hovered before them the commandment: will a self and thou shalt become a self. (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 232)

In this view, the self is not merely adapting to external circumstances but actively producing its own trajectory. Life is lived not as a rehearsal for some external justification, but as an affirmation of one's choices, even in retrospect. Nietzsche's emphasis on authorship demands that individuals accept responsibility for the consequences of their commitments and actions rather than attributing outcomes to fate or institutional favour or constraint.

> Life as a product of life. However far man may extend himself with his knowledge, however objective he may appear to himself—ultimately he reaps nothing but his own biography. Nietzsche (Nietzsche, 1878/1994, p. 238)

Nietzsche's position also resonates with the epistemology of pragmatic idiographic truth. His acknowledgement that meaning is sustained through self-endorsed interpretation underscores the role of conviction in enabling action. Nietzsche argues that human excellence is grounded in the capacity to affirm one's own existence rather than deriving meaning from obedience to external mandates. In this view, individuals are called to engage in life vigorously and assume ownership of their commitments, rather than subordinating themselves to inherited purposes or institutional imperatives. Nietzsche's thought offers a psychological counterweight to forms of social theories that erode agency, thus confronting individuals with the responsibility to actively shape their lives.

This stance is neither cynical nor antisocial. It rejects resignation without endorsing contempt for others, emphasising instead the ethical seriousness of self-determination. Interpreted in this way, Nietzsche can be seen as a precursor to later critiques of discourses imposed by social institutions, yet his position diverges sharply from relativistic postmodern accounts that dissolve standards of value altogether. Rather than denying evaluation of the world's impositions upon individuals, Nietzsche relocates it: judgments of good and bad are grounded in the individual's capacity for self-affirmation, responsibility, and creative engagement with life.

To affirm a narrative is not to claim objective certainty; instead, it is to commit oneself to a course of action in full awareness of self's contingency amidst systems of influences, regardless of whether they are pernicious, benign, or favourable. Far from endorsing nihilism, Nietzsche's philosophy insists on the ethical seriousness of such commitment: individuals must generate value through lived engagement rather than inheriting it from external authorities.

The notion of self-authorship delineates complementary ethical orientations within career counselling. One orientation moderates suffering by clarifying the boundaries of control; the other orientation energises agency by demanding ownership of one's future. Both converge on a crucial point: living well in uncertain conditions requires neither resignation nor illusion, but the courage to act in accordance with meanings one is prepared to claim as one's own.

Future directions

The effectiveness of career development interventions is rightly subject to empirical scrutiny and it is evidently an effective means of supporting individuals to making sense of their educational choices, work-related choices, and transitions through the life (e.g., Milot-Lapointe & Arifoulline, 2025; Whiston et al., 2017). But delivering career counselling (and other services) as if it were morally and politically inert is not an option. Empirical scrutiny alone cannot resolve the philosophical quandaries that are implicit in career counselling practice and what is deemed effective, for whom, and why. Decisions about what constitutes a desirable life course, a worthwhile form of work, or an acceptable trade-off between security and fulfilment are not settled by data alone. These matters and decisions are conditional on value judgments of what is good, and good for whom. Enter philosophy.

My intellectual and professional journey has been influenced by Professor David Blustein, whom I regard as a moral lightning rod for the science of vocational psychology and professional practice of career development. Blustein's prosecution of his humanistic agenda (e.g., 2019; 2023) exemplifies how scholars and practitioners in the field career development can be a force for the greater good. In his magnum opus, *The Psychology of Working: A New Perspective for Career Development*, Blustein (2006) called for an experience-near understanding of and connection to the issues and people of interest to researchers and practitioners.

> Empathic understanding can help researchers to make their values more explicit as they are exposed to aspects of participants' lives that may have been inaccessible or inadequately understood. (Blustein, 2006, p.240).

Consistent with empathic introspection and experience-near understanding, is Blustein's call for an *emancipatory communitarian* approach to research and practice. Toward that end, Blustein and colleagues recommended that the discipline should 'strive to instil a critical consciousness—not just among the powerless but the powerful and privileged' (Blustein et al., 2005, p. 167). They did not shy away from taking an overt moral and political stand, in stating 'We agree that a social justice agenda is inherently political and ideological in that it is based on an overt recognition and promotion of a particular set of values' (p. 167). Blustein's (2006, 2019, 2023) affirmative grounding of his psychology of working within a moral and political frame epitomizes the intellectual and professional transparency needed to ensure that scholars and practitioners are accountable by way of their ethically delivering evidence-based practices and, moreover, are accountable to whom they profess to serve.

In this article I have addressed just two quandaries inherent in the field of career development, its predominant science (vocational psychology), and one of its practices (career counselling). There are many more matters that could be and should be the grist of philosophical considerations because they involve contentious issues which are inherently moral and political (e.g., employment, unemployment, and employability; curricula and pedagogies for schools and universities; immigration). Consider those examples for a moment. Career development practitioners are working amidst their systems of career influences (as depicted in Figure 1; Patton & McMahon, 2021) and within the space of their influences converged with their clients (as in Figure 2) in which their moral and political inclinations overtly or unconsciously influence their practices. Therein lies a conundrum which demands an ethic of reflexivity.

Conclusion

I began this article with a confession of the intellectual torments which derailed my settled psychological understanding of the nature of an individual. As a psychologist practitioner and researcher, I provisionally resolved these torments by critically challenging misuse and abuse of the scientific and professional practices within the field of career development (McIlveen & Patton, 2006; McIlveen & Perera, 2019) and through the scientific and professional application of a theory, namely theory of *dialogical self* (Hermans et al., 1992; McIlveen & Patton, 2007). Years later, doubts remain.

Through philosophical considerations, I have grappled with the nature of narrative truth, narrative as pragmatic ideographic truth, and a hopeful reclamation of the individual from the morass of discourse in which nothing seems stable. Metaphysics and moral philosophy have furnished provisional explanations and solace, but I remain vexed. For, as I wrote in an earlier version of this argument, philosophical questions remain:

> At this crucial juncture, I do not find solace in the amoral relativism of postmodernist thinking that made way for social constructionism in career development. Nor should I. For if I am to be honest with my clients and myself, I must admit to (a) the limitations of scientific research that provides the evidence for my practices of career counselling as a technology of self; (b) the fictional qualities of pragmatic idiographic truth that comprises the co-construction of stories that generate action; and (c) my will that is inherent in my ethical stance, as it were: that is, my belief on what composes the good life. (McIlveen, 2015a)

What is true? What is good? Do I have the courage to go forward as if I know the answers? Do you?

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Reframing student voice and participation in the UK education system for socially just career work

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Abstract

This integrative review explores the extent to which student voice and participatory practices in UK education reflect genuine power-sharing, and their potential application to socially just career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG). Twelve sources were synthesised using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis method, generating four key themes: structural constraints, psychological safety, agency and representation, and the potential for citizen power. Findings highlight tensions between participatory rhetoric and practice, and propose an original conceptual model combining Arnstein's Ladder, ethical pragmatism, and participatory action research. The review concludes that future inclusive CEIAG practice must embed student co-design to avoid reinforcing inequality.

Keywords: Student voice, career education, student participation, social justice, United Kingdom

Introduction

Despite increasing policy attention to the notion of 'student voice', student participation in shaping educational practice, particularly within career education, information, advice, and guidance (CEIAG), often remains limited, tokenistic, or poorly defined (Resch, 2023; Roberts, 2015). Across both secondary and higher education settings in the UK, participatory processes are frequently constrained by neoliberal imperatives, such as marketisation, accountability pressures, and curriculum standardisation, which inhibit meaningful engagement (Hooley et al., 2021). While institutional rhetoric around voice has grown, there remains a disconnect between policy commitments and students' influence over educational structures, especially those concerning their future trajectories (Higdon, 2016).

Key concepts such as student voice, student choice, and participation are often conflated in both literature and practice. 'Voice' typically refers to the expression of student perspectives, whereas 'choice' centres on options provided within pre-structured frameworks (Finneran et al., 2021; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Stein et al., 2021). Participation, by contrast, implies collaboration and power-sharing in educational content and delivery. While 'student voice' and 'student participation' are distinct concepts, they are also interconnected. Voice represents the expression of students' perspectives and experiences, whereas participation extends this expression into shared decision-making and co-construction of practice. In this review, the distinction is used analytically rather than absolutely: not all expressions of voice equate to power-sharing, yet all meaningful participation depends on voice as its foundation (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022). This review draws upon Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation to differentiate between symbolic involvement and authentic power-sharing, providing a critical lens through which student engagement practices can be assessed.

Within the field of CEIAG, the role of student voice is particularly significant. Career guidance is not a neutral activity; it is deeply shaped by social, cultural, and institutional norms (Hooley, 2019). Without meaningful inclusion of young people's perspectives, career education risks reinforcing inequalities rather than challenging them. The review aligns with Hooley et al.'s (2021) 'five signposts to a socially just approach to career guidance', which advocate for participatory and empowering practices that challenge normative assumptions and expand the capabilities of all learners.

Although a growing body of research explores student voice in general educational contexts, there is a lack of synthesis focused on how these practices are applied within CEIAG. Few studies explore how participatory methods in curriculum design and feedback processes intersect with students' career readiness, aspirations, or transitions. Without synthesis, CEIAG risks excluding the very voices it aims to support, especially those from marginalised or underrepresented groups (Higdon, 2016).

This integrative literature review aims to explore how student voice, choice and participatory processes are conceptualised and enacted in UK secondary and higher education, with a particular focus on their application to CEIAG. It seeks to critically examine the extent to which these practices reflect genuine power-sharing or remain within the realms of tokenism. The review is guided by the following question: To what extent do student voice and participatory practices in UK education reflect genuine power-sharing, and how might they inform socially just approaches to career education and guidance?

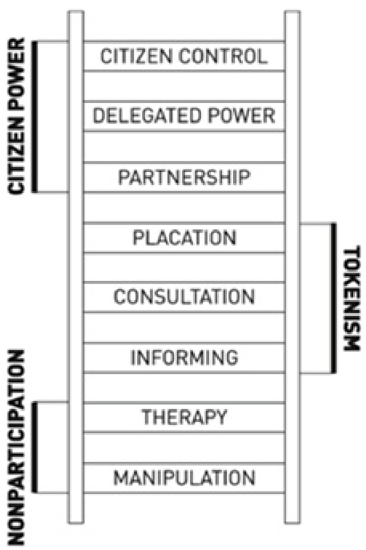
Methodology

This review adopted an integrative literature review methodology (Torraco, 2005; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005) to explore the role of student voice, choice, and participatory curriculum design in English secondary schools and universities. The aim of the review was to explore how such processes adopted in general education settings can be implemented in career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) to promote socially just practices. An integrative review was chosen due to the dearth of empirical research into student voice specifically within CEIAG (Moote & Archer, 2018). While student voice is increasingly prominent in education discourse (Robinson & Taylor, 2007), its application in career education often remains embedded within broader attainment-focused frameworks. The review was grounded in a social justice paradigm, reflecting a commitment to exploring power relations and structural inequalities in CEIAG. This lens prioritises marginalised voices, challenges deficit framings of disengagement, and supports approaches where students are not merely consulted but seen as co-constructors of their learning and career trajectories (Hooley et al., 2021).

Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

This review is underpinned by Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of participation' (Figure 1); a typology that enables critical engagement with power dynamics in student participation. The ladder was originally developed within urban planning to conceptualise the distribution of power between citizens and authorities (Arnstein, 1969). It presents eight rungs, moving from non-participation (manipulation, therapy), through forms of tokenism (informing, consultation, placation), to degrees of citizen power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control). The model's enduring value lies in its explicit focus on power redistribution, making it a useful tool for analysing whether participatory processes are symbolic or genuinely empowering. Despite its enduring influence, however, Arnstein's (1969) Ladder has been criticised for its linear and binary structure (Collins & Ison, 2009; Tritter & McCallum, 2006), its limited attention to the relational and emotional dynamics of participation (Beresford, 2012), and its insufficient sensitivity to intersectional power relations (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2008). Although later models, such as Hart's (1992) Ladder of Children's Participation and Lundy's (2007) framework, address issues of voice and children's rights more directly, they pay less attention to structural inequalities and the transfer of power. Despite criticisms that Arnstein's Ladder is linear, binary, and insufficiently sensitive to relational and intersectional dynamics, it was chosen here precisely because of its central concern with power and control. These dimensions are particularly pertinent to CEIAG, where the stakes for students' futures are high, and where institutional practices risk reinforcing rather than disrupting inequality. These are essential in understanding whether student participation processes achieve genuine citizen control or remain tokenistic.

Figure 1. Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969)



Literature identification and search strategy

To structure the search process, the SPIDER tool (Cooke et al., 2012) was employed to reflect the qualitative and experiential nature of the research focus. Search terms were developed using SPIDER components (sample, phenomenon of interest, design, evaluation and research type) and adapted for use in key academic databases (British Education Index, ERIC, and Web of Science). Search strings were refined and piloted before final use. Grey literature was also included to capture practice-based knowledge and current policy mandates, including reports from The Careers and Enterprise Company (2024) and the Department for Education (DfE) (2017).

An example search strategy used in the 'Web of Science' database included: ((student* OR pupil* OR learner*) NEAR/2 (voice* OR input OR feedback OR perspective)) AND (curriculum OR programme* OR education) AND (career* OR guidance) AND (England OR UK). Boolean operators and proximity commands were adjusted per platform. Supplementary hand-searching of key journals and citation chaining was used to capture additional works relevant to the field.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Included texts were published between 2015 and 2025 in line with the introduction of the *National Careers Strategy* in state secondary schools in England (DfE, 2017) which marked a renewed national emphasis on careers education and student engagement within English secondary schools. This time frame ensured that the literature reflects contemporary practices, expectations, and systemic influences relevant to the review's focus. Literature was included if it was written in English, and if it explored student voice, participation, curriculum co-design, or career education in secondary schools, colleges, sixth forms or universities in the UK. Studies were excluded if they focused on SEND-specific contexts only, were outside the UK, or did not centre student participation. Grey literature was included if produced by nationally recognised bodies and aligned with the review topic. While the inclusion criteria prioritised UK-based literature to ensure contextual relevance, one high-quality study from Australia (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023) was retained due to its strong conceptual alignment with the aims of the review. This review draws primarily on UK-based literature to ensure contextual coherence. Careers education and guidance are deeply situated practices shaped by national policy frameworks, accountability regimes, and labour-market ideologies (Hooley, 2019; Sultana, 2021). In the UK, initiatives such as the Gatsby Benchmarks and the Department for Education (DfE) Careers Strategy have constructed distinctive expectations of student agency and institutional responsibility that differ markedly from those in other jurisdictions. Consequently, focusing on UK sources allows for a critical exploration of participation as it is discursively and structurally enacted within this policy environment.

Appraisal and quality assessment

The CASP Qualitative Checklist (CASP, 2018) was used to assess the quality of empirical texts. This enabled a consistent evaluation of trustworthiness, ethical rigour, and methodological transparency across diverse sources. Each source was rated against ten CASP criteria, including clarity of research aims, methodology, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. This quality assessment process ensured that only credible and relevant studies were included in the synthesis. Grey literature was appraised using relevance, authorship transparency, and publication origin.

Data extraction and management

PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) is a guideline developed to improve the transparency and completeness of reporting in literature syntheses (Page et al., 2021). A PRISMA-style flow diagram (PRISMA, 2020) was created to document the search and selection process, and a data extraction table was developed to capture key details of each study: author, year, context, methodology, findings, and links to Arnstein's ladder (Figure 1). Key details were extracted from each study including focus, methodology and insights, culminating in a data extraction summary table. These details were mapped against Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969) to explore patterns around tokenism and citizen control. Literature was grouped thematically using inductive coding, and an initial coding summary was recorded manually and later organised digitally to facilitate theme development.

Data analysis and thematic synthesis

Thematic synthesis was used to analyse and integrate insights from the selected literature, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis approach. Four overarching themes were developed through iterative coding and critical reflection, each illuminating the complex interplay between student voice, power, inclusion, and the potential for socially just CEIAG. These themes are presented below, with attention given to theoretical connections, tensions, and implications for participatory practice.

Structural and ideological constraints

A common thread running through literature is the limitations to authentic student participation posed by neoliberal frameworks (Hooley et al., 2021; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023; Young & Jerome, 2020). Even with the best of intentions, political systems at management, institutional and national level can hinder the oft desired journey from tokenistic processes to authentic citizen power. Despite national policy encouraging student voice (DfE, 2014), findings suggest that many approaches remain tokenistic in practice, shaped by marketised, outcome-driven cultures.

Higdon (2016) argues that employability discourses in higher education are shaped by neoliberal ideologies that position students as passive participants. The exclusion of student and graduate voices is, as Higdon (2016) suggests, potentially deliberate. The dominance of employer- and business-led discourse in employability, coupled with a dearth of qualitative research into student and graduate perspectives, serves to prioritise employer needs over student experience and thereby narrows the space available for authentic student voice. Authentic student voice processes might go against the dominant neoliberal, meritocratic backdrop, and therefore are purposely designed to restrict voice within set parameters. This assertion is supported by Young and Jerome (2020) whose exploration of student representation in feedback systems highlights that management ownership of such processes serves to perpetuate unequal power hierarchies. Student representatives participating in the study expressed feelings of frustration and powerlessness in a process sold as inclusive and diplomatic, often becoming less motivated to exercise agency with future initiatives.

Nieminen et al. (2022) contribute further by exploring frameworks of student agency in participatory processes, and highlight problematic institutional responses to student disengagement. They acknowledge that student agency in feedback systems is vital but complex, and that practices aiming to promote agency often unknowingly hinder it through rigidity of feedback systems or misattribution of blame. The researchers highlight that when feedback is framed as a one-directional process of information transmission, students are often blamed for 'not engaging' even when the system itself limits their opportunities to act (pp. 8-9). Feedback methods such as online platforms and rubrics can, as they note, both enable and restrict agency. For example, when students can only access audio feedback passively, without means to annotate or respond, their capacity for dialogue and action is curtailed (p. 9).

Moote and Archer (2018) provide context for such phenomena, exploring student perceptions of CEIAG in English secondary schools and describing how it is heavily stratified along lines of social class and institutional expectations. Their findings illustrate that structurally disadvantaged students are more likely to report feeling that their aspirations are disregarded. This aligns with Young and Jerome's (2020) discussion around tokenism leading to disengagement, and Nieminen et al.'s (2022) conclusion that branding such disengagement as dysfunctional or irresponsible disregards deeper seated societal inequities.

Coney (2023) offers a counter position to the above with her work on autistic students as partners in employability design, explicitly stating that the project was 'underpinned by an emancipatory paradigm (Habermas, 1968/1972)' with a concern for 'emancipating the disempowered, redressing inequality and promoting individual freedoms' (p.2). Unlike tokenistic or consultative 'voice' models, autistic students were involved in all stages of the research (survey analysis, programme co-design, and evaluation). The researcher minimised power differentials by positioning herself as a facilitator and explicitly recognising autistic participants as the experts (p. 4).

Together, these findings reveal a pattern in which student voice is often accommodated only within narrow institutional parameters. Although institutions may claim to promote participation, these efforts are often located within the lower rungs of Arnstein's ladder (1969), such as consultation or placation, without granting students genuine influence.

These structural and ideological limitations pose specific challenges in the context of CEIAG, where the stakes for students' futures are high. If participation remains symbolic, students – especially those from marginalised backgrounds – may feel disillusioned or misrepresented.

The emotional cost of insecure participation

This theme explores how the psychological and emotional dimensions of student participation shape the authenticity and effectiveness of student voice initiatives. Even when formal structures exist to support participation, students and other stakeholders may experience fear of repercussion and emotional fatigue when their contributions are ignored or met with resistance (Finneran et al., 2021; Young & Jerome, 2020). As discussed previously, such experiences can undermine trust in participatory processes and discourage further engagement, particularly among underrepresented students (Messiou et al., 2025; Moote & Archer, 2018). As highlighted across the literature, psychological safety is a prerequisite for genuine participation (Finneran et al., 2021; Young & Jerome, 2020), yet it is often assumed rather than actively fostered by institutions (Cook & Warwick, 2023; Nieminen et al., 2022). Government reports utilise student voice as a vehicle for market research, with The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) (2024) identifying students' desire for more personalised CEIAG. The review, however, reveals that marginalised students remain underrepresented in shaping such provision.

The notion of student voice functioning as a form of mutual discipline is explored by Young and Jerome (2020). In hierarchical institutional contexts where scrutiny and accountability are heightened, they argue that student feedback is sometimes deployed as a mechanism to discipline staff, while assessments are used to discipline students. The semantics of 'discipline' are significant, as the term implies an expectation to conform to specific standards, with consequences for failing to do so (Collins Dictionary, 2025). It is suggested that power differences between management and lecturers, and even between student representatives and the peers they aim to represent, magnify distrust in what is deemed to be an inclusive practice. They provide empirical evidence that distrust within student–staff feedback relationships is amplified by existing power hierarchies. Several participants reported withholding feedback for fear of negative repercussions, with one describing evaluations as 'blackmail' (p. 11). These findings, interpreted through a Foucauldian framework, illustrate how feedback systems operate as disciplinary mechanisms that reinforce hierarchies rather than foster trust or collaboration.

The challenges of fostering emotional safety in participatory contexts are recognised in Cook and Warwick's (2023) study, which explores how dialogic engagement through a microblogging tool can democratise communication. Their findings suggest that emotional safety can be actively supported through design: asynchronous, low-risk modes of participation allowed quieter students to contribute, while visible staff responses created reciprocal dialogue and validation. Although some voices remained more prominent than others, Cook and Warwick interpret this imbalance as a prompt for reflexive adjustment rather than an unavoidable limitation. This reinforces the argument that exclusion is not an unavoidable pitfall of participation but contingent on facilitation and institutional commitment. Within this frame, the aspiration toward full citizen power remains essential, not as an unreachable ideal, but as a guiding principle for designing participatory systems that continually challenge structural and relational barriers. Nieminen et al. (2022) further problematise institutional responses to student disengagement, arguing that behaviours such as non-participation are too often framed as individual deficits (dysfunctional, maladaptive), rather than symptoms of deeper systemic failures to create psychologically safe environments. By framing student agency as problematic, institutions risk pathologising disengagement rather than understanding it as a rational response to inequitable systems (Hooley et al., 2021; Moote & Archer, 2018). Although their paper is a theoretical synthesis rather than an empirical systematic review, their argument draws on prior studies of feedback systems that reveal how institutional and technological constraints restrict students' capacity to act (see Boud & Molloy, 2013; Henderson et al., 2019). They therefore contend that disengagement should be interpreted as a symptom of insufficiently safe or responsive feedback environments rather than a deficit in student motivation (pp. 8–9). These interpretations mirror Arnstein's (1969) caution that participation without power may amount to manipulation or placation, ultimately eroding trust and reinforcing hierarchical norms. Across the literature, it is evident that psychological safety is not simply an emotional consideration but a structural requirement for equitable student voice. (Finneran et al., 2021; Moote & Archer, 2018).

Most literature identifies psychological safety as an important precondition for student participation but offers little empirical guidance on how to achieve it (e.g. Nieminen et al., 2022; Young & Jerome, 2020).

Voice, choice, and implications for agency

Even when institutional and psychological factors are considered, questions remain about who is invited to participate in student voice processes, and how this shapes authenticity and inclusivity. While institutions offer mechanisms for representation such as student councils and surveys, in reality participation is frequently restricted to those already empowered to speak: students with higher levels of capital, high achievers, or individuals deemed 'appropriate' by staff. Across the literature, questions emerge about equity of representation, with several studies highlighting how the voices heard are not always reflective of the wider student body (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Stein et al., 2021). In such cases, student voice risks reinforcing privilege and exclusion rather than challenging it, thus remaining within the lower rungs of Arnstein's (1969) ladder, where consultation and placation stand in for genuine redistribution of power.

Stein et al. (2021) suggest that common 'myths' surrounding student voice practices may contribute to disenfranchisement (Stein et al., 2021, p.2), however, the broader literature suggests that such concerns are well-founded. A student quoted in Matthews and Dollinger (2022) remarked: *'Many of us want to make a change, but not all of us can'*. This insightful contribution raises a critical question: Who gets to speak, and who is heard?

Finneran et al. (2021) challenge the assumption that all students are equally positioned to speak, noting that student voice processes risk favouriting students who 'speak the palatable language of the school' (p.3), while further disempowering students who are already marginalised. This claim is reinforced by Matthews and Dollinger (2022) in their exploration of student representation and student partnership. They highlight that, despite efforts towards an ecosystem of authentic student participation, the use of student representatives creates an additional level of hierarchy that hinders the path to true partnership.

Across several studies (Finneran et al., 2023; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023; Scarparolo & MacKinnon, 2023), research participants were either part of formal representative structures or selected from privileged school contexts. In Scarparolo and MacKinnon (2023), participants were sampled from an independent boys' school and were teacher-nominated, suggesting social privilege and a lack of anonymity in their responses. While these students were able to articulate their views with confidence, the samples excluded those from underrepresented groups, raising questions about whose voices are legitimised. In contrast, Coney (2024) prioritises inclusion in her participatory design, ensuring that autistic students work in authentic partnership.

These patterns raise questions about both representation and the purpose of participation in CEIAG. Hooley et al.'s (2021) five signposts to socially just career guidance highlight the need to challenge what is normal and to work at different levels, both of which require authentic, diverse student input. Yet, when participation is dominated by the most confident and institutionally fluent students, CEIAG risks failing to recognise the systemic barriers.

When student voice mechanisms privilege the already confident or institutionally aligned, participation is not only inequitable, but potentially misleading. Mapping such practices onto Arnstein's (1969) ladder makes clear that inclusion is not simply a question of numbers but of power. When participation draws primarily on already-advantaged students, those with confidence, cultural capital, or institutional familiarity, it occupies the middle rungs of tokenism, where students are consulted but not empowered. In contrast, intentional inclusion of underrepresented voices creates the conditions for movement toward the upper rungs of partnership and delegated power, where influence is shared and diverse forms of knowledge shape outcomes. Within CEIAG, the failure to embed such inclusion risks transforming participatory rhetoric into a mechanism for reproducing social advantage, as programmes continue to reflect the aspirations, values, and experiences of those already best served by the system.

Participatory practice and the potential for citizen power

This final theme considers the extent to which student voice practices move beyond consultation towards meaningful partnership and shared decision-making. While previous themes have highlighted structural constraints, emotional risk, and inequitable representation, this section focuses on efforts to redistribute power. Several studies demonstrate emerging models of co-design and collaboration (Coney, 2023; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022), particularly in contexts where students are engaged not only in feedback but in shaping the very structures of their experience. Yet, even in these more progressive models, questions remain about the depth and consistency of power-sharing. Mapping these approaches onto the upper rungs of Arnstein's (1969) ladder ('partnership', 'delegated power', and 'citizen control') allows for a nuanced analysis of the extent to which student voice can function as a vehicle for social justice, particularly within the CEIAG landscape.

As previously described, Coney (2024) stands out for its commitment to co-production, allowing participants to choose modes of engagement and contribute to multiple stages of the research process. This level of flexibility signals a shift towards citizen control, particularly in how power was consciously shared and adapted. Despite many other studies aspiring to such levels of inclusion, the majority describe processes that fall short.

While Matthews and Dollinger (2022) promote a move from representation to partnership, they note that such efforts often remain bounded by institutional terms and conditions. In this sense, partnership may reflect Arnstein's mid-rung rather than truly delegated power. In a similar vein, although digital innovations such as the microblogging tool explored by Cook and Warwick (2023) aim to decentralise power, the analysis reveals tensions in how student contributions are acknowledged and actioned. Both studies recommend clearer communication of how input is used and ensuring voice leads to tangible change. Striving for processes in which the implications of student voice are made explicit, and that voices are heard as well as enabled, are positive steps towards authentic citizen control (Coney, 2024; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022).

Across even the most progressive examples, full delegation of power remains rare. Arnstein's ladder (1969) helps surface this distinction, as student voice efforts are often bound by educational agendas. Career education is uniquely positioned to engage students in shaping their futures, yet current participation structures often reflect institutional constraints. Hooley et al. (2021) offer a comprehensive framework in which to position career work, addressing the gaps discussed across the literature in the pursuit of truly emancipatory practice. When read alongside Arnstein, this provides both the diagnostic and transformative tools needed for emancipatory practice. The ladder exposes the hierarchy of control, while Hooley et al. offer principles for climbing it through care, collaboration, and social justice. Within CEIAG, this synthesis reframes 'citizen power' not as the end point of participation, but as an ongoing, justice-oriented process through which students and practitioners co-create meaning and possibility.

The following discussion reflects on the tensions across all themes, exploring their implications for future CEIAG research and practice, and considering how participatory approaches might be both expanded and critically refined.

Discussion

This integrative review set out to explore the nature and extent of student voice and participatory practices within the UK education system, with a particular focus on how these approaches might inform emancipatory models of career work. It addressed the question: To what extent do student voice and participatory practices in UK education reflect genuine power-sharing, and how might they be applied to enhance equity and impact in CEIAG? The thematic synthesis revealed complex factors affecting the authenticity and reach of student participation, including neoliberal constraints, emotional labour, and patterns of exclusion, all of which have significant implications for the development of socially just career work.

Grey sources vs academic literature

Alongside peer-reviewed literature, this review incorporated grey sources such as the DfE's guidance on student voice (2014) and the CEC's 2023–24 Insight Briefing. While these documents affirm a commitment to listening to young people, they often position voice as a means to improve engagement or satisfaction, rather than as a vehicle for social change. This stands in contrast to academic literature that critiques the superficiality of consultation models and emphasises the need for power redistribution (e.g. Hooley et al., 2021; Young & Jerome, 2020). The persistence of tokenistic participation is not simply procedural but ideological. Under neoliberal frameworks that value performance metrics and market responsiveness (Ball, 2012; Higdon, 2016), student voice is frequently commodified as feedback rather than dialogue. Within CEIAG, this translates into practices that measure satisfaction rather than redistribute power, reinforcing a consumerist rather than collaborative relationship between students and practitioners. Integrating these perspectives highlights the tension between policy narratives and frontline participatory realities, posing a key challenge for CEIAG professionals aiming to design truly inclusive guidance provision.

Synthesis of key themes

Across the four themes, a consistent tension emerged between the rhetoric of student voice and the realities of practice. While institutional strategies often emphasise inclusion and consultation (Career & Enterprise Company, 2024), this review found that such efforts frequently remain constrained by structural hierarchies, individualised metrics of success, and limited frameworks for agency (Higdon, 2016; Moote & Archer, 2018). These constraints are not only pedagogical but ideological, shaped by neoliberal discourses that frame students as consumers and position staff as accountable deliverers of performance outcomes (Higdon, 2016; Young & Jerome, 2020).

A key insight arising from the synthesis is that tokenism is often not due to malice but results from tightly bounded systems in which time, capacity, and policy limitations inhibit deeper engagement. However, the outcomes (disillusionment, disengagement, and misrepresentation) are no less damaging (Nieminen et al., 2022). This raises critical questions for CEIAG, where student voice is rarely integrated beyond consultation, and yet the stakes for young people's futures are particularly high (Education Committee, 2023; Higdon, 2016).

Psychological safety emerged not only as a desirable condition for participation but as a structural requirement. Across the literature, students' willingness to share perspectives, and their interpretation of whether these perspectives are acted upon, was shaped by institutional culture, and the presence or absence of trust. The persistence of unsafe participatory environments reveals the depth of the structural and emotional labour involved in power-sharing. Across the literature, psychological safety is positioned as a precondition for authentic participation, yet most studies describe its absence rather than offer practical strategies for achieving it. This absence signals the continued dominance of performative accountability systems that privilege compliance over care. Through an ethically pragmatic lens, however, psychological safety can be understood not as a fixed condition but as a relational process that develops through trust, transparency, and mutual responsiveness. Studies such as Cook and Warwick's (2023) exploration of dialogic microblogging and Coney's (2023) participatory work with autistic students illustrate how small design choices (e.g. anonymity, asynchronous feedback, shared authorship) can incrementally construct safer spaces. Such practices do not eradicate power differentials but acknowledge them openly, converting awareness into ethical action. This suggests that the aspiration toward 'citizen power' is not naïve idealism but a necessary objective guiding trust-building change. For CEIAG to foster meaningful participation, strategies must go beyond listening to students. Rather they must demonstrate responsiveness, care, and reciprocity.

Furthermore, the synthesis revealed how existing mechanisms of student voice tend to reproduce existing inequalities (Hooley et al., 2021; Moote & Archer, 2018). Student representatives were often drawn from already empowered groups, and their visibility did not necessarily equate to wider inclusion. This has significant implications for career education, which often claims to support social mobility, yet may be informed by a narrow range of student perspectives. Without deliberate inclusion of underrepresented voices in the design of CEIAG provision, interventions risk entrenching structural advantage rather than disrupting it.

Empirical evidence indicates that student representation is not evenly distributed across social groups. Moote and Archer's (2018) longitudinal study of STEM engagement found that opportunities for student leadership and representation were dominated by middle-class, high-attaining students, while those from working-class backgrounds were often absent from decision-making spaces. Similarly, Young and Jerome (2020) observed that confidence, communication style and familiarity with institutional norms shaped whose voices were amplified within feedback systems. These findings move beyond theoretical concern to establish the socially skewed nature of participation empirically. When viewed through Arnstein's (1969) lens, such practices occupy the lower rungs of the ladder, particularly the stages of consultation or placation, where participants are heard but have limited influence over outcomes. Apparent inclusivity therefore masks structural exclusion, as the power to define agendas and interpret 'voice' remains largely with staff and institutional gatekeepers. Recognising this positionality is essential if CEIAG is to progress toward genuinely redistributive, justice-oriented forms of participation.

Finally, a small number of texts (e.g. Coney, 2024) demonstrated the possibility of transformative practice through co-design, flexibility, and authentic power-sharing. These studies, while rare, highlight that citizen control is possible, but only when institutions are willing to share power, challenge normative hierarchies, and embrace ethical pragmatism. For CEIAG, this means moving beyond market-led, outcomes-driven models of guidance, and toward participatory, justice-oriented practices that recognise young people as active agents in shaping their futures.

Theoretical underpinning

This review was underpinned by Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation, chosen for its explicit focus on the redistribution of power. Across the thematic synthesis, the ladder provided a critical lens through which to analyse whether student voice practices reflected genuine shifts in power or remained at the lower rungs of tokenism and symbolic engagement. Arnstein's binary between citizen control and non-participation highlighted the degree to which participation is often constrained by structural inequality, limited inclusion, and institutional risk-aversion.

However, the synthesis also revealed several limitations in Arnstein's model, particularly when applied to the relational, emotional and ethical dynamics of education. The ladder's linear and hierarchical design does not fully account for the complex interplay of trust, identity, risk, and social capital that shapes students' willingness and ability to participate. Moreover, it lacks an explicit focus on intersectionality, cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and the emotional labour of both students and staff. These are crucial omissions when applying participation theory to career education, where aspirations and outcomes are deeply embedded in social context and systems of power.

To ensure that the analysis captures both the structural and relational dimensions of participation, Arnstein's Ladder is applied here in conjunction with ethical pragmatism (Dewey, 1932; Frega & Levin, 2020) and Hooley, Sultana and Thomsen's (2021) socially just framework for career guidance. Whereas Arnstein exposes the distribution of power within participatory processes, ethical pragmatism foregrounds the quality of ethical action within those constraints, recognising that practitioners must navigate competing responsibilities and imperfect systems. Hooley et al.'s framework extends this synthesis by situating participation within the broader philosophy of social justice, emphasising the need to challenge structural inequities rather than simply increase engagement. Together, these frameworks allow for a multidimensional analysis: Arnstein provides the critical architecture for identifying where power resides, ethical pragmatism offers a compassionate, context-sensitive guide for action, and Hooley's signposts ground both within a justice-oriented vision of CEIAG. This triangulation ensures that participation is understood not merely as a procedural goal, but as an ethical and political practice aimed at addressing rather than reproducing inequality.

Conclusion

This review explored how student voice and participatory practices in UK education reflect genuine power-sharing, and how these insights can inform socially just approaches to career education, information, advice, and guidance (CEIAG). Four key themes were identified: structural and ideological constraints; psychological safety and emotional labour; the politics of voice, choice, and agency; and the potential for participatory practice to reach Arnstein's (1969) higher rungs of participation (partnership, delegation, and citizen control).

Despite frequent policy promotion, student voice remains constrained by hierarchical cultures, market-driven accountability, and selective representation (Messiou et al., 2025; Scarparolo & MacKinnon, 2024). Psychological safety, often assumed rather than intentionally cultivated, proved essential for meaningful engagement, especially for marginalized students. Participation structures tend to amplify dominant voices, limiting inclusion. However, some studies showed that co-designed and inclusive approaches can foster authentic power-sharing (Coney, 2024; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023).

Implications for career work

The findings of this review offer significant implications for the design and delivery of socially just career education. Despite policy commitments to inclusivity and empowerment, student voice in CEIAG remains largely under-theorised and under-utilised. When present, it is often confined to consultation or post-hoc evaluation rather than embedded throughout the design, delivery and development of provision.

The participatory themes emerging from this review resonate strongly with broader interdisciplinary debates around power, voice, and agency. In social work (Beresford, 2007; Healy, 2005), youth studies (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Wood, 2014), and public policy (Cornwall, 2008; Hill & Hupe, 2009), there is a growing consensus that participation must go beyond symbolic inclusion and engage with the structural conditions that enable or suppress authentic voice.

The literature highlighted that students' capacity to engage with CEIAG meaningfully is shaped by structural and emotional factors, including institutional expectations, and students' prior experiences of being listened to or ignored. It also highlighted the necessity for caution in the assumption that student voice is an unequivocal good. Scholars such as Fielding, (2004), Cook-Sather (2007) and Mejias (2013) warn that student voice, if not critically examined, may serve to reinforce existing power dynamics under the guise of inclusion. In light of these findings, CEIAG practitioners and institutions should consider the following recommendations:

- **Embed student voice from the outset:** Approaches such as co-establishing the goals, language and delivery of CEIAG programmes, are likely to be more empowering than end-point feedback mechanisms. Evidence from scholars on the effectiveness of participatory research tools such as causal loop diagrams (Brychkov et al., 2022) or collaborative curriculum audits (Elliott et al., 2021) shows that such approaches allow students to identify what support they actually need, rather than what is assumed they need. Practical application could involve piloting small-scale co-design workshops with a diverse group of students at the start of programme planning, then using their input to shape curricula before implementation.

- **Create psychologically safe opportunities to contribute:** To avoid reinforcing inequality, CEIAG must offer multiple, low-risk routes for participation. Cook and Warwick (2023) demonstrate that tools such as digital microblogging can provide anonymous, low-risk ways to contribute. However, students reported disappointment when their input was ignored. Such concerns could be mitigated by combining anonymity with visible responsiveness. For example, by displaying how student feedback has been actioned in follow-up sessions or sharing 'we heard, we did' reports with contributors.
- **Challenge dominant conceptions of 'appropriate' student voice:** The tendency to rely on high-achieving, institutionally literate students (e.g. prefects, award participants) as representatives risks reinforcing social advantage (Finneran et al., 2021; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022). In contrast, Coney (2024) demonstrates that deliberately reaching out to underrepresented groups creates more equitable participation. More inclusive outreach is required to engage students who are underrepresented in CEIAG planning, including disabled students, those with competing responsibilities or from working-class backgrounds. Recruiting through multiple channels (e.g., community groups, targeted invitations, support services) and allowing students to choose modes of contribution (written, visual, digital) may reduce barriers to participation.
- **Make student voice consequential:** Where feedback is sought, it must be acted upon. Young people in the literature expressed frustration with cycles of consultation that resulted in no perceptible change (Nieminen et al., 2022; Young & Jerome, 2020). Transparency, follow-up, and even co-dissemination of findings (e.g. blogs, podcasts, assemblies) are essential for building trust and credibility.
- **Empower staff:** Teachers, career leaders and practitioners are often constrained by time, capacity and policy demands (Sutton Trust, 2024). Participation must therefore be made practical, purposeful, and non-onerous, built into existing practice rather than as an additional burden (Matthews et al., 2019). Thomsen (2017) emphasises that small-scale, iterative participation is more sustainable for practitioners than large, resource-heavy interventions. Resources such as low-burden, cost-free toolkits that share real student input and co-designed strategies may be vital to ensure uptake and sustainability.
- **Adopt an ethically pragmatic stance:** Recognising that not all participation is possible at all times, practitioners should be supported to make ethically sound decisions within given constraints (Dewey, 1932; Frega & Levin, 2020). Genuine participation therefore depends not on unrestricted autonomy but on honest negotiation of influence, echoing Cook-Sather's (2007) and O'Reilly et al.'s (2023) emphasis on relational trust and informed transparency. This includes being transparent with students about what is open to influence and what is not, fostering a participatory culture grounded in honesty and respect.

These suggestions offer a practical foundation for rethinking CEIAG design. Embedding ethical deliberation at each stage of participatory activity, from agenda-setting to evaluation, can help practitioners navigate the tensions between empowerment and institutional accountability. Such considerations do not dissolve constraint, but use it as a grounding for ethical action, aligning everyday practice with the pursuit of social justice.

This review integrates Arnstein's ladder, ethical pragmatism, and participatory action research principles to advocate for intentional, equity-driven participation in CEIAG, recognizing institutional constraints but emphasizing responsiveness and care.

As Freire states:

> Critical consciousness cannot be a hierarchical process... but must be a participatory process owned by the learners.
>
> (Freire, 1970/2005)

For CEIAG to be truly emancipatory, students must be empowered to move beyond consultation and become co-creators of the very systems shaping their futures.

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Short Article

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Point of view: the need for moral compass in career guidance

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Abstract

This article revisits research on the ethical tensions experienced by professional careers advisers from the former English Careers Service after they were transferred into the Connexions service as Personal Advisers. It examines how austerity distorted their practice and intensified the ethical labour required of them. By reconsidering these dynamics through the lens of this special issue on Ethics, Philosophies and Principles, the article identifies enduring questions for contemporary career education and guidance, particularly around care and control, professional impartiality, and the need for policy on and management of career services to sustain moral compass in practice.

Keywords: ethics, professional practice, Connexions, career guidance

Introduction

This reflective commentary revisits research undertaken more than a decade ago on the ethical tensions experienced by former careers advisers transferred into the Connexions service as Personal Advisers for disadvantaged young people (Lewin & Colley, 2011, Chadderton & Colley, 2012, and Colley, 2011, 2012 report the research fully, including its methodology). The aim in returning to this work is not to re-state past critiques, but to explore what the Connexions experience reveals about the philosophical and ethical foundations of career guidance provision for young people in times of neo-liberal politics and austerity for public services. The article considers the relevance of these lessons for contemporary practice.

Much changed in career guidance work with young people when Connexions was launched in 2001, even more so since it was disbanded in 2010. Services have diversified – many careers advisers are now employed individually by schools, colleges, and universities, so that provision tends to be driven by these institutions' priorities, not necessarily aligned with clients' needs. Information technology is seen more than ever as both a silver bullet for clients and a cost-cutting measure for delivery. A generation has spent their childhood or adolescence in lockdown during the Covid pandemic, with all the attendant difficulties that has created for them. Moreover, young people's transitions have become disrupted further still, as entry-level jobs disappear in part thanks to artificial intelligence (AI) (Prospects Luminate, 2025; Department for Education, 2023; Mousicos, 2025).

Yet many issues still appear basically familiar: marketisation, performance management, fragmentation of provision, and the increasing complexity of young people's transitions. Against this backdrop, the focus in this NICEC special edition on Ethics, Philosophies and Principles provides a timely opportunity to revisit the moral foundations of the field. Viewed through this lens, the Connexions story becomes a philosophical provocation rather than a historical account. It shows what can happen to career guidance when its ethical base is destabilised, and highlights what is asked of practitioners who attempt to sustain a moral commitment within such an environment.

The argument developed here centres on the idea of 'ethical labour' (Banks, 2009; Colley, 2011, 2012). This notion refers to the ongoing, invisible, and often emotionally costly work practitioners undertake to maintain principled client-centred practice in contexts where organisational targets, limited resources and policy directives pull in another direction. In Connexions, ethical labour intensified under austerity and became central to the daily experience of practitioners. (There are of course other aspects of ethics in relation to career guidance, such as the just transition to a green economy, but they are not the focus of this article.) Today, we must interrogate varied organisational settings and ask if similar dynamics persist. This field, like any other human service work, faces a continuing challenge to recognise ethical labour as a core element of practice and to understand how policy and institutional structures can either support or diminish it.

From welfare to austerity: a shifting philosophical ground

Connexions was created with a rhetoric of inclusion and holistic support for the 'hardest-to-help' young people. In practice, the service operated within a wider political turn towards market-driven values, public sector reform and austerity. Let us not forget that the Careers Service was the first public service to be entirely scrapped after the banking crisis of 2008, and its workforce entirely subsumed into the multi-professional Connexions service. Critical social theorists (e.g. Bauman, 2004) writing in the early 2000s highlighted how economic crisis and austerity narrow the purposes of public services to economic participation, and position some young people as marginal or disposable – notably those not in education, employment or training: 'NEETs'.

In-depth qualitative research with 24 career guidance-trained Personal Advisers (PAs) and their managers across four Connexions services illustrated how such philosophical shifts influenced everyday practice. Practitioners were working with young people navigating homelessness, mental health difficulties, family conflict and poverty. Yet the official priorities of the service became increasingly dominated by measurable outcomes, particularly the reduction of the number of young people classified as 'NEET'. Resources were limited, timescales were short, specialist support was scarce, and practitioners were left with tools for tracking young people rather than tools for their care. This was not simply a reduction in provision: it constituted a redefinition of purpose.

As client-centred support became displaced by instrumental aims, the ethical terrain of practice began to distort. Connexions reflected a broader trend in which the moral vision of career guidance, grounded in empowerment, equality of opportunity and professional impartiality, became subordinated to narrow interpretations of economic utility. These consequences were felt by young people, but also by practitioners who bore the emotional weight of navigating contradictions between their ethical training – closely linked to their professional and personal identity – and the demands placed on them by their managers.

When systemic pressures distort practice

One of the most striking findings of the Connexions research was the way institutional pressures produced what I described – drawing on Hannah Arendt's (1963) notion of the 'banalisation of evil' – as the banalisation of unethical practice. This phenomenon did not arise from intentional wrongdoing by PAs themselves, but from situations in which committed practitioners found themselves under constant pressure to carry out actions that conflicted with their values. On the one hand, the organisational framework, with the targets imposed on it by policy-makers – mediated by service managers – and the austerity reductions in related services, afforded no realistic alternative. On the other hand, PAs themselves were threatened with losing their jobs if they did not conform to managerial imperatives. How did these pressures manifest themselves?

Dual triage and the quiet exclusion of the most vulnerable

Connexions ostensibly prioritised young people with the most intensive needs. Yet pressure to meet 'NEET' reduction targets generated a second, hidden level of triage. Practitioners were compelled to focus not on the hardest to help, but on those easiest to help, so that unrealistic time-limited targets could be met. Young people requiring long-term relational work or specialist support were often sidelined, with practitioners even instructed not to record them as clients so that targets would not be undermined. This amounted to the silent exclusion of the young people the service had supposedly been designed to support.

Surveillance over support

Many practitioners found their work shifting from relationship-building towards monitoring and control. Home visits intended to provide support were described by PAs as feeling more like policing. Young people were contacted repeatedly to update data rather than to receive meaningful assistance. Practitioners reported discomfort with forms of surveillance that conflicted with their professional ethos.

Coercive guidance and the erosion of impartiality

Practitioners also experienced pressure from their managers to secure participation in education, employment or training programmes, even when these were clearly unsuitable for the young person. Impartiality became compromised. One practitioner likened the experience to working as a double-glazing salesperson, distressed by feeling forced to push clients into any opportunity available, however inappropriate. (There is a broader discussion about impartiality in career guidance, see Hooley 2023; here the focal point is about institutional pressures overriding appropriate client care.)

Ethical labour: The invisible work of struggling to maintain integrity

A central question explored in the original research, and relevant still today, concerns how practitioners maintained professional integrity under such pressures – or we should say, struggled to maintain it. Ethical labour includes the work of questioning decisions, negotiating tensions, advocating for young people's interests, and attempting to honour professional values even when organisational constraints make this challenging or impossible.

In Connexions, ethical labour was widespread – an intrinsic part of the role – but unrecognised. It was also greatly intensified by the contradictions imposed on practitioners by the lack of resources and managers' pursuit of targets. Practitioners described feelings of dread, guilt, frustration, fear and loss of professional identity. Some PAs on temporary contracts, who had raised ethical objections with their managers, did not have their contracts renewed. Almost all the other PAs who participated in the study told us that they had become mentally and/or physically ill as a result of the tensions they faced, and almost all had quit their jobs in Connexions, or were actively trying to, by the time the research was completed.

Our encounters with managers were also revealing (Colley, 2014). After sending them our findings from the initial round of interviews with PAs and seeking discussion with them, managers refused to respond to or re-engage with us. When presenting the findings of the completed study to a national commission on the career guidance profession, senior managers of Connexions services flatly denied the issues we had uncovered – even though members of their own staff were studying for a career guidance qualification with us and had confirmed that our findings chimed strongly with their own experiences. Indeed, the unethical pressures on front-line practitioners had become so routinely banalised by managers that they could be dismissed in this way. As this article presents a 'point of view' rather than a purely academic account, I would state here that this situation was a truly shameful one for our profession.

In the face of such serious disjuncture between policy, management implementation, and front-line practice, how can or should we define the underlying purpose of career guidance for disadvantaged young people?

Questions about purpose and ethics in career guidance

In a context of labour market instability and persistent inequality, career guidance requires a clear philosophical foundation. This is not some 'optional extra', an unaffordable luxury in times when funding is tight. If services are shaped primarily by scant resources tied to labour market participation goals, the most vulnerable young people will be marginalised further still. A commitment to well-being, flourishing and equality of opportunity must be supported by ethical principles that guide both policy and practice. This raises questions that need to be addressed today.

What mechanisms protect impartiality and professional integrity?

Connexions showed how vulnerable impartiality becomes under strong organisational pressures. Contemporary practitioners require mechanisms that enable them to raise concerns and challenge practices that conflict with young people's interests. These may include ethical guidelines (that are not abstract, but confront the *realities* of front-line work), professional dialogue, or collective representation. This does, however, also mean that service managers at every level need to embrace the same commitments, and speak truth back to political power. It is just morally wrong to continually report upwards that everything in the garden is rosy.

How can career guidance structures recognise and support ethical labour?

Other sectors such as therapeutic counselling have typically acknowledged the emotional and moral dimensions of practice. Career guidance could benefit from similar recognition. Without supervision, reflective dialogue and cohesive professional communities to address these issues, ethical labour becomes unsustainable.

What new forms of control are emerging?

New technologies, especially AI, raise new questions about surveillance, data privacy and autonomy. The philosophical issue remains the same: whether technological tools enhance care or reinforce systems of control.

How do we support practitioners in fragmented or precarious environments?

Fragmentation and short-term funding create challenges for ethical consistency. When practitioners move between organisations or teams are restructured, shared ethical principles and values become vital. Yet many practitioners today work virtually alone, or in very small companies, and therefore without a community of peers to sustain their emotional and mental wellbeing.

Furthermore, a feature of neo-liberalism in public services today is the appointment of managers who have no training or practical background in the services they oversee. 'Management' has been increasingly re-constructed as an abstract activity, divorced from expertise in specific professional practice and its ethical basis. If this continues to be the case, it is hard to see how the gulf between instrumental policy and ethical practice can be bridged.

Conclusion

Returning to this research after more than a decade highlights that maintaining a moral compass in career guidance is not simply a matter of adhering to formal codes. It is a daily, lived negotiation shaped by organisational structures, economic pressures and political ideologies. Connexions shows how easily ethical principles can be stymied when systems prioritise metrics over relationships, 'efficiency' over trust, and control over care.

This concern feels particularly urgent today as the UK government renews its focus on young people not in education, employment or training. Current policy rhetoric, including claims about the supposed over-diagnosis of mental health difficulties (The Guardian, 2025), indicates the potential for punitive approaches which prioritise sanctions over support. Promises of support to help young people overcome barriers are worryingly vague and as yet unfunded. The government's pledge of £85 million to boost career guidance provision in schools, including the recruitment of 1000 careers advisers, did not appear to have any clear institutional strategy, and has been quietly shelved (Career Development Policy Group, 2025).

For the field today, a central task is to define what good practice in career guidance with young people looks like, and to ensure practitioners are supported to enact it. It also requires that managers are committed to this end *and* prepared to speak out if policies threaten to drive practice in an ethically wrong direction. This requires attention to the philosophical foundations of the work, recognition of the ethical labour involved, and a willingness to address and, where need be, challenge the political, economic and societal forces shaping young people's transitions. In practical terms, it also requires career guidance training to avoid formulaic, decontextualised approaches to ethics; professional bodies and membership organisations need to champion ethical practice proactively, and support whistleblowing in the kinds of situations that our research revealed.

If this NICEC special issue stimulates debate on these questions, it may help to renew moral clarity within the field. Such clarity recognises the humanity of practitioners and the young people they support, and emphasises that career guidance must remain anchored in values that resist the narrowing pressures of austerity and marketisation. A moral compass in career guidance has to be maintained – without it, there will be no guidance for disadvantaged young people, only coercion or neglect.

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Short Article

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Embodying integrity in careers education and guidance practice: Looking through the DOTS window

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Abstract

This article explores what professional integrity looks like in careers education, information and guidance. It draws illumination from the work of Bill Law, especially the DOTS model which he developed with Tony Watts. It encourages the reader to reflect on their own professional mindset and behaviour as career practitioners, offering questions inspired by the DOTS framework and suggests ways in which applying approaches which we might more usually apply to our clients might help us to develop our professional integrity.

Keywords: DOTS, careers education, professional integrity, values, ethics

Introduction

What does the description of a careers practitioner as 'having real integrity as a professional' mean to you? Does someone come to mind and is that person, Bill Law perhaps? Is it something that you would be proud to have said of you? What does integrity mean in our context of Careers Education Information and Guidance (CEIG) and how might the DOTS model of career education, Decision Learning, Opportunity Awareness, Transition Learning and Self-Awareness, which Bill Law and Tony Watts developed together around 50

1 Writing in a personal capacity.

years ago, now help us think more concretely about a concept as ellusive as 'professional integrity' in CEIG (Law and Watts, 1977, 2003).

After 36 years delivering and leading CEIG in 10 university careers services, and with a perspective further enriched by my experience as an AGCAS Board Director 2016-2021, I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on what integrity might mean in our professional CEIG context. My own professional experience is primarily in Higher Education (HE) and graduate-focused contexts, but I hope some of what I write here is also useful in CEIG delivery beyond the academy and for those readers who are careers professionals in other settings including private practice. Integrity matters in every professional context.

Conventionally used more as a term applying to professions that have fiduciary responsibilities, such as finance and law, professional integrity is in essence about trust. As a client of an accountant or a lawyer, my reasonable expectation of professional integrity is the approach, 'I trust you not to lie, cheat or steal, or to pervert my business to serve your interests'. Our core currency in CEIG is guidance, education, information and empowerment, rather than financial assets or legal advice, which prompts questions such as what does trustworthiness look like in that context, or more challengingly, where does our honesty lie? This is where I find illumination in applying the DOTS model to our own professional practice and exploring some questions catalysed by that framework.

Self-awareness supports professional integrity in walking our own talk

How is your own career health? Are you future-fit? How much are you actually following the advice that you dish out to clients? Is your self-awareness centred on your values and skills, or are you rather absorbed by your insecurities for which you are compensating with the ego-boost of your professional role? Is your self-awareness dynamic and open to change? Yesterday's confident practice, unless refreshed regularly, is today's arrogance and an invitation to creeping incompetence. We can refresh our self-awareness by applying to ourselves Bill Law's approach to careers learning, articulated in his work on new DOTS (Law, 2001) and based on the value of sensing, sifting, focusing and understanding (SeSiFU) in creating effective insights. The more we are aware of what we are bringing to any CEIG conversation or lesson, and where our limitations might be, the easier it is to get our ego out of the way and to deliver trustworthy and effective CEIG.

Transition learning challenges us to take own career risks

One of the paradoxes of careers work is that the comfortable are often coaching the client out of their comfort zone to take risks. Our own comfort can provide a calm base and broader cognitive bandwidth from which we support clients, but it can also reduce our empathy in appreciating how challenging risk-taking with your economic wellbeing and facing social rejection can feel when the safety net is fragile. What might our comfort zone comprise? Are we benefiting from the privilege of a permanent contract or the privilege of a second household income or other family capital? Where are we situated in social privilege such as race, gender or class? Some of our personal comfort zone may be intrinsic and cannot be changed. Other comfort zones may be life advantage for which we may have worked hard to achieve and which we value on behalf of ourselves and our families.

But part of professional integrity is looking at our comfort zone regularly and shaking it up a bit. It is naturally human to think that our success is mainly due to our efforts and while effort plays a key part, if we have success, we have also benefitted from luck. So, as well as self-awareness, part of walking our talk is to continually take risks, to feel the discomfort of being evaluated and to fail at times. Integrity comes from regularly facing and being humbled by what scares you, whether that is public speaking in a new context, interpersonal conflict at work, or death by spreadsheets. CEIG work can be so fulfilling that there is a temptation to stay in the satisfying and comfortable people-facing activities which drew so many of us into the business. However, we need to tackle a personal scary thing every month if we want to work with integrity; to find the right words and tone to encourage our clients to take the risks which they need to overcome on the way to achieving their own dreams.

We also need to master our own career transition skills and apply for jobs, secondments, awards, contracts and promotions. From my own experience, I was most effective as a careers coach when I was applying for jobs on my own behalf, sweating over every word on the application form and boring the cat with yet another rehearsal of my presentation. It reminded me that job hunting is so substantially an emotional regulation task under intense time pressure. Anyone who has recruited in the CEIG world has depressing stories of experienced careers consultants submitting substandard applications and lacklustre interview performance. What is going on here? Is it professional arrogance? Is it lack of self-confidence? Could it be addressed by realising that we too would benefit from talking to a fellow professional, or at least ChatGPT, about our approach to self-presentation, especially if it has been a while since we put ourselves out there to be evaluated. Taking the other seat and working through our discomfort deepens our integrity as a career practitioner.

Opportunity awareness keeps us current

We also demonstrate professional integrity by continually researching and adapting to the changes of the times we work in. There is no integrity in being the professional of 2016 (or 2036) in the working environment of 2026. Part of our integrity is being really alive to the present. What is useful to our clients NOW? One of the gifts of my four decades of working life has been a growing appreciation that much of the white noise of working life is temporary trends and buzz-words, and that much can be navigated with the sense that 'this too will pass'. However, though it may be transient, and some of it I have been eager to speed on its way, while it is today's fashion, it frames the environment that our clients must navigate in their job hunting and career development. And if we work in an organisational context, it frames the strategic landscape in which we must present narratives and perform, or we risk being seen as outmoded or irrelevant with consequent loss of impact on our ability to empower individuals. So we need to refresh our vocabulary to talk today's talk.

We need to put in the hours to listen, learn and keep up to date with the labour markets relevant to the clients we advise. Keep reading job advertisements, salary trends, industry news and, in 2026, have a view on how AI can help you do your job more effectively (and implement some of it) so that you have the credibility to ask the same question of your clients. Part of the trust we earn is in keeping up to date, refreshing our material and delivering honest and competent work. Time for that delete button for some of your old favourite slides. One of the ways in which I find Bill Law inspiring was his continual curiosity about new approaches. Like him, keep evolving.

Decision-learning (and decision-making) is where integrity becomes wisdom

So much effective career development is about good decision-making: choosing the options that fit who we are and who we are likely to become; choosing how to spend our limited discretionary time in career enriching activities; basing our decisions on long-lasting principles or values; being realistic about how to make compromises when options are limited. Does that describe your own career management? Should I be taking career advice from you?

We also support the career decision-making skills of others. Have we invested the time to think about the different ways in which people legitimately make decisions. Reading Bill Law is always a good start. His work on community interaction and the importance of one's circle of influencers: parents, teachers, role models and peers has inspired me for over 30 years (Law, 1981). In a field which has often fetishised individual choice, Bill looked at the social context and how we are interdependent with it. If, as a client, I am going to stretch out of my community comfort zone to explore a vocational area where my social support is weak, then hopefully my careers consultant is bringing some integrity to this discussion to help me make an honest appraisal of new support structures and new behaviours which I may need to adopt in order to make and sustain social mobility jumps.

We often make good decisions when we balance the fashions and opportunities of today with what matters to us intrinsically, and when we stay true to our fundamental principles and values. It is that anchoring to values which people often pick up on when they sense integrity. How could someone, for example a client, tell that we value professional competency, honesty and impartiality (as much as that is possible for any human being) – where's the evidence?

The final test of integrity is whether we operate as if the work is bigger than we are (quick tip: it is, as the graveyard is full of people who thought that they were indispensable). Are we prepared to change our mind, and at times sacrifice our ego, when we discover inconvenient truths through our work? Are we actively experimenting, making mistakes and sometimes making fools of ourselves? Do people get the sense that we are in service to something bigger than our own small agendas but not taking ourselves too seriously? Bill Law embodied this sense of lightness as he created a website entitled 'hihohiho' inspired by the song which continues, 'it's off to work we go'.

In the way he approached his professional work and in the many models and ideas he explored and developed, Bill Law enriched the endeavour of professional integrity in CEIG. So go, walk that talk and stay current, credible and a catalyst for change. Take the opportunity to explore the NICEC Bill Law archive online, and next time you need a professional integrity refresh, ask yourself 'What would Bill do?'

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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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Short Article

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Career counselling in a highly constrained context: ethical reflections from a school-based pilot in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Career guidance is often framed around informed choice and individual agency, yet these principles are tested in contexts where opportunity structures are severely constrained. Drawing on routine documentation from a school-based counselling pilot in three secondary schools in Freetown, Sierra Leone, this article presents a practice-based ethical analysis. Situating the pilot within small-state career guidance research, it examines how professional principles, including those of the IAEVG, require contextual interpretation. The article argues that ethical career counselling in low-resource settings depends on enacting universal standards through locally grounded practice.

Keywords: career counselling; ethics; school-based guidance; Sierra Leone; youth transitions

Introduction

Transitions from school to adulthood are challenging in most societies. In Sierra Leone, they are particularly complex. Young people face limited access to tertiary education, a narrow formal labour market, and high levels of underemployment. Secondary schooling remains one of the few structured institutions most young people engage with, making schools a critical site for career development support.

Formal career guidance has largely been absent from Sierra Leone's secondary education system. Career decisions are typically shaped by family expectations, peer influence, perceived social prestige, and limited information about pathways, costs, and alternatives. Professions associated with status and stability, such as medicine, engineering, or law, are frequently prioritised, even when structural capacity to absorb graduates is extremely limited.

In November 2024, a pilot placing career counsellors in senior secondary schools was launched in Freetown through collaboration between Skool Grind and the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education. The programme aimed to support students aged 16–21 through structured, individual counselling sessions focused on exploration, reflection, and practical planning.

This article reflects on the first six months of that pilot. Rather than offering a formal evaluation, it presents a practice-based ethical reflection. It asks what it means to practise career counselling ethically in a context where aspirations routinely exceed opportunity, and where established professional principles must be interpreted under conditions of scarcity.

Career guidance in low- and middle-income contexts raises distinct ethical challenges, particularly where labour markets are narrow and educational opportunities limited (Watts, 2009; Blustein, 2006). Much dominant career theory assumes diversified opportunity structures; in constrained contexts, principles such as autonomy and informed choice require contextual interpretation.

National and educational context: Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is a coastal West African country with a population of approximately 8.6 million people and a markedly young demographic profile: 38 per cent of the population is under the age of 15 (World Bank, 2024a, 2024b). English is the official language of government and education, while Krio functions as the primary lingua franca across ethnic and regional groups. Since independence from the United Kingdom in 1961, the country's development trajectory has been shaped by political instability and economic fragility.

The civil war (1991–2002) severely disrupted social infrastructure, including education. Schools were destroyed or damaged, teachers displaced, and learning interrupted for many children (UNICEF, 2019). Although reconstruction efforts have improved access, the effects of conflict continue to influence educational participation and perceptions of opportunity.

The formal education system follows a 6–3–3 structure: six years of primary schooling, three years of junior secondary, and three years of senior secondary. While primary enrolment is relatively high, continuation through secondary levels declines significantly (World Bank, 2023). Transition to tertiary education is limited, and only a small minority of adults have completed post-secondary study (World Bank, 2019). The formal labour market similarly absorbs only a small proportion of school leavers.

These structural features mean that access to higher education and formal employment is highly competitive. Understanding this constrained opportunity structure is essential for interpreting both the aspirations students express in counselling and the ethical tensions encountered in practice.

The pilot programme and methodology

The pilot placed trained career counsellors in three senior secondary schools in Freetown: Prince of Wales School (boys-only), Ahmadiyya Secondary School (co-educational), and Services Secondary School (co-educational). Selected in collaboration with the Ministry, these schools represent relatively well-resourced urban institutions.

Counsellors were recruited based on relevant educational qualifications and demonstrated interest in youth development. All held post-secondary qualifications in education or related social science fields. Prior to deployment, they received structured, contextually adapted training addressing career development practice, counselling ethics, non-directive approaches, documentation procedures, and the Sierra Leonean education and labour market landscape. Ongoing reflective supervision was provided through regular meetings with programme leadership.

Students aged 16–21 were invited to attend three to four individual counselling sessions during the academic year, focusing on career exploration, educational pathways, perceived barriers, family expectations, and practical next steps. In each session, the counsellor built on previously discussed topics and introduced additional questions depending on the number of prior sessions and the student's year group. Between November 2024 and May 2025, 531 students participated in 982 counselling sessions. A descriptive summary of these data is presented in a programme report (Caminor Foundation, 2025). As one school is boys-only, the dataset reflects a gender imbalance.

Data collection and analysis

Data derive from routine documentation produced during counselling sessions rather than interviews conducted specifically for research purposes. After each session, counsellors recorded structured summaries in a digital logging system used for programme monitoring and continuity of care. Records included demographic information, stated aspirations, perceived barriers, family influence, and agreed next steps.

Anonymised administrative data were reviewed using descriptive and inductive approaches. Patterns in aspirations were identified, and counsellor notes were examined to explore recurring ethical tensions. Themes were not predetermined but emerged through iterative reading and discussion. The analysis is exploratory and interpretive rather than statistically inferential. This article should therefore be understood as a practice-based reflective analysis of administrative data rather than a formal empirical research study.

Small-state context and implications for guidance design

Although Sierra Leone's population exceeds eight million, it shares structural features identified in small-state research on career guidance. Sultana (2006) argues that in economically concentrated states, limited labour market diversification, high occupational visibility, and restricted internal mobility intensify competition for a narrow range of elite roles. Sierra Leone's formal economy absorbs only a small proportion of school leavers, while professional pathways remain highly concentrated and socially prestigious. In such contexts, aspiration is shaped not only by personal interest but by the structure of opportunity itself, amplifying the gap between ambition and feasibility.

Sultana (2006) also observes that in many small states, career guidance is frequently incorporated into teachers' responsibilities rather than delivered by specialised counsellors, reflecting limited institutional capacity and resource constraints. In Sierra Leone, career guidance is formally recognised in The Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act (Government of Sierra Leone, 2023), which affirms the importance of counselling and guidance within secondary education.

However, legislative recognition has not yet translated into systematic implementation in schools. Where guidance is left to subject teachers, effective delivery requires labour market knowledge and counselling competence that cannot simply be assumed across teaching staff. In practice, structured provision remains limited. The pilot therefore prioritised sustained individual counselling by trained practitioners rather than classroom-based or teacher-led activities. In a constrained environment, deeper engagement at the individual level was necessary to support informed decision-making in ways that generic career lessons could not achieve.

The role and ethical positioning of the career counsellor

Career counsellors occupy a position of ethical weight. They are often among the few adults whose role is to discuss the future without assessment or discipline.

Counsellors act as interpreters of complex systems—educational requirements, training pathways, labour market realities—that are largely opaque to students and families. Even when counsellors explicitly avoid directive advice, students may still attribute authority to their words. Ethical practice therefore requires continuous attention to influence, not only intention.

There is also a risk that counsellors become informal substitutes for absent policy infrastructure. When counselling compensates for missing labour market information, weak transition systems, or limited post-school support, ethical responsibility can become blurred. The pilot deliberately frames counsellors as facilitators of thinking, not planners of outcomes, but this boundary must be actively maintained.

Acknowledging counsellor positionality is therefore central to ethical practice. It requires humility about what counselling can achieve, clarity about what it cannot, and reflexivity about how power operates even in ostensibly non-directive interactions.

The pilot operates in the absence of a formalised national career education curriculum, comprehensive labour market information systems accessible to schools, or established post-school transition structures. In this context, counsellors frequently compensate for systemic gaps that would elsewhere be distributed across institutions. This further intensifies the ethical complexity of their role.

Early patterns in student aspirations

Several consistent patterns emerged across counselling sessions. Student aspirations clustered strongly around a limited number of high-status professions. Careers in the health sector—particularly becoming a medical doctor—were dominant, with engineering and technology-related roles also frequently cited. These preferences reflect perceived prestige and associations with stability and upward mobility.

Interest in teaching as a profession was notably low, despite the country's need for qualified educators. This may reflect occupational prestige hierarchies, whereby roles perceived as offering limited economic mobility are excluded early in the aspiration process (Gottfredson, 2002). The pattern therefore signals broader social valuation of professions rather than isolated individual preference.

Entrepreneurship was frequently mentioned but often framed as a secondary option should university plans not materialise. This positioning suggests both the scarcity of formal employment and a perceived hierarchy between professional careers and self-employment.

A smaller group of students initially described themselves as undecided. For these individuals, counselling sessions provided structured space to clarify interests, constraints, and possible pathways. In some cases, students refined or adjusted their plans after researching requirements or exploring related roles. Counselling did not consistently lead to changed aspirations—and nor should it. The ethical value often lay not in altering goals but in expanding understanding.

The gender distribution of participants reflects the inclusion of one boys-only school, resulting in a higher proportion of male students overall. Within the available data, aspirations towards medicine and engineering were more frequently expressed by male students, while female students more often articulated interest in health-related and socially oriented roles. Although not statistically representative, these patterns align with broader evidence that occupational aspirations are shaped by gendered socialisation and cultural expectations. In constrained labour markets, such norms may further influence how feasibility and desirability are perceived, underscoring the importance of gender awareness in career guidance practice.

Ethics, philosophies, and principles in constrained contexts

Ethical practice in career guidance is shaped not only by philosophical ideas but by professional frameworks. The International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG, 2025) sets out globally applicable ethical principles, including respect for dignity and autonomy, cultural sensitivity, social justice, and commitment to equity. These principles are articulated as universal standards, yet are largely framed through individualised concepts of self-direction and informed choice.

In Sierra Leone, where career decisions are deeply embedded in family expectations, communal obligations, and resource constraints, such principles require contextual interpretation rather than simple application. Respect for autonomy, for example, cannot be understood solely as individual self-determination but must be negotiated within relational and intergenerational dynamics.

The applicability of such guidelines in Sierra Leone cannot be assumed in abstract terms but must be examined through practice. For example, the IAEVG emphasis on respect for autonomy and client self-direction presupposes that career choice is primarily an individual decision. In the pilot, however, counsellors routinely encountered situations in which family expectations and communal obligations shaped aspirations as strongly as personal preference. Rather than treating this as a deviation from ethical norms, counsellors worked to interpret autonomy relationally, supporting students in articulating their own views while recognising the legitimacy of family involvement. In this sense, IAEVG principles were not rejected but enacted through local social realities.

The notion of informed choice presupposes the existence of meaningful alternatives. Sen's (1999) capability approach distinguishes between formal freedom and substantive opportunity: the right to choose is insufficient if realistically attainable options are severely restricted. Where access to tertiary education is limited and labour markets absorb few school leavers, the gap between aspiration and feasible opportunity is often considerable. Ethical career guidance in such settings cannot be confined to information provision but must attend to the real capabilities and constraints shaping students' futures. This does not negate autonomy but situates it within material constraints.

Ethical reflections from practice

Aspiration and feasibility

Encouraging aspiration while acknowledging structural constraint remains a central ethical tension. Optimism and ambition can be motivationally important, yet affirming highly improbable pathways risks fostering expectations unlikely to be realised. Supporting aspiration must therefore be coupled with realistic appraisal of available opportunities. Ethical practice involves holding possibility and feasibility in tension—neither extinguishing ambition nor ignoring material limits.

Neutrality, influence, and responsibility

Non-directiveness is widely regarded as a professional principle, but neutrality is difficult where constraints are predictable. When a student relies on a single unlikely pathway, inaction may itself shape the trajectory. In response, counsellors adopted structured challenge—encouraging research, exploration of adjacent roles, and discussion with family members—seeking to balance respect for agency with responsible engagement.

Family, prestige, and social pressure

Career decision-making in Sierra Leone is deeply relational. Family expectations and social prestige strongly influence aspirations, and some students report pressure to pursue particular professions irrespective of personal interest. Counselling therefore often involves supporting students in navigating these dynamics rather than treating career choice as purely individual. Dominant guidance models, often grounded in individualised notions of autonomy, may insufficiently account for such relational contexts. Ethical practice in this setting requires recognising that agency is exercised within family and community networks.

Entrepreneurship and risk

Entrepreneurship is frequently presented as a response to youth unemployment, yet it transfers economic risk to individuals. Counsellors approached it cautiously, emphasising small-scale experimentation and incremental learning rather than idealised narratives of success.

Limits of the pilot and unresolved ethical questions

The pilot operates within clear structural limits. The data reflect a short time horizon, an urban sample, and early-stage counselling relationships. Career counselling cannot expand university places, diversify labour markets, or resolve structural unemployment.

As Watts (2009) cautions, guidance interventions cannot compensate for systemic economic constraints. Where policy infrastructures are weak, counselling risks managing expectations rather than expanding opportunity. Recognising these limits prevents overstating the transformative potential of guidance alone.

Important questions remain. Does early counselling mitigate later frustration or merely postpone it? How should practitioners respond when aspirational pathways repeatedly fail?

Framing the programme as a learning system rather than a finished model allows such questions to remain open and underscores the iterative nature of ethical practice.

Implications and concluding reflections

Early reflections from this pilot suggest that career counselling in highly constrained contexts requires greater ethical attentiveness, not lower expectations. Principles such as informed choice, autonomy, and neutrality remain vital, but must be interpreted in light of structural realities rather than assumed universality.

For practitioners, this means accepting ethical discomfort as part of professional responsibility. For policymakers, it underscores the importance of introducing career guidance early, before aspirations harden without reference to feasibility. For the wider field, it highlights the value of learning from contexts where constraint is explicit rather than implicit.

The reflections presented here suggest that career guidance in small states may face intensified versions of tensions familiar elsewhere: limited diversification magnifies aspiration–feasibility gaps, and personalised networks complicate neutrality. Recognising the influence of scale allows ethical debates in career development to be situated within their structural context rather than framed solely as professional dilemmas.

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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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Measuring engagement with green guidance: Validation of new instruments and a mediation model

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Abstract

This article validates two instruments which measure careers practitioners' engagement with green guidance (GG) and their perception of clients' attitudes towards GG. Building on existing research on the relationship between career guidance and environmental/climate issues, it is a secondary inferential analysis of data collected within a practice-development project focused on GG amongst 666 European practitioners. Findings support these measures' validity, and suggest that practitioners' attitudes towards GG are influenced by their attitudes towards climate change, in which their perception of their clients' attitudes towards GG is a mediator. Implications are discussed, aiming to support practitioners' reflections on their own attitudes and practices.

Keywords: environment; green guidance; career education and guidance; psychometric measure; validation

Introduction

There is a scientific consensus that there is an environmental crisis caused by human activities, and which is already having a major effect on the functioning of human life

(IPCC, 2023). The effects of climate change are expected to increase throughout the next century, with temperatures rising to at least 2.5C above pre-industrial levels, and being felt in all spheres of human life, including increased exposure to extreme weather, worsening global health, food shortages, increased migration and changes to work, education and leisure (Carrington, 2024).

The facts of the environmental crisis are sobering and there is a concern that policymakers, businesses and the general population are failing to engage with these problems in sufficiently robustly with potentially disastrous consequences (Hooley et al., 2024). The only good news is that the causes of, and potential solutions to, climate change are well understood, and a range of policies and technologies have been developed which have the potential to slow, mitigate and ultimately reverse climate change (OECD, 2023). Enacting such approaches requires major policy shifts, accompanied by changes in attitudes and actions from a variety of social actors. At present this is not happening on the scale that is needed (IPCC, 2023).

While the green transition will require changes in almost every aspect of life, there is a strong case to be made that the sphere of the labour market will be critical (Cedefop, 2023). The changes associated with climate change as well as green transition policies are likely to impact the mix of roles in the global economy and the skills and training that are needed (Consoli et al., 2016; ILO, 2016).

The recognition that the labour market and educational and occupational choice making are in a dynamic relationship with a changing climate has implications for career development (Kennedy-Moore, 2021; McMahon & Knight, 2024; Rosenthal et al., 2024). Careers unfold within a changing context which is shaped by environmental shifts and that the way in which people manage their careers has profound implications for the environment. This is an important area for further research, but in this article, we want to focus on the role of career guidance in supporting individuals to engage with these issues.

Hooley et al. (2018, p.20) argue that:

> Career guidance supports individuals and groups to discover more about work, leisure and learning and to consider their place in the world and plan for their futures.

They go on to note that such activities use a wider variety of approaches (counselling, classroom learning, information provision, work-related learning), are referred to using a wide variety of terminologies (career development, guidance counselling, vocational guidance) and that they draw on a variety of theoretical traditions. Given the role that career guidance plays in helping individuals and groups to find their place in the world and consider how they are going to engage with the future, guidance practice cannot ignore a phenomenon such as climate change. Rather, as the climate crisis worsens, it is very likely that guidance will be asked to engage with environmental issues further by clients struggling to make sense of these issues and to live their lives and careers in an environmentally sustainable way. Policymakers and funders of guidance services who are keen to utilise guidance as a technology to bring about a greening of the labour market are also likely to ask careers practitioners to engage with these issues more substantially.

There has been discussion about the role of career guidance in addressing issues associated with climate, sustainability and the environment since the 1990s (Bakke et al., 2024). Plant (1996; 2021) has proposed the idea of 'green guidance' (GG) as an approach through which career guidance practice can address climate change and other issues of sustainability. Other writers have also engaged with these ideas either building on Plant's work or proposing alternative approaches to environmentally focused forms of career guidance (Di Fabio & Bucci, 2016; Guichard, 2022; Rochat, 2024).

As the theorisation of GG has developed, greater clarity has emerged around issues such as what counselling and pedagogic approaches might best be used to deliver GG (Nuttall, 2024; Personen, 2023; Tacchini et al., 2024), how to address ethical issues in GG (Kavková & Šprlák, 2024), and how to train careers practitioners in the use of GG (Grant, 2024). However, despite the energy that is evident in this field, the evidence suggests that GG still has some way to go in order to fully cross into practice. A recent descriptive survey of European guidance practitioners, on which the current study builds, concluded that only around a third of practitioners are practising any form of GG, with a similar amount still unaware of the concept (Hooley et al., 2024). Moreover, these preliminary findings suggested that the overwhelming majority of practitioners (84%) found the idea of GG appealing, though in the qualitative comments some mentioned ethical concerns around impartiality and client centredness.

If GG is to become a reality, then it is critical for career development practitioners to feel confident in what it is, competent to deliver it and able to align new 'green' practices with existing guidance practices, ethics and frameworks. Recent work by Lucas Casanova et al. (2025) has set out a handbook of GG practices which emphasise the importance of working with individuals and groups to raise awareness of environmental issue and develop a sense of individual and collective agency to deliver change, as well as engaging with more systemic forms of action like brokerage, advocacy, lobbying and system change.

Despite the growing body of research and practice on GG, there is at present no robust way in which career development practitioners' engagement with this area can be measured. Ginevra et al. (2024) have developed a useful instrument which assesses 'Activism toward Social and Environmental Sustainability for Career Construction'. Despite its value, this instrument focuses on measuring how career development professionals act in their role as citizens – e.g., staying informed of the issues, promoting environmental sustainability and justice within their organisations. This leaves a gap for an instrument that is able to measure career development professionals' engagement with GG.

This article presents the process of validation of two new instruments focused on practitioners' attitudes to GG, and their perceptions of clients' attitudes to GG; and the findings of a mediation model to understand what may contribute to practitioners' likelihood of engaging with GG, and the role of the above-mentioned practitioners' ethical concerns. This makes an original contribution to the literature and offers valuable new instruments that can be used in the training and evaluation of GG practice (openly accessible in supplementary materials[1]).

1 Supplementary materials to this article have been published at https://ined.hub.ese.ipp.pt/items/show/68 this includes additional tables setting out further statistical details that underpin this article.

Methods

This study conducts secondary inferential analyses of data collected within a practice development project funded by the European Union – *Exploring Green Guidance*. Within this project European guidance practitioners were surveyed to build a baseline picture of career practitioners' engagement with GG through a descriptive analysis (Hooley et al., 2024). It was decided to explore if the items generated for the survey could provide the basis for two new psychometric instruments. This article presents the process of validation of these two scales (study 1); and an exploratory mediation model (study 2).

Hence, our research objectives were to:

1. validate a psychometric measure focused on practitioners' attitudes to GG;
2. validate a psychometric measure focused on practitioners' perceptions of their clients' attitudes to GG; and
3. explore the relationships between these variables and practitioners' perceptions of climate change (Van Valkengoed & Perlaviciute, 2021) through a mediation model.

We hypothesise that practitioners' attitudes towards GG may be influenced by their attitudes towards climate change. Moreover, a mediation model was tested to explore if practitioners' perceptions of their clients' attitudes towards climate change function as a mediator between practitioners' climate change attitudes and their attitudes to GG. Through this mediation model we aim to explore the role of practitioners' ethical concerns.

Procedures

The items included in the survey were developed based on a literature review on GG (Bakke et al., 2024). They were originally developed in English and were discussed with a panel of experts in the area. Subsequently, these items were translated to Czech, Slovak, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, and French, and interviews were conducted with practitioners to assess the clarity and accessibility of the translated items, reviewing them when necessary to assess facial and content validity through the interpretation and formulation of items.

The survey was assessed and ethical approval was obtained from the Norwegian National Research Ethics. The sample was collected through an online platform that was disseminated among institutions that employ career practitioners, professional organisations, and through snowballing in the Czech Republic, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, UK, France and the wider European careers community. Participants could select which language they wanted to answer the survey in.

Participants

The sample is composed of 666 career practitioners. Table 1 presents the sample characterisation for professional and sociodemographic variables. Regional origin was coded based on countries of origin to allow for a more balanced analysis of data. It is worth mentioning that most Portuguese practitioners identified as psychologists since this is the academic qualification necessary for career counsellors in the country (and so it is perceived as their main professional identity), while most participants from other countries identified as careers practitioners.

Considering that the sample was randomly divided to conduct Exploratory Factor Analyses (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFA), a chi-square test was performed to assess the existence of significant differences between these samples. No significant differences between these samples were found for Professional Role, Country of Origin and

Geographical Region of origin. Significant differences were found for the sectors in which practitioners work, with a small effect size of 0.14.

Table 1. Sample characterisation for the complete sample, EFA sample and CFA sample.

Variable	Categories	Complete Sample		EFA Sample		CFA Sample		Sample Comparison
								X2 (df); p value
		n	%	n	%	n	%	
Professional Role	Careers practitioner	265	39.8	132	39.6	133	40	12.74 (10); p=.239
	Psychologist	90	13.5	43	12.9	47	14	
	Counsellor in school sector	46	6.9	30	9.0	16	4.8	
	Teacher / educator	83	12.5	42	12.6	41	12	
	Youth worker / social worker	6	0.9	2	0.6	4	1.2	
	Public employment service officer	53	8.0	27	8.1	26	7.8	
	Manager / Leader	40	6.0	16	4.8	24	7.2	
	Academic / Researcher	25	3.8	13	3.9	12	3.6	
	Expert	20	3.0	9	2.7	11	3.3	
	Policymaker	5	0.8	0	0.0	5	1.5	
	Other	33	5.0	19	5.7	14	4.2	
Sector	Schools	205	30.8	106	31.9	99	30	13.26 (5); p=.02
	Vocational education and training (VET)	95	14.3	35	10.6	60	18	
	Higher education (HE)	101	15.2	55	16.5	46	14	
	Public employment services (PES)	111	16.7	53	16	58	17	
	Private practice	48	7.2	29	8.7	19	5.7	
	Other	105	15.8	54	16.2	51	15	
Country of origin	Czech Republic	52	7.8	29	8.7	23	6.9	16.62 (10); p=.08
	Norway	48	7.2	25	7.5	23	6.9	
	Poland	90	13.5	42	12.7	48	14	
	Portugal	106	15.9	58	17.5	48	14	
	Slovakia	95	14.3	49	14.8	46	14	
	UK	53	8.0	26	7.8	27	8.1	
	France	81	12.2	27	8.1	54	16	
	Denmark	43	6.5	19	5.7	24	7.2	
	Italy	48	7.2	25	7.5	23	6.9	
	Switzerland	22	3.3	15	4.5	7	2.1	
	Other	27	4.1	17	5.1	10	3	
Region	Nordic Europe	100	15.0	51	15.3	49	15	2.63 (3); p=.453
	Eastern European	244	36.6	125	37.5	119	36	
	Central European	214	32.1	98	29.4	116	35	
	Southern Europe	108	16.2	59	17.7	49	15	

Note. Complete Sample N=666; EFA Sample N=333; 1 missing values. for Country; 1 missing value. for sector; CFA Sample N=333; n= frequency; % = Percentage.

Measures

Sociodemographic survey

As an exploratory project that aimed to reach a wide group of European practitioners, sociodemographic questions were kept to a minimum to reduce the length of the survey. So, questions focused on variables that could characterise participants professionally, such as their professional role, the sector in which they worked, and their countries.

Climate Change Perceptions Short Scale (Van Valkengoed & Perlaviciute, 2021)

The Climate Change Perceptions Short Scale is a unidimensional scale that addresses five components of Climate change perceptions (reality and causes of climate change, its perceived valence, and the spatial and temporal distance of its consequences) through five items, answered through a 7 points Likert scale between 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 7 (Strongly Agree). It was developed through a thorough process of validation that confirmed its internal consistency, convergent, predictive and discriminant validity, along with measurement invariance for gender and political orientation. Validation procedures were conducted for the present sample and are presented in the results section.

Practitioners' Attitudes to GG Scale

A pool of items was created to explore practitioners' attitudes to GG, leading to the following items: I find the idea of guidance actively addressing issues of climate change and environmental sustainability (GG) appealing; I believe that career development should help people to meet their current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs; I believe that helping clients to achieve more environmentally sustainable work and lifestyles should be one of the objectives of career guidance; I am already practicing GG.

The development of items followed common standards for scale development, creating univocal, specific and clear sentences (Clark & Watson, 1995), as previously presented in procedures. Data was collected through a 5 points Likert scale between 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 5 (Strongly Agree). Therefore, higher scores reflect a higher level of engagement with GG, which can vary from attitudinal support to putting it into practice. However, it does not allow us to assess if practitioners have received adequate training to put it into practice, solely their attitudes to its place in career guidance and counselling. Validation procedures and results will be presented in the following section.

Perceptions of Clients' Attitudes to GG Scale

The development of this scale followed the same procedures and steps. It is composed of three items (My clients raise issues to do with the climate or the environment when making career choices; My clients are keen to find environmentally sustainable work; My clients are keen to live environmentally sustainable lifestyles) answered through a 5 point Likert scale between 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 5 (Strongly Agree).

Data analyses

To validate these scales, it was decided to randomly divide the sample into two datasets and use one sample for EFA and the other sample for CFA. These were conducted as a two-step necessary process for the validation of new psychometric scales with independent samples, in which EFA allows the initial exploration of a latent structure and items' loading, and CFA tests this hypothesised structure and confirms it through a stricter validity assessment. Subsequent analyses used the complete sample.

IBM SPSS Statistics 29 was used to perform descriptive and correlational analyses, as well as EFA. JAMOVI 2.5.3 was used to perform confirmatory factor analyses, multi-group invariance analyses and mediational analyses. Analyses using SPSS excluded missing values cases' pairwise, while for CFA and Invariance Analyses, missing values were imputed using regression analysis using the expectation-maximisation technique.

The sensitivity of all items of the scales was assessed through descriptive statistics to assert the fulfilment of basic assumptions for EFA and structural equation modelling (SEM). Table A in supplementary materials presents these results for means, SD, range, skewness and kurtosis. Moreover, correlations between all items were explored, which can also be analysed in Supplementary materials (Table B).

This was an exploratory study and some items showed problematic scores of skewness and kurtosis (Kline, 2005), mostly the first item of the Climate Change Perceptions short scale (van Valkengoed & Perlaviciute, 2021). These were taken into account for the exploratory analyses of these scales. Results for this scale seem to be skewed towards agreeing with the 'reality' of climate change, which represents social and scientific discourses on this and so, these were considered to be acceptable. Besides this issue, no serious violations in terms of normality, linearity, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices and multicollinearity were found both in this scale and others. Considering the patterns of outliers, all were kept in the analyses. Further preliminary results of the process of EFA and CFA can be consulted in supplementary materials, as well as the final scales' means, standard deviations and correlations.

Results

Study 1: Validation of the scales

Practitioners' Attitudes to GG Scale

Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) was performed to test a reflective model of this scale, assuming the existence of correlations between items and underlying latent causes (Boorsboom, 2006), and that it is composed by a single factor. Results from PAF showed low to moderate correlations between items, confirming the unidimensionality of the scale (Clark & Watson, 1995), and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) result was acceptable (.700), though the Bartlett's sphericity test was significant (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996/2007). Eigenvalues above 1 and the scree plot suggested one or potentially two factors, in which all items are retained with a conservative exclusion criterion of .30.

Therefore, a CFA with Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS) , as suggested by the literature for ordinal variables (Finney et al., 1998), was performed for one factor with all the items to refine the scale. The model achieved a suffering quality of adjustment considering the following indices (Model A): $\chi 2/df = 8.12$, CFI = .89, TLI = .78; RMSEA = .146; P[rmsea<= 0.05]< .001]; SRMR= .092. Analysing factor loadings, and their R-Square and so, how each item contributes to the latent variable, it was decided to eliminate item 1. The model was then tested, achieving good quality of adjustment (Model B): $\chi 2/df = 1.69$, CFI =

.99, TLI = .98; RMSEA = .046; P[rmsea<= 0.05]= .422; SRMR= .031. Item's standardized regression weights are acceptable, supporting the quality of local adjustment with values between .38 and .79. Table 2 presents results from Model A and Model B.

After confirming the scale's internal structure validity, considering that data were collected in different languages and regions, a multi-group invariance analysis was conducted to corroborate the factor structure for participants from different regions in sequential steps, as suggested in the literature – configural, metric, scalar, strict and structural invariance (Maroco, 2014). Since the Δ χ2 test (and respective p value) is dependent on sample size and has been questioned as a worthy measure to test invariance in large samples and models with different levels of quality or adjustment (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002), other indices were also explored to assess the invariance of the scale, focusing on Δ CFI (< or equal to -.01), Δ RMSEA (< .015), and Δ Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) < .025 (Chen, 2007; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). These procedures were used for all scales under analysis. Multigroup (MG) invariance tests for this scale are presented in Table 3, and seem to suggest configural and metric invariance, considering the Δ χ2 test p value, Δ CFI, Δ RMSEA, showing the potential of the scale by confirming the scale's factor structure and factor loadings' invariance.

Table 2. Goodness of Fit Indices for CFA for all the scales used

	CFA (N=333)								
	χ 2(df)	p	χ2/ df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	LO 90	HI 90	PCLOSE
Practitioners' attitudes to GG Scale (Model A)	40.6 (5)	< .001	8.12	0.89	0.78	.146	0.107	0.190	< .001
Practitioners' attitudes to GG Scale (Model B)	3.38 (2)	.185	1.69	0.99	0.98	.046	.000	.127	.422
Clients' Attitudes to Sustainability Issues in Relation to Work Scale	8.89 (2)	.012	4.45	.97	.96	.102	.041	.174	.076

Note. χ2 = Chi-Square; df = degrees of freedom; p = P-value; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; LO 90 = lower limit of a 90% confidence interval for the population value of RMSEA; HI 90 = upper limit of a 90% confidence interval for the population value of RMSEA.; PCLOSE = RMSEA P-value.

Perceptions of Clients' Attitudes to GG Scale

An EFA was performed through PAF, reaching moderate correlations between items and an acceptable KMO (.704), with eigenvalues above 1 and the scree plot suggesting one factor in which the three items were retained with a conservative exclusion criterion of .30 and acceptable levels of communalities (.54 to .76) and item loadings (.74 to .87).

Subsequently, a CFA was performed using DWLS estimation. Given that this model is composed of three items, initial results showed a saturated model due to having only three free parameters. Therefore, it was necessary to add another constraint to the model. Despite satisfactory results in terms of CFI and TLI, χ2 and RMSEA advise caution and so this scale should be improved: χ2/df = 4.45, CFI = .97, TLI = 0.96; RMSEA = .102; P[rmsea<= 0.05]= .076; SRMR=.059. Item's standardised regression weights support the quality of local adjustment through adequate results between .62 and .89. Table 2 presents goodness of fit results for this scale.

Table 3. Models' Comparison for Invariance tests for the Practitioners' Attitudes to GG Scale

Invariance level	Definition	Model	$\chi 2$	df	$\Delta\ \chi 2$	Δ df	p	CFI	RMSEA	Δ CFI	Δ RMSEA	Δ SRMR
Configural invariance	Same factor structure	M1	6.55	8			.586	1.00	.000			
Metric invariance	Same factor structure and factor loadings	M2-M1	15.8	17	9.25	9	.537	1.00	.000	0	0	.027
Scalar invariance	Same factor structure, factor loadings and intercepts	M3-M2	49	26	33.2	9	.004	0.945	.073	-.055	.073	.025
Error variance invariance	Same factor structure, factor loadings and error variances	M4-M3	65.3	38	16.3	12	.004	0.934	.066	-.011	-.007	.021
Structural invariance	Same factor structure, factor loadings, error variances and factors' covariance	M5-M4	124	41	58.7	3	< .001	0.80	0.11	-.134	.045	.043

Note. $\chi 2$ = Chi-Square; df = degrees of freedom; $\Delta\ \chi 2$ = difference between model's $\chi 2$; Δ df = difference between models' df; p = P-value; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; Δ CFI = difference between model's CFI's; Δ RMSEA = difference between model's RMSEA; Δ SRMR = difference between model's standardized root mean square residuals; M1 to M5 = Models tested.

Subsequently, MG invariance analyses were performed according to the region of origin of participants, presented in Table 4. Though the Δ χ2 test p value is significant in all steps, taking into account Δ CFI, Δ RMSEA and Δ SRMR, results support scalar invariance, while the Δ CFI may suggest strict invariance. Thus, results support the scale's factor structure and factor loadings' invariance. However, as Maroco (2014) states strict invariance is not generally necessary for comparing groups and it is often not found, along with structural invariance.

Table 4. Models' Comparison for Invariance tests for the Perceptions of Clients' Attitudes to GG Scale

	Definition		**χ2**	**df**	**Δ χ2**	**Δ df**	**p**	**CFI**		**Δ CFI**	**Δ RMSEA**	**Δ SRMR**
Configural invariance	Same factor structure	M1		8			.025	.98	.085			
Metric invariance	Same factor structure and factor loadings	M2-M1		14	10.6	6	.014	0.97	.078	.009	-.007	.012
Scalar invariance	Same factor structure, factor loadings and intercepts	M3-M2		14	0	0	.014	0.97	.078	0	0	0
Error variance invariance	Same factor structure, factor loadings and error variances	M4-M3		23	8.3	9	.038	.98	.059	.002	-.019	.017
Structural invariance	Same factor structure, factor loadings, error variances and factors' covariance	M5-M4		26	20.2	3		0.94	.084	-.032	.025	.022

Note. χ2 = Chi-Square; df = degrees of freedom; Δ χ2 = difference between model's χ2; Δ df = difference between models' df; p = P-value; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; Δ CFI = difference between model's CFI's; Δ RMSEA = difference between model's RMSEA; Δ SRMR = difference between model's standardized root mean square residuals; M1 to M5 = Models tested.

Table 5. Models' Comparison for Invariance tests for the Climate Change Perceptions short scale (van Valkengoed & Perlaviciute, 2021)

Invariance level	Definition	Model	χ2	df	Δ χ2	Δ df	p	CFI	RMSEA	Δ CFI	Δ RMSEA	Δ SRMR
Configural invariance	Same factor structure	M1	0.397	8			1	1.00	.000			
Metric invariance	Same factor structure and factor loadings	M2-M1	8.74	17	8.34	9	.948	1.00	.000	0	0	.056
Scalar invariance	Same factor structure, factor loadings and intercepts	M3-M2	19	26	10.26	9	.834	1.00	.000	0	0	.013
Error variance invariance	Same factor structure, factor loadings and error variances	M4-M3	36.9	38	17.9	12	.52	1.00	.000	0	0	.06
Structural invariance	Same factor structure, factor loadings, error variances and factors' covariance	M5-M4	269	41	232.1	3	< .001	.16	.183	.84	.183	.226

Note. χ2 = Chi-Square; df = degrees of freedom; Δ χ2 = difference between model's χ2; Δ df = difference between models' df; p = P-value; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; Δ CFI = difference between model's CFI's; Δ RMSEA = difference between model's RMSEA; Δ SRMR = difference between model's standardized root mean square residuals; M1 to M5 = Models tested.

Climate Change Perceptions short scale (van Valkengoed & Perlaviciute, 2021)

Considering that the Climate Change Perceptions short scale (van Valkengoed & Perlaviciute, 2021) is a validated scale, an EFA and CFA were conducted, following best-practice, to ensure the scale's validity and reliability with a specific target group (career practitioners) and other languages. These results can be found in supplementary materials.

Regarding MG invariance tests, according to the abovementioned indices, results for this scale seem to support configural, metric, and scalar invariance, considering Δ $\chi 2$ test p value, Δ CFI, and Δ RMSEA, with confidence (Table 5), confirming the scale's factor structure, factor loadings, and intercepts among participants from different European areas.

Reliability of the scales under analysis

The scales' internal consistency was assessed through Cronbach alpha and McDonald's Omega coefficients, as well as through composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). Cronbach, McDonald's Omega, CR and AVE results for the Climate change perceptions short scale (van Valkengoed & Perlaviciute. 2021) and for the Perceptions of Clients' Attitudes to GG Scale achieved satisfactory values, while the Practitioners' Attitudes to GG Scale achieved acceptable results for exploratory research (Hair et al., 1998), providing support for construct validity of these new scales. Table 6 presents these results for all scales under analysis.

Nonetheless, the Practitioners' Attitudes to GG Scale should be developed to improve its psychometric qualities, though these results seem acceptable for exploratory research, with a CR over 0.6 and an AVE of almost 0.4 (Borsboom et al., 2004; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Besides this scales' Cronbach and McDonald's Omega reaching acceptable coefficients, inter-item correlation for this scale, after eliminating item 1, fits recommended results according to Briggs and Cheek (1986). These results, along with standardised regression weights provide support for the scales' convergent validity. Additionally, each scale's discriminant validity was assessed by comparing their AVE to the square of correlations between the scales. All these results were lower to the AVE of the scales, supporting the scales' discriminant validity.

Table 6. Construct Reliability and Validity for the scales under analysis

Scales	α (n=674)	McDonald's Omega	N. Items	CR	AVE
Climate change perceptions short scale (van Valkengoed & Perlaviciute. 2021)	.86	.86	4	.86	.61
Practitioners' Attitudes to GG Scale	.70	.71	4	.73	.39
Perceptions of Clients' Attitudes to GG Scale	.80	. 81	3	.81	.58

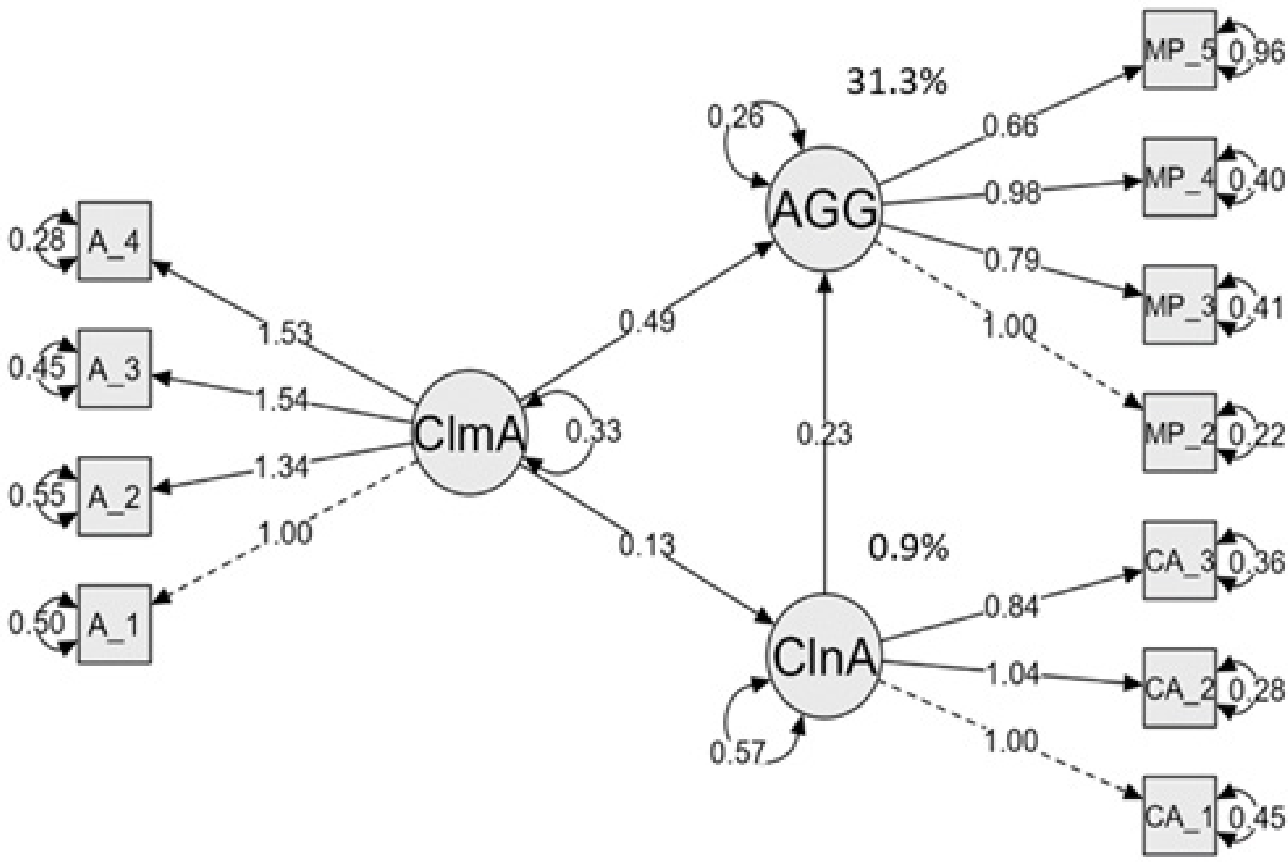
Note. α: Coefficient Cronbach Alpha; RC: reliability composite; AVE=average variance extracted.

Study 2: Mediation model measuring practitioners' engagement with GG

This study explored if practitioners' attitudes towards GG are associated with their attitudes towards climate change, and if practitioners' perceptions of their clients' attitudes towards climate change statistically mediate this association testing a theoretical model through SEM. Moreover, the following findings provide evidence for the Practitioners' Attitudes to GG scale and the Perceptions of Clients' Attitudes to GG scale convergent and divergent validity, furthering evidence for these scales' validity.

A mediation model was tested through DWLS considering that the scales are composed of ordinal variables. As a cross-sectional study, the directional paths here presented are interpreted as theoretically informed correlations, not causal effects. The model achieved good quality of adjustment considering the following indices: $\chi 2/df = 2.31$, CFI =.97, TLI = .96; RMSEA = .044; P[rmsea ≤ 0.05] = .78. Figure 1 presents these results, showing that Practitioners' Climate Change perceptions are significantly positively associated ($\beta=.49$; $p< .001$) with their Attitudes to GG and are positively linked ($\beta=.13$; $p< .001$) with Perceptions of Clients' attitudes to GG. On the other hand, Perceptions of Clients' Attitudes to GG have a significant direct positive association ($\beta=.23$; $p< .001$) with Practitioners' Attitudes to GG.

Figure 1. Model of associations between practitioners' climate change perceptions, perceptions of clients' attitudes, and attitudes to GG (direct effects represent standardised path coefficients). *ClmA – Climate change perceptions short scale; ClnA – Perceptions of Clients' Attitudes to GG Scale; AGG – Practitioners' Attitudes to GG Scale*



The model explains 31.3% of the variance of positive attitudes towards GG, and it explains 0.9% of the variance of perceptions of clients' attitudes towards climate change. Moreover, Practitioners' perceptions of their clients' attitudes to GG functions as a mediator between practitioners' climate change attitudes and their attitudes to GG through a significant indirect positive effect (β=.03; $p < .001$). There is a significant positive total effect (β=.52; $p < .001$).

These results suggest that practitioners' attitudes to climate change (as a negative reality, with human causes, with proximal consequences in terms of time and space) are positively associated to their openness to GG through a large effect size (β =.49), commonly described above .5 according to Cohen (1988), which means that for a one-point increase in the mean score regarding climate change perceptions, is associated an estimated increase of 0.5 SD in practitioners' attitudes to GG (standardised for these scales' metrics).

Practitioners' Climate Change Attitudes also associate with their perceptions of clients' attitudes to GG through a small effect size (β =.13), suggesting they may be more attentive to these concerns in their clients (Cohen, 1988). Subsequently, practitioners' Perceptions of Clients' Attitudes to GG as concerned with climate change regarding their career decisions, have a positive association with their openness to GG through an almost medium effect size (β =.23).

The fact that Climate Change Perceptions has a very small indirect positive effect on practitioners' attitudes to GG (0.9% of explained variance), mediated by their perceptions of clients' attitudes to GG suggests that practitioners' perceptions of clients' attitudes play a minimal mediating role in the relationship between climate change perceptions and attitudes towards GG.

Discussion

These studies provide support for the psychometric quality and validity of two new measures of career development practitioners' attitudes to GG. CFA results support the internal structure validity, construct and convergent validity of both new scales, and multi-group measurement invariance analysis according to participants' geographical regions of origin support Practitioners' Attitudes to GG metric invariance, and perceptions of clients' attitudes scalar invariance. Moreover, the correlations between these scales and the Climate Change Perceptions short scale (van Valkengoed & Perlaviciute, 2021) – in supplementary materials – corroborate the scales' divergent validity (which was also assessed through acceptable and good AVE results for the Practitioners' Attitudes to GG Scale and the Perceptions of Clients' Attitudes to GG Scale, respectively). The scales also presented acceptable reliability results based on Cronbach alpha, McDonald's Omega, and Composite Reliability, thus demonstrating their potential for combined use.

Given the emergent literature on GG discussed in the introduction to the article, these scales can become critical tools in understanding practitioners' engagement with GG and targeting training and other GG interventions (Bakke et al., 2024). Theorists and policy makers are united in the idea that career guidance should play a stronger role in the green transition of the labour market. However, at present engagement with these issues amongst practitioners remains limited. The opportunity to ascertain practitioner attitudes will be useful for those looking to identify where training and resources are needed and ascertain the effectiveness of their implementation. There has already been a range of work that has sought to measure engagement with environment issues in analogous fields such as teaching (Peedikayil et al., 2023), social work (Allen, 2020) and health professionals (Wei et al., 2014). Given this, it is important to measure engagement with environmental issues amongst career development practitioners and the measures validated in this study provide a mechanism for doing this.

However, the current measures remain emergent. Both scales would benefit from further validation studies with a variety of populations. There would also be value in strengthening the scales further through the addition of new and conceptually related items to ensure a stronger measure (Clark & Watson, 1995) and contribute to their reliability. Equally important is the need to develop or identify additional measures which can assess the strength of practice and wider propensity to environmentally positive citizenship (e.g., through the use of Ginevra et al., 2024). It will also be important to examine the impact of a wide range of demographics to understand further what supports engagement with GG, which constitutes one of the limitations of the present study.

The findings reported in study 2 are also of critical importance. However, SEM cannot offer causality without a longitudinal design. So, the hypothesised directionality between variables was guided through theory that suggests that individual environmental beliefs shape attitudes (e.g., Di Fabio & Bucci, 2016), providing the opportunity for testing the theoretical model through psychometric cross-sectional research (Maroco, 2014). Therefore, these findings must be further tested.

Firstly, and unsurprisingly results show that careers practitioners' likelihood of engaging with GG is underpinned by their general level of belief that climate change is a clear and present danger. This raises important issues about how GG can be developed as a practice when professional interventions are unlikely to shape someone's underlying beliefs about climate change (Hornsey et al., 2016). It also raises the question as to whether a positive attitude towards GG is sufficient to propel people to engage with, and develop, GG practices and what may mediate that relationship – e.g., access to training and resources; wider pro- (or anti-) environmental attitudes amongst peers, managers or funders.

The other main finding in study 2 is the role that practitioners' perceptions of their clients' engagement in environmental issues has. This mediational study (assessing the indirect effects of Climate Change Perceptions on Attitudes to GG, mediated through their Perceptions of Clients Attitudes to GG) allows a reflection on one of the concerns expressed by practitioners in preliminary results (Hooley et al., 2024): ethical concerns about introducing environmental issues into career counselling fearing it would tap into political issues that could bias intervention, undermine practitioners' neutrality by enforcing their views on their clients regarding climate change.

Findings show that the reality of climate change associates positively with being open to GG, and with perceiving clients as more open to GG. However, the weak effect size (β =.13) of Climate Change Perceptions on Perceptions of Clients Attitudes, only explaining 0.9% of variance in the latter's variation, may indicate that personal beliefs are not strongly projected onto perceptions of clients. This minimal mediation may suggest that practitioners' perceptions of clients' attitudes do not play a substantial role in shaping their openness to GG. Thus, perceptions of clients' attitudes may have a limited role in explaining practitioners' openness to GG.

This finding is particularly critical because of the centrality of the idea of person/client-centredness (Rogers, 1951) and a range of associated ideas such as non-directivity and impartiality to the practice of career guidance (Hooley, 2023; Kavková & Šprlák, 2024). Such approaches are what Watts (1996) describes as 'liberal' approaches which seek to minimise the substantive influence of the career development practitioner on the decision making of the individual, advancing the ideal of outcome neutrality for the practitioner. This raises ethical and paradigmatic concerns about whether supporting a normative value, such as environmental sustainability, is a legitimate thing to do in career guidance. Such ideas around person-centredness and practitioner neutrality have been critiqued for a variety of reasons, not least the philosophical question as to whether a position of neutrality really exists, particularly within unequal and hierarchical societies (Bassot, 2021; Hooley et al, 2018), but they clearly offer major challenges for 'GG' which is necessarily committed to a normative outcome.

Such challenges are philosophical in nature, and as both Watts (1996) and Sultana (2014) have argued there are a range of ideological positions from which guidance practice can proceed. GG is more typically associated with radical and emancipatory rationalities which view the purpose of guidance as being to promote critical consciousness and awareness of the various dimensions that influence career decision-making. Such approaches de-centre the individual and reconceptualise guidance more contextually by recognising the inter-dependence of individuals, communities and ecosystems. However, this does not mean that GG should be conceived as a normative top-down approach in which career guidance practitioners railroad their clients into choosing 'green' careers. Rather it might be more helpfully considered as a dialectical engagement in which outcomes are constructed by the client through the working relationship with the practitioner. The model discussed in study 2 provides insights that this may be what is happening in practice and that guidance practitioners' engagement with GG is driven, at least in part, by the needs of their clients who are also wrestling with these issues of climate crisis.

There have already been extensive philosophical debates about the nature of GG and how it fits into career guidance theories and practices. But, the voice of the practitioner has been noticeably absent. The development of measures such as those validated in this study offer one way for theorists to listen more carefully to where practitioners are and to explore the ways in which they come to those positions.

Conclusions

The measures developed in this article represent an important step forward in the discussions about GG. They offer a mechanism for deepening understanding of practitioners' positions and exploring the interaction between attitudes, practice and client needs. There would be value on building on this by strengthening these measures, exploring findings with different populations and examining their interaction with other measures such as Ginevra et al. (2024).

The instruments set out in this article might also be useful in supporting practitioners to reflect on their attitudes to, and competence in, GG. They may also prove to be useful tools in measuring the efficacy of initiatives which seek to develop careers practitioners' capacity to address GG.

It is clear that discussion about the climate and the environment more widely are not going to go away. Over the next decade careers practitioners should expect that the environmental context will become increasingly important to their clients, as they navigate a changing education and employment landscape. They should also anticipate that the funders of career guidance provision will increasingly emphasise the importance of green jobs and sustainability competencies. It is hoped that the measures and evidence presented in this article help to ensure that these new forms of practice remain evidence-based and ethical.

Statements and Declarations

Availability of Data and Material

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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General articles

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Rise High: An investigation of a pilot careers and skills development programme for young people in rural and semi-rural areas in Derbyshire

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Abstract

The Rise High programme, a collaboration between the University of Derby and the Chatsworth House Trust, explores a progressive, sustained approach to careers outreach with under-represented young people in rural and semi-rural areas. This case study examines emerging evaluation findings, showing early evidence that the programme has strengthened participants' understanding of career pathways over time and supported the development of skills and confidence. Impacts on university aspirations or motivation in current studies are less conclusive, highlighting potential for future programme development. The case study concludes by situating the programme within the local and wider political context of rurality and hidden disadvantage.

Keywords: career progression, outreach, rural careers England, widening participation, evaluation, measuring impact

Introduction

This qualitative case study explores the emerging findings from the Rise High programme, a progressive, sustained outreach initiative delivered to 28 participants in rural and semi-rural areas of Derbyshire. The programme is a collaborative venture led by the University of Derby's Widening Access (WA) team and the Chatsworth House Trust's Learning and Engagement (LE) team. This partnership has been established in recognition of shared objectives to create meaningful opportunities for local young people, with a particular focus on those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For the WA team, the emphasis lies in supporting progression to higher learning, whereas for the LE team, the priority is to facilitate access to the Chatsworth Estate and to enhance understanding of career pathways within the organisation. The collaboration brings together complementary expertise in widening participation, higher education progression, and evaluating outreach, and rural, heritage, and arts career pathways, enabling the development of innovative approaches to careers outreach for local young people.

The main aim of the Rise High programme is to deliver an engaging suite of activities focused on careers information, skills development, and confidence building to a group of young people from local rural and semi-rural areas. All participants meet one or more indicators of disadvantage, identified using the regulator of higher education provision for England, the Office for Students' (OfS), criteria for identifying under-represented groups in higher education (OfS, 2021).

This study is positioned within the political and social context associated with rurality and disadvantage, where 'hidden' deprivation is often overlooked (Local Government Association, 2017; Burke & Jones, 2019; Davies et al., 2021). Rural areas are often categorised as having low levels of deprivation due to the presence of a generally advantaged population spread over a wide geographic area, with statistically high numbers progressing to higher learning. This can mask small pockets of significant disadvantage, meaning that some young people in these areas may miss out on opportunities and support more readily available to their urban peers (IntoUniversity, 2015; Graham, 2024), particularly where specialist rural careers education is lacking (Commission for Rural Communities, 2012; ACRE, 2014; Alexander & Fuqua, 2024).

The motivation for developing the Rise High programme was to address entrenched social mobility, as perceived by the WA and LE teams in their local contexts, which is both prevalent and under-researched in rural contexts (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014; Corbett & Forsey, 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities, widening the attainment and progression gap between the most and least advantaged young people (Lally & Bermingham, 2020; Tuckett et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, the programme teams sought to provide a sustained, high-quality intervention tailored to local needs.

Literature Review

The main driver for the creation of the Rise High programme was the recognition from the WA and LE teams that they could apply their respective expert knowledge and resources to support the successful career progression of disadvantaged young people in local rural and semi-rural areas.

This, in part, was in recognition that rural disadvantage can often be hidden. This view is grounded in research which cites a number of reasons why this is the case, such as, a reluctance to reveal a need for support for cultural reasons (Local Government Association, 2017; Golestani et al., 2025), overall favourable averages in the health of the general local population masking a minority in poor health (National Centre for Rural Health and Care, 2022; Burke & Jones, 2019) and deprivation being viewed by those within the population only as a historical problem, as Woodward (1996) notes 'Historically, the vast majority of rural residents have lived in conditions of extreme hardship' (Woodward, 1996, p. 63) and therefore by comparison, due in part to general rises in living standards, modern rural deprivation is more concealed (Woodward, 1996). Milbourne backs this view highlighting a disconnect for those living in areas of rural disadvantage between the material and sociocultural aspects of their lived experience (Milbourne, 2014).

This 'hidden' disadvantage has a practical impact for organisations engaged in outreach, particularly careers and progression outreach, as often funding sources focus on areas where high levels of deprivation and disadvantage can be readily identified. IntoUniversity (2015), for example, report that most funders are biased towards urban needs, albeit unintentionally. This is due to a higher concentration of disadvantaged target groups within smaller geographic areas, meaning they can be reached more easily and with fewer resources. Rural areas, on the other hand, tend to include a wider social mix across a greater geographic area which makes it much harder, and more costly, to reach those who need support (IntoUniversity, 2015). Further still, Graham (2024) asserts that the inequality in funding of the urban versus the rural can be explained by the pervasive discourse that 'rural pupils outperform their urban peers' when, in fact, his analysis of attainment through a socio-economic deprivation (SED) lens found that 'the prevailing narrative of English rural overperformance in average data has hidden the underperformance of SED rural pupils from the political landscape' (Graham, 2024, p. 11). This evidence justifies the necessity for organisations such as the University of Derby and the Chatsworth House Trust that have a presence in rural communities to use their collective will and expertise to redress this balance.

When using the term 'disadvantage' an important part of the programme development is to understand what criteria were to be used. The main dataset used to identify participants is the English Indices of Multiple Deprivation (EIMD), an official measure of relative deprivation within small areas in England, developed by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and updated every 3-5 years (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019). A secondary dataset, POLAR4, also mapped postcodes of potential beneficiaries for the programme. This dataset measures levels of youth participation in higher education produced by the OfS using the English census data (OfS, 2022). Both datasets assess by geographic area and, ultimately, have both strengths and weaknesses. Zelenina et al. (2022) reviewed the use of deprivation indices across the world and noted the advantages as the breadth of the socio-economic and demographic indicators used within the indices, the ability to apply the indices to neighbourhood level, and, that the data is drawn from comprehensive sources such as a census. However, the disadvantages are the infrequency with which data is gathered, with often large timespans between data collection (Zelenina et al., 2022). Other authors, such as Harrison & Hatt (2010), Fecht et al. (2018) and Burke and Jones (2019) also note that the allocation of scores for an area being applied to every individual is problematic, an issue further exacerbated in rural localities, as deprivation can be isolated within small pockets which are difficult to identify within an allocated area unit (Harrison & Hatt, 2010; Fecht et al., 2018; Burke & Jones, 2019).

Moreover, measures used to identify 'disadvantage' spans more than socio-economic factors and can also include a number of demographic indicators, particularly when considering disadvantage and progression to university (Jerrim, 2021). Within higher education the term 'under-represented' is more commonly used than disadvantaged. The term 'under-represented' referring to individuals who meet certain criteria and who, by numbers of population, should be progressing and succeeding in higher education in greater numbers than they are (Davids, 2024). Consequently, for identification of participants for the programme, and therefore, also for the purposes of this study, other demographic categories of those 'under-represented' in higher education as classified by the OfS are also used. This includes those eligible for free school meals or pupil premium, disabled students, or care-experienced students (OfS, 2021).

This lack of progression amongst under-represented groups can be quite stark. Comparison figures from the OfS show that in 2022/23 whilst 30% of young people (21 and under) progressed to higher education from high progression areas, this reduces significantly to 13% for those living in areas of least progression (OfS, 2024). A range of reasons for this lack of progression has been proposed, which reference in particular the structural barriers that disadvantaged and under-represented groups may face, including insufficient advice and support, prior attainment, and financial concerns (Bolton & Lewis, 2025). Access to high quality information is vital in supporting progression of disadvantaged and under-represented groups as these students are less likely to access formal sources of information themselves (Pickering, 2021). They also require clear and easily accessible information appropriate for themselves and their circumstances (Pickering, 2021). If that can be achieved, high quality information can positively influence their intentions to continue into post-compulsory education (McGuigan et al., 2016).

Access to high quality careers information for disadvantaged young people is further compounded for those in rural areas, with what can be seen as a lack of specialist knowledge of local labour market information combined with lack of access to reliable transport and work experience opportunities (Aldridge Foundation, 2023). Concerns have been raised by a number of organisations who support rural communities, such as the Commission for Rural Communities and the Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) that careers advisors have 'insufficient knowledge of local economies, local labour markets, and the range of employment, education and training opportunities available within rural areas' (Commission for Rural Communities, 2012), and that the solution is to ensure there is 'fair access to opportunities and services' for young people in rural areas that is 'focused on their needs' by the provision of 'specialist advice and tailored support' (ACRE, 2014).

Programme development

In the first instance the WA team conducted desk-based research into rural and semi-rural areas of Derbyshire using the EIMD to identify local need in line with outlined research. This line of enquiry revealed a small area in the Derbyshire Dales that was ranked amongst the 10% most deprived in England, despite being surrounded by areas of high advantage. Due to the small geographic size of the area it would not be identified as an area of high need by the OfS, who use ward-level data, which suppresses rural pockets of deprivation such as this, to allocate outreach funding, such as for the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (now Uni Connect), leaving local disadvantaged young people excluded from opportunities available to urban peers (OfS, 2018). The WA and LE teams identified a maximum cohort size of 28, in line with both organisations' standard class sizes for their outreach activities. As numbers of potential participants within this small geographic area did not meet that threshold, they employed the POLAR4 dataset and other personal and demographic indicators of disadvantage in line with the OfS categories of under-represented groups (OfS, 2021) to ensure the programme could run with a full cohort.

With the potential participants of the programme identified, the WA and LE teams have developed a Theory of Change (TOC) to map programme aims, expected outcomes, and activities (see Figure 1). TOCs provide a visual framework for interventions and an early test of whether the design and evaluation methods are appropriate (TASO, 2023).

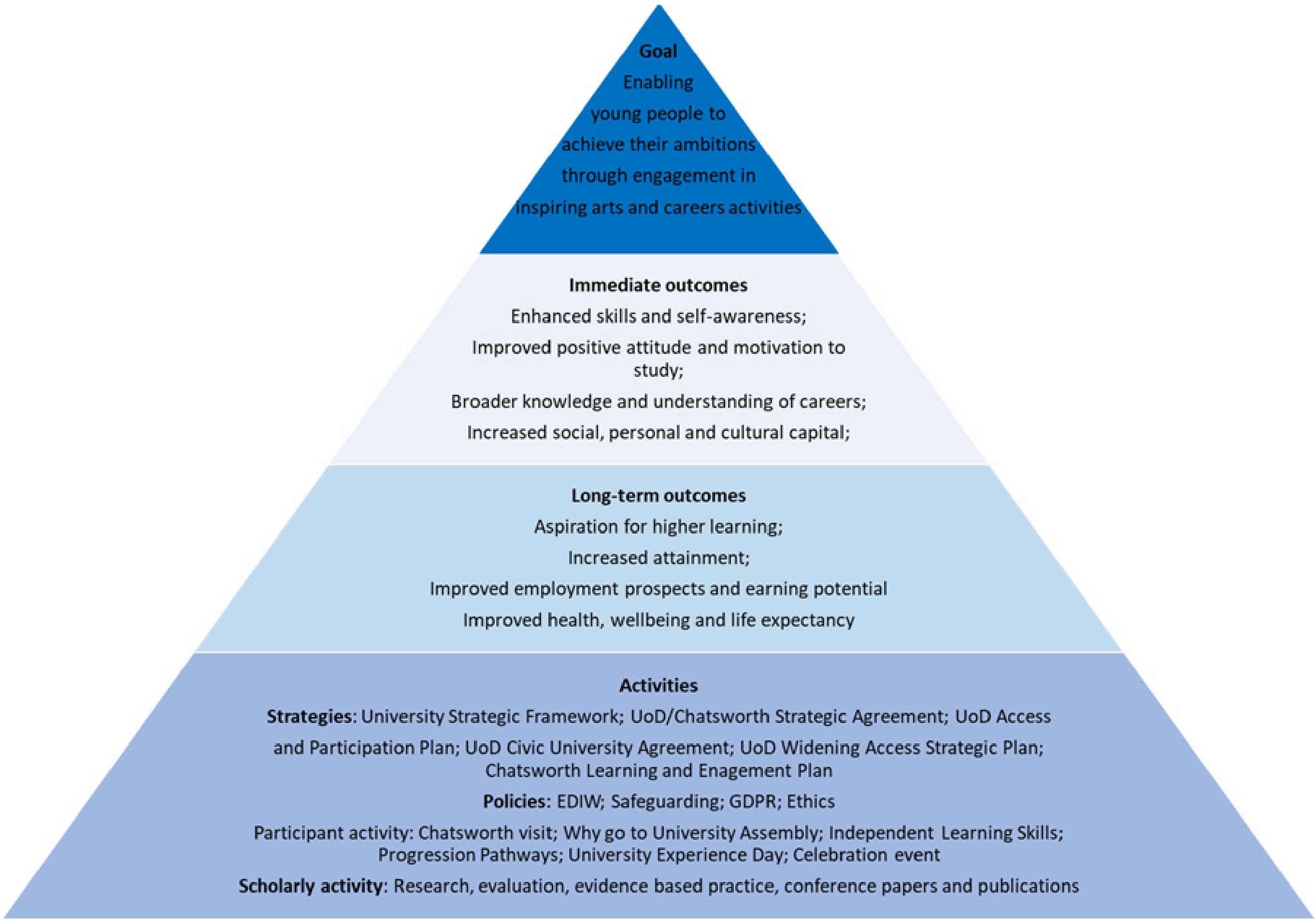

Figure 1: Original Rise High Theory of Change

The Rise High programme is designed as a progressive, sustained outreach programme to be delivered over the course of 18 months, with multiple engagements embedded to build trust and familiarity with both the team members and the careers concepts and pathways being presented. The programme is jointly delivered by the WA team and the LE team, taking advantage of the WA team's expertise in widening access, higher education progression and evaluating outreach, and the LE team's experience in rural, heritage-based learning, enabling a blend of careers-focused education and experiential learning grounded in the local context. The programme's primary aims are to:

- Broaden participants' knowledge and understanding of career pathways;
- Enhance participants' learning skills and confidence;
- Introduce the concept of higher education and progression to university.

The programme begins with a launch event at school for participants and their parents/carers to introduce the WA and LE teams, the programme activities, and expected outcomes of participation. The launch is also used as an opportunity for parents/carers to complete consent paperwork for their child to take part in activities, data collection and be photographed. The programme delivery content includes two immersive experiences: real-world learning encounters at Chatsworth House, giving exposure to the variety of professional roles and working environments Chatsworth House provides; and a university campus discovery day to demystify higher education and showcase pathways from school to degree-level study. These are underpinned by a series of thematic workshops delivered within a classroom setting at school, led by WA team staff supported by undergraduate student ambassadors, which are focused on career awareness, skills development, goal setting and reflective exercises to help participants link experiences, both on and outside of the programme, to their own aspirations. The final element of the programme is a celebration event at Chatsworth House for the participants and their parents/carers which includes the presentation of certificates and floral buttonholes, the opportunity for photographs in a university cap and gown, and fun games and activities.

Table 1 summarises the main elements of the programme, outlining the sequence of activities, content, and areas of responsibility:

Activity	Focus	Location	Delivered by
Launch event	Introduction to programme	School	LE team WA team
Why go to university assembly	Goal setting	School	WA team
Skills development workshops	Enhancing learning skills and building confidence	School	WA team
Careers visit	Workplace experience and local labour marketing info	Chatsworth House	LE team
Progression Pathways workshop	Career pathways mapping and self-reflection	School	WA team
Experience Day	Higher Education progression knowledge	University	WA team
Celebration event	Reflection and celebration	Chatsworth House	LE team WA team

Table 1: Rise High programme summary

By providing a structured, multi-session intervention the Rise High programme has sought to increase knowledge of career pathways, develop transferable skills, and raise confidence in learning and abilities. A progressive, sustained model has been adopted to allow concepts to be revisited and built upon, creating a cumulative engagement rather than a series of isolated events. This structure reflects research emphasising the effectiveness of progressive, multi-intervention approaches in widening participation outreach (Bainham, 2019; TASO, 2021; Patel & Bowes, 2021; Harding & Bowes, 2022; Williams et al., 2024).

Methodology

The methodologies employed within the case study were selected to explicitly evaluate the impact of the Rise High programme and to understand if it has met its primary aims. A robust evaluation structure forms the basis for the case study (see Table 2).

Data collection	**Point in programme**	**Age of participants**	**Number of respondents**
Pre-programme survey	Before	11-12	28
Event evaluation form – University Experience Day	During	12-13	24
Event evaluation form – Chatsworth Careers Day	During	12-13	25
Focus group	During	12-13	7
Teacher interview	During	N/A	1
Teacher informal feedback	During	N/A	2
Practitioner reflection	During and after	N/A	3
Post-programme survey	After	13-14	20

Table 2: Summary of data collection methods and timeline

A mixed methodology for the evaluation of the programme has been adopted, with research suggesting a mixed methods approach provides a strong evidence base. Thiele et al. (2018), when reviewing the evaluation of similar outreach initiatives, acknowledged that this approach can support the building of a compelling evidence base. The strength of the methodology is further endorsed by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, (OHID) whose evaluation guidance for public health practitioners favours the use of a mixed methods approach to garner robust and comprehensive findings (OHID, 2018). The triangulation of data through the use of mixed methods supports the validation of findings, strengthens conclusions and, importantly for this case study, incorporates participants' voices in the evaluation (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2021).

The evaluation was developed so that there would be a significant break between the Chatsworth House visit and the evaluation of that visit taking place (four months) and another significant break of six months between the last activity, the celebration event, taking place and undertaking the post-programme survey. This was to evaluate, not just the engagement in activities as they happened, but also the impact and retention of information, including career concepts over a longer period of time.

The sample for the case study evaluation was 28 pupils who were all in Year 7 (11-12 years old) at the beginning of the programme and who all met at least one OfS indicator of disadvantage or under-representation, with some meeting multiple criteria (OfS, 2021). This included pupils who were living within an area of high deprivation or low progression to university using the EIMD and POLAR4 datasets, pupils who were in receipt of free school meals or pupil premium, care-experienced pupils, and/or SEND/disabled pupils.

Due to the age of participants (11-12 years old at the commencement of the programme) consent was sought from their parents/carers for all aspects of the research and data collection used in this case study. The consent form was approved for use for the purposes of this study through the University of Derby ethics committee approval process.

As the case study participants were children, those who engaged with them for research purposes were all required to have Disclosure and Barring Service certificates from the Home Office (a pre-requisite in the UK for people working with children) and have safeguarding training before the commencement of the programme data collection.

The research data collection was embedded with the delivery of the programme from the outset. This included a pre-programme survey which provided a baseline dataset in order to measure the 'distance travelled' of participants in relation to programme aims. The question set was created in order to ascertain participants' knowledge of career pathways; university life/study; and to measure a self-assessment of their skills, confidence, and motivation to study in the classroom. This was completed at the launch event before participating in the programme activities. A post-programme survey, replicating the pre-programme survey, was then completed by participants at the end of the programme.

In addition, individual event evaluations were collated using questionnaires with a mix of open and closed questions and Likert scales (Likert, 1932) to gather quantitative and qualitative data about the impact of the experiential visits to Chatsworth House and the University of Derby from both participants and teachers. The questionnaires focused on knowledge of progression routes and careers gained from the visits as well as how they could apply this knowledge to their current studies and future careers. The WA team use event evaluation forms as standard practice on outreach activities, developed through years of practice and experience of delivering and evaluating outreach and cited in two national papers as examples of best practice (The Purpose Coalition, 2021; Atherton & Webb, 2022). Template evaluation forms had questions adapted for each visit dependent on the focus of the activities (career progression/planning; skills acquisition; or confidence building).

All participants were invited to join a focus group and seven volunteered to take part. Use of focus groups with young people was identified as a suitable method of data collection following a review of similar papers (such as Adler et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2021; and Hanson et al., 2021) to ensure best practice was employed in facilitating focus groups with children. The qualitative element of the evaluation framework was developed in order to follow up and gain context in relation to the themes that emerged from the survey data and event evaluation. This was conducted in a relaxed discussion setting where participants were able to use their own words to illustrate their experience on the programme and the learning they have gained from participating in it.

Teacher voice was also important to understand the programme from multiple perspectives, and this was gathered using survey questions, a semi-structured interview, and unstructured feedback at a number of touchpoints. This included review meetings, email correspondence, and informal discussions captured whilst their pupils were engaging in activities.

Analysis and interpretation of both the quantitative and qualitative data collected was then undertaken to consider if, and how, any impact aligned with the Rise High programme aims. Quantitative data, which was primarily gathered using Likert scales (Likert, 1932) as numerical and statistical data, was collated and analysed based on descriptive analysis methods (O'Dwyer & Bernauer, 2014). Qualitative data, collated through the focus group, interviews and open text, was analysed and mapped against a series of themes linked to the programme aims (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Findings

Analysis of findings identified four main themes: increased knowledge and understanding of career progression; enhanced skills development and confidence; sustained impact and concept retention; and mixed outcomes for university aspirations and motivation.

Increased knowledge and understanding of career pathways

There are clear indications the programme had a positive impact on the participants understanding of career progression, including progression to university. Pupils reported a broader understanding of career options and clearer awareness of routes to those careers, including the role of university. Experiential learning opportunities, such as the Chatsworth House visit and university discovery day, provided evidence of participants linking education to employment. One pupil reflected:

> It showed you different jobs, improving your knowledge for your future career. (Participant 1)

Another described how the programme had increased their awareness of new possibilities:

> It helped me look at the different paths I could take in life and what career paths I could go down. (Focus Group Participant)

Several comments suggested that visiting a university demystified it:

> You get a good insight into university. (Participant 2)

> It has helped me have more of an understanding of university. (Participant 3)

Teachers observed similar shifts in participant knowledge and reflection, noting that students were asking practical questions about university life, such as where they would live and how could they get to university, indicating genuine curiosity and engagement.

Quantitative survey data supported these perceptions, with the proportion of participants agreeing 'I have a good understanding of jobs I could do in the future' rising by 5 percentage points and 'I know where to go to get information about careers' rising by 11 percentage points between the pre- and post-programme surveys.

Overall, it can be seen that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the programme had met the key aims to broaden participants' knowledge and understanding of career pathways.

Skills development and confidence building

There is emerging evidence that the programme has been effective in supporting participants to improve their skills and confidence in their learning. Many participants highlighted skills they had developed, particularly teamwork, communication, and presentation skills. One participant noted:

> It taught me lots of skills and I had new experiences. (Participant 4)

Others commented:

> I learned about different skills and why they are important. (Participant 5)

> It was teaching you skills you need in the future for when you get your job. (Focus Group Participant)

And one reflected the mix of activities had supported their skills acquisition:

> (The University and Chatsworth visits showed) different skills from different places that we make sure that we have for life when we get a job of our own. (Focus Group Participant)

The University Experience Day appeared to reinforce this, with 78% of participants indicating they understood the importance of developing skill sets for careers. Teachers also reported 'an improvement in learning skills' across the cohort, with one commenting:

> With some I've seen a real spark, far more dedicated than peer group of same ability, more oomph and dedication and motivation. (Teacher 1)

Confidence emerged as a recurrent theme. Participants linked programme activities to feeling more assured in the classroom:

> I feel more confident answering questions and knowing more stuff. (Participant 6)

> Standing up and speaking helped me gain confidence. (Participant 7)

> It helped me feel confident in lessons. (Participant 8)

Underpinning the qualitative findings, eight post-programme respondents specifically named confidence as one of the top benefits gained from the programme in survey responses.

It is clear the emerging evidence indicates meaningful gains in both skills and confidence, highlighting the programme's impact on participants' personal and academic development.

Sustained impact and concept retention

Evidence from the post-programme survey and focus group indicates that participants could recall key concepts delivered through programme activities and experiences months after they occurred. Participants were able to articulate their key learnings from taking part in the programme, frequently highlighting careers knowledge, understanding of university and their own confidence building:

> I now know about different careers. (Participant 5)
>
> Greater understanding of universities and what they are like. (Participant 4)
>
> The sessions had made me confident. (Participant 9)

Others responded positively when asked if the programme had helped them think about their future career:

> I am now more confident in the job I want to do when I'm older. (Participant 4)

This retaining of careers knowledge is further evidenced through recall of activities which took place at Chatsworth House, with many able to articulate the relevance to their own career thinking:

> It gave me ideas of what I can do when I'm older. (Participant 10)
>
> It showed you different jobs improving your knowledge for your future career. (Participant 1)

Participants could also distinguish clearly, and differentiate between, each experience:

> We went to Chatsworth to see jobs around animals and the work that they do there and the trees and all that. And then we went to Derby University, like the actual university in Derby, to see what different jobs we could do there and what different courses we could take there. (Focus Group Participant)

And how the experiences had helped with their own future decision-making:

> Well, I feel more prepared for things that could get thrown at me in a way because I could be finishing school and I have a chance of university, college or sixth form. (Focus Group Participant)
>
> (It has) helped me and other people hopefully know how much commitment they'll have to do if they want to pursue a career that they want to have in life. (Focus Group Participant)

Teachers have noted the sustained impact of the programme on participants:

> One pupil has a lot of challenges and she is working so incredibly hard and making more progress beyond what was expected. (Teacher 1)

And so, taking into consideration the findings from each element of the evaluation, it is evident that the programme has had a sustained positive impact on participants who could successfully recall career and university concepts, apply these to their own experience and preferences, and feel confident about their future beyond school.

Mixed outcomes for university aspirations and motivation

There were a small number of elements where the programme has appeared not to have met the intended aims. For instance, while initial exposure to university generated enthusiasm, this did not appear to be sustained. Positive responses to the statement 'I would like to apply to university in the future' dropped from 61% immediately after the university visit to 30% in the post-programme survey.

There were limited qualitative comments which could suggest reasons for this, however, one comment does clarify that university was simply not relevant to their chosen career:

> Yes, a bit, but not much, because I don't need university for football. (Participant 11)

On the whole though the data provides no clear explanation for the reduction of the impact of the university visit over time, and so further speculation in relation to this outcome, beyond potential relevance to careers aspirations is not possible.

Participants were asked about their current studies to see if there were any marked positive changes which could be attributed to engagement in the programme. There was no compelling evidence indicating an upturn in feeling motivated in the classroom. There were initial positive responses to the question 'I feel motivated to work hard in school' in the pre-programme survey, taken when participants were in Year 7 (11-12 years old), however, this does not seem to be mirrored in the post-programme survey, taken when participants were in Year 9 (13-14 years old), with a 14 percentage point reduction giving a positive response. And whilst teachers reflected that the majority of participants did appear more motivated than peers who had not participated in the programme, the lack of qualitative commentary makes a definitive assessment difficult as the downturn highlighted by the quantitative data could be impacted by any number of external factors.

Overall, the use of mixed methods has ensured that the evaluation of the programme has been robust. There is clear emerging evidence that the programme has largely met its intended aims and has had a positive, sustained impact on the knowledge, skills, and confidence of the participants.

Discussion

This case study has explored the emerging findings of the Rise High programme, which aimed to broaden participants' knowledge of career pathways, strengthen skills and confidence in learning, and support the articulation of career ambitions through careers-focused activities. The interpretation of findings in this case study is informed by a pragmatist analytical perspective (Morgan, 2014), focusing on how participants make sense of their experiences within the specific context of a progressive, place-based outreach intervention (Biesta, 2010). While the programme aims and Theory of Change provided an orienting framework for evaluation (TASO, 2023), the qualitative analysis was primarily inductive, allowing themes to be generated from the data rather than being predetermined. Data from focus groups, open-text survey responses, teacher feedback, interviews and practitioner reflections were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), through an iterative process of familiarisation, initial coding and theme development, with themes refined through analysis of the dataset and across the data sources.

Evidence suggests the programme aims are largely achieved, demonstrating the value of sustained outreach for young people in rural areas, where disadvantage is often hidden and opportunities more limited than for urban peers (IntoUniversity, 2015; Local Government Association, 2017; Burke & Jones, 2019; Davies et al., 2021; Graham, 2024). While much of the literature highlights the negative effects of rural disadvantage, relatively little research has evaluated interventions designed to address these challenges, situating this study as a useful contribution.

The findings indicate a clear link between participation and increased knowledge and understanding of career progression. Participants also reported improved skills and greater confidence in applying them, with positive responses sustained over time. However, the programme's influence on aspirations towards university study and motivation for participants' current engagement in school appeared weaker, reflecting wider evidence that these elements can be shaped by contextual barriers beyond programme control. It is important to note that no detrimental outcomes for participation in the programme have been observed.

A distinctive strength of the programme lies in its collaborative design. Delivered jointly by two organisations, it has pooled expertise and resources to create a more impactful learning experience. Such partnerships are increasingly favoured by universities and third-sector organisations (Eddy, 2010; Ankrah & Al-Tabbaa, 2015) and are encouraged by policymakers for their potential to increase innovation and cost-effectiveness (OfS, 2023). Recent analysis confirms that collaborative outreach can extend reach, reduce duplication, engage harder-to-reach groups, and improve efficiency (CFE Research, 2023). While challenges exist in cross-organisational delivery, the evidence suggests that benefits outweigh disadvantages, particularly when shared goals are clearly defined (Eddy, 2010; Bowers, 2017).

The positive outcomes appear closely linked to the programme's progressive, sustained structure. By engaging participants at multiple points of contact over time, the Rise High programme enabled repeated reinforcement of knowledge and skills, producing more durable effects. This supports growing evidence that sustained, multi-intervention outreach generates stronger impacts on progression outcomes than one-off activities (Bainham, 2019; TASO, 2021; Patel & Bowes, 2021; Harding & Bowes, 2022; Williams et al., 2024). Participants' increased confidence in articulating their ambitions echoes McGuigan et al.'s (2016) finding that high-quality information can positively influence career intentions (McGuigan et al., 2016).

The findings also highlight that, despite concerns from organisations such as the Aldridge Foundation (2023) and the Commission for Rural Communities (2012) regarding limited access to local work experience and labour market opportunities, impactful and relevant careers interventions can be designed for rural contexts. The Rise High programme demonstrates that tailored, place-based activities can broaden horizons without requiring young people to disengage from their rural identities, offering a practical framework for future interventions.

With regard to positionality, the author developed the initial programme structure but did not contribute to content development or delivery, having stepped back from operational involvement to maintain analytical distance. Contact with participants was therefore limited to a small number of formal touchpoints, including the programme launch, focus group and celebration events. While this does not remove the interpretive nature of the analysis, it reduced the risk of conflating delivery and evaluation perspectives. The analysis prioritised participant voice, triangulated findings across data sources, and retained mixed or inconclusive outcomes where programme aims were not fully met, supporting the credibility of the findings.

Limitations

This case study is not without limitations. First, its short timeframe restricts assessment of long-term impact. Data was collected up to six months post-programme, but the full value may only be realised at key educational transitions, such as GCSEs or post-16 progression (Careers & Enterprise Company, 2023; TASO, 2021; Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020). Longitudinal research is needed to establish whether early gains in skills and confidence translate into sustained outcomes.

Second, the study raised further questions, particularly regarding declining motivation in school. This is unlikely to be attributable solely to the programme and may instead reflect the 'Year 8 dip' in engagement commonly observed during early adolescence (Bromley, 2016; Martin et al., 2024, Jerrim, 2025). However, time constraints limited deeper exploration of this phenomenon.

Finally, the small scale of the study constrains its wider applicability. With only 28 respondents, findings are not statistically significant and should be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, the local impact is potentially substantial, particularly in shaping the continuation and refinement of the programme for future learners from disadvantaged rural communities.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article has presented an exploratory case study of the Rise High programme, a progressive, sustained outreach initiative delivered to 28 under-represented secondary-aged pupils from small but significantly disadvantaged rural and semi-rural areas of Derbyshire. By situating the programme within the wider context of rurality, hidden disadvantage, and place-based inequality, the study highlights the importance of targeted interventions in areas often overlooked by conventional outreach criteria.

The emerging findings indicate the programme has been successful in meeting its key aims of increased knowledge and understanding of career progression, improved skills acquisition, and sustained positive impact. It is clear participants feel more confident about their future career choices as a result of being involved in the programme and that these positive impacts persist beyond the life of the programme.

The case study also highlights the value of collaborative, place-based delivery. The partnership between the WA and LE teams brought together complementary expertise, enabling the programme to offer both higher education insight and employer-linked learning. This approach appears well-suited to addressing complex, localised barriers to progression within rural and semi-rural locations.

As a small-scale, context-specific study, these findings, whilst non-generalisable, do offer insights relevant to practitioners designing outreach for under-represented groups in rural and semi-rural contexts. The benefits of long-term, progressive, multi-intervention programmes appear to outweigh the challenges, provided delivery teams remain responsive to local context and evolving participant needs.

To strengthen both the programme and the evidence base, the following areas for further study are proposed:

- mapping the long-term outcomes of participants beyond compulsory schooling;
- conducting comparator studies with matched cohorts from similar localities;
- exploring the most effective ways to sustain post-programme motivation and aspiration; and
- examining how government policy and funding mechanisms influence provision for rural communities.

For the programme itself there are also recommendations to further increase positive outcomes for participants, including reviewing and reflecting on the content relating to university aspirations and participant motivation in their current studies to better understand why the programme may not be meeting these intended aims as effectively as other elements.

With thoughtful refinement the Rise High programme offers a promising model for collaborative, place-based careers-focused outreach that builds confidence, skills, and knowledge among young people in rural and semi-rural communities.

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Reimaging and operationalising 'meaningful' work experience in England: The PERE model – An illustrative case study

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Abstract

This practice-led case study introduces the PERE (*Prepare, Execute, Reflect, Evaluate*) Model as a practical framework for delivering meaningful experiences of workplaces in secondary education. While the Gatsby Charitable Foundation and Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) define *what* high-quality career learning should achieve, and professional bodies, including the Career Development Institute (CDI) and National Institute for Career Education and Counselling (NICEC), articulate *why* careers education matters, PERE focuses on *how* to operationalise these intentions through repeatable routines, adaptable tools, and clearly defined roles for schools and employer partners. The paper presents an illustrative example to demonstrate the model's feasibility and transferability.

Keywords: work experience, Gatsby Benchmark 6, PERE model, UK careers education, equitable access, reflective practice, hybrid delivery

Introduction

This paper introduces the PERE (*Prepare, Execute, Reflect, Evaluate*) Model as a theoretically grounded and practice-informed tool for reimagining how work experience is conceptualised and delivered in secondary education in England. It addresses persistent inequities and inconsistencies in how opportunities are accessed, organised, and translated into meaningful outcomes for young people.

Traditional work experience has centred on short, one-off placements (SQW, 2022). While these can offer valuable insights into the world of work, they are often inconsistently organised, weakly connected to the curriculum, and highly variable in quality (Magee et. al, 2022). From September 2025, schools are expected to provide a week's worth of experiences of workplaces for Years 7-9 and an additional week for Years 10-11, strengthening Gatsby Benchmark 6 (Department for Education, 2025). Without a clear operational framework, schools risk approaching compliance as an administrative requirement rather than as meaningful careers education that supports informed decision-making. The PERE model addresses this gap by embedding routines that drive sustained and high-quality career development practice. While work experience is devolved across the UK, this discussion focuses on England and the Gatsby Benchmark 6. Nevertheless, PERE's core mechanisms, such as equity routines, curriculum integration, preparation artefacts, guided reflection, and rapid feedback loops, are transferable across different policy contexts. While these principles align with shared practice in Scotland and Wales, their successful adaptation will necessitate aligning analogous routines with the distinct national frameworks and accountability measures in those devolved nations.

Terminology used in this paper is briefly clarified to support coherence. Work experience traditionally refers to a one-week supervised placement involving observation or participation in workplace tasks. Workplace experiences encompass a broader range of activities, such as site visits or employer-led projects. Experiences of workplaces, as defined in current policy, describe cumulative, varied and structured activities that build career awareness, skills, and identity over time. Statutory definitions used by the Department for Education and Gatsby Benchmark 6 are adopted, while recognising the pedagogical value of all three and arguing for a coherent developmental model that connects them.

Development of PERE Model

The PERE model was developed by synthesising personal experiences of careers education practice over 30 years. It responds to systemic and operational challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, when traditional work experience models became unworkable as employers shifted to remote or hybrid operations, disrupting school provision. In one UK study, 76 per cent of Careers Leaders reported the pandemic had negatively impacted workplace experiences, and 70 per cent said it impaired meaningful employer engagement (Careers & Enterprise Company, 2020), highlighting lasting disruption.

In this context, PERE emerged as a robust method enabling Careers Leaders to sustain meaningful workplace experiences. Informal feedback from Careers Leaders, learners, and employers shaped its refinement, ensuring the model operationalised Gatsby Benchmark 6 through a structured, stakeholder-centred approach. Development drew on practitioner reflection, policy review, and simulated programme design exercises to test feasibility and transferability, supported by principles of reflective professional practice (Schön, 1983; Finlay, 2002).

Rather than prescribing *what* to deliver or *why*, PERE shows *how* to enact high-quality experiences of workplaces. By centring collaboration, reflection and iterative design, it shifts work experience from a transactional requirement into a developmental process that builds confidence, capability and aspiration for all young people.

Post-COVID, three recurring barriers emerged: inconsistent employer availability; financial/logistical constraints on visits; and weak curriculum linkage. PERE's routines respond directly: hybrid options and in-school simulations when site access is limited; preparation artefacts and inclusive delivery guidance to reduce participation costs; and employer/educator co-designed briefs/workbooks/evaluations to tie tasks to curriculum aims. These tactics stabilise delivery quality across contexts.

This is a conceptual, practice-informed paper presenting an illustrative example. Insights were derived from practitioner reflection, sector consultation, and simulated programme design. The paper does not report a formal study or associated aspects such as sample size or statistics. Forthcoming pilots will supply empirical data in due course.

Conceptual foundations

The PERE Model is underpinned by experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), and reflective practice (Schön, 1983; Finlay, 2002). These theoretical foundations inform its focus on how schools, employers, and learners can co-construct meaningful workplace experiences that lead to tangible developmental outcomes for young people. PERE's cyclical design echoes Kolb's experiential learning cycle, where learning arises through the dynamic interplay of experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation. Each stage translates these processes into structured routines: preparation, execution, reflection, and evaluation.

The model also draws on sociocultural learning principles (Lave & Wenger, 1991), recognising that work experience is inherently relational. By involving teachers, parents, and employers as co-educators, PERE establishes a collaborative learning ecosystem that supports equity of access and engagement. This multi-stakeholder alignment responds to structural inequalities in English careers provision, particularly those affecting disadvantaged learners (Education and Employers, 2024).

Reflective practice provides the interpretive bridge between theory and action. Drawing on Schön's concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, learners and practitioners critically analyse experience to generate adaptive insight. Additionally, teachers and employers refine practice through evaluation feedback loops. PERE also integrates implementation science principles (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020), ensuring that change is staged, monitored, and refined over time.

The PERE Model

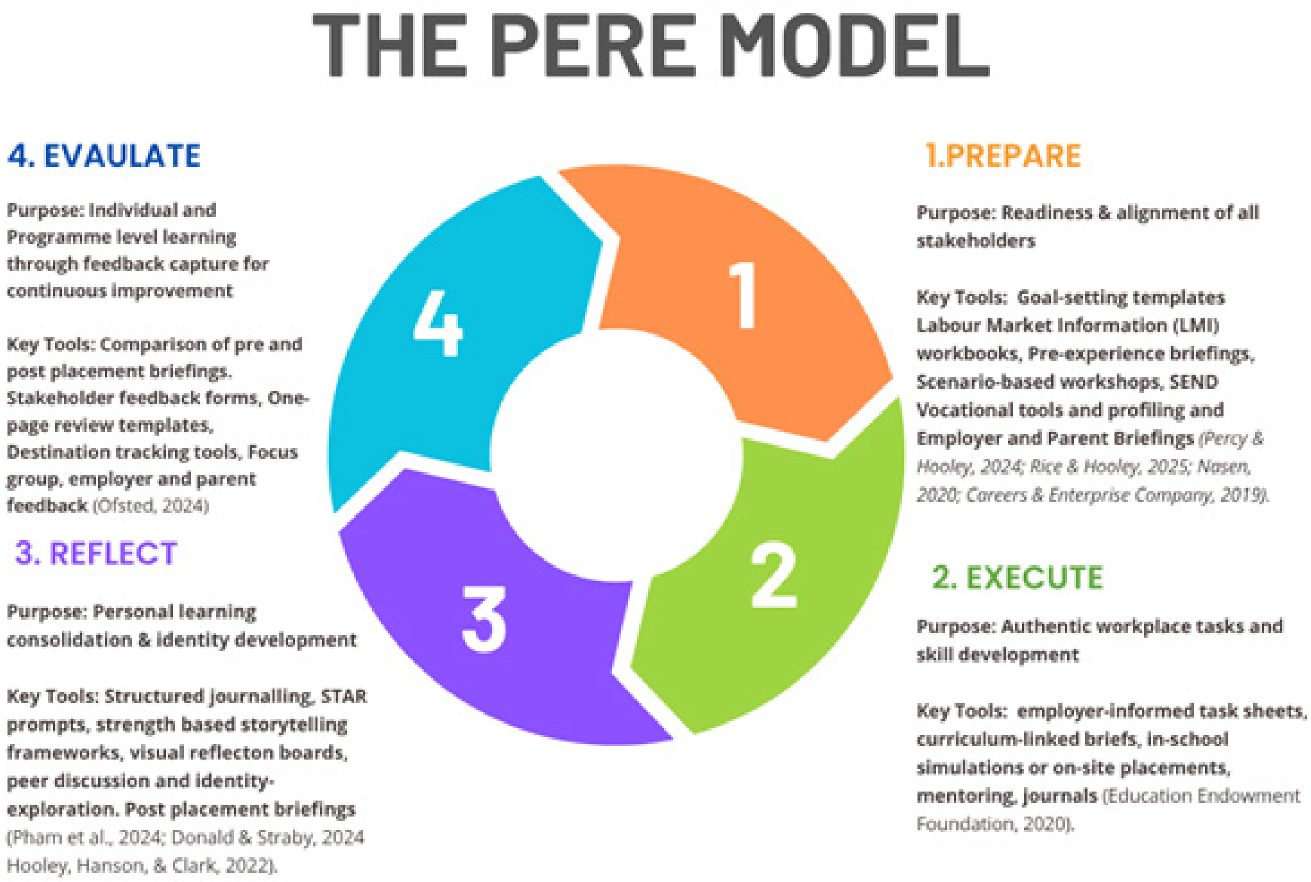

Figure 1: Overview of the PERE Model outlining key tools needed to ensure a Gatsby-aligned experience of the workplace.

The traditional approach to work experience constrains learning to a one-off experience rather than a developmental process. PERE differs by embedding a continuous learning cycle that begins well before each placement and extends beyond it. It adds four core enhancements: front-loaded preparation shared by learners, parents, and employers; authentic tasks delivered in person, in school, or virtually; guided daily reflection that includes processing misfit or negative moments; and light-touch evaluation loops that allow schools and employers to enhance quality delivery in real time. These routines are format-agnostic, functioning in in-person, hybrid or fully in-school simulations. The following section explores the four core elements in detail.

Prepare: This phase focuses on the readiness and alignment of all stakeholders. It ensures that learners, parents, educators, and employers share a clear understanding of objectives, roles, and expectations. Activities within this stage equip learners with the knowledge and contextual understanding needed before entering a workplace experience (Careers & Enterprise Company, 2019). Preparation establishes a shared foundation that promotes informed engagement.

Execute: This phase represents the practical application of learning through authentic workplace tasks and skill development. Preparation becomes lived practice as students engage in employer-informed activities, whether on-site, at external venues, or within structured in-school simulations. The focus is on building teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills that connect directly to curriculum aims (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020). Here, equity is addressed through flexible delivery models. Schools and employers collaborate to create inclusive environments – such as offering in-school or hybrid experiences, providing resources where necessary, and designing tasks that recognise diverse starting points and strengths. When effectively implemented, this stage transforms abstract preparation into an authentic experience (Percy & Tanner, 2023).

Reflect: The reflection phase consolidates learning, enabling students to make sense of their experiences, regardless of whether those experiences were positive, challenging, or unexpected (Donald & Straby, 2024; Pham et al, 2024). Structured and purposefully created reflection space within the classroom encourages learners to understand and articulate their own growth, identifying strengths, skill development, and areas for improvement. Students who encounter disappointment or discomfort are guided to reframe these as opportunities for insight, understanding what environments or roles best align with their values and learning styles. Facilitated discussion, journaling, and mentoring ensure that all forms of experience contribute meaningfully to professional and personal development (Hooley, Hanson, & Clark, 2023).

Evaluate: Evaluation measures the broader impact of the experience across four dimensions: learner reactions, skill development, behavioural change, and longer-term outcomes, aligning with Ofsted's emphasis on personal development (Ofsted, 2024). Whereas reflection focuses on individual interpretation and meaning-making, evaluation measures personal progress against starting points. At an individual level, evaluation informs next steps: learners identify roles to pursue (e.g., in construction), and employers refine placements (e.g., by adding more LMI). Evaluation also captures programme-level learning (Moote et al, 2025). It examines the effectiveness of delivery methods and curriculum alignment, drawing on both quantitative data (e.g., surveys, attendance, outcomes) and qualitative insights (e.g. student and employer feedback). A key feature of this stage is closing the feedback loop. Findings from the evaluation are shared with participating stakeholders, allowing them to see how their input shapes future iterations and improvements. Through this cycle of continuous improvement, the PERE model cultivates not only individual growth but also systemic advancement in how work experience is designed and delivered.

Implementing the PERE model

The following example, lightly informed by a real event during the pandemic, illustrates how the PERE Model could be applied within a secondary school to embed meaningful employer engagement and support career readiness. It models good practice and demonstrates how the framework might operate effectively in context.

Context: A secondary school partners with local and national construction employers to deliver a co-designed, week-long hybrid experience that raises awareness of built-environment careers and strengthens local skills. Combining in-school learning, virtual engagement and on-site visits, the programme supports students at different stages of career readiness to complete authentic, employer-informed tasks while developing core employability skills.

Prepare: A co-design process ensures the programme is purposeful, inclusive, and responsive to student needs. Using the PERE checklist, educators and employers refine structure, outcomes, and the balance of in-school, virtual, and workplace activities. Planning meetings produced an employer briefing pack outlining expectations, safeguarding measures, and inclusive delivery guidance, while building strong relationships between teachers and industry partners. Co-design involved careers leaders, subject leads and employer supervisors, with weekly teacher–employer check-ins and a pre-placement student induction clinic to keep roles, tasks and support aligned. Parent and student briefings explain aims and practical requirements, and students complete a pre-placement form to identify prior knowledge and support needs. A co-developed placement workbook, tailored to each employer's brief, includes sector terminology, practical worksheets, and reflection prompts aligned to each day's focus. This collaborative approach keeps the placement relevant, adaptive, and aligned with Gatsby Benchmarks and student aspirations.

Execute: The programme is delivered through a hybrid model, combining classroom and virtual learning with employer site visits. This blended approach enables safe, equitable, and authentic engagement within the construction industry, removing financial barriers to participation. Teams respond to a sustainability and design brief set by local employers, drafting proposals that balance accessibility, safety, and cost, reflecting the link between sustainability and career development (McMahon & Knight, 2024) and demonstrating how hybrid engagement can widen access while maintaining authenticity (Percy & Tanner, 2023). Students participate in hands-on workshops, construction-themed challenges, and live Q&A sessions, all linked to the placement workbook to develop teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills. Employers provide structured feedback and mentoring, helping students apply their learning.

Reflect: Structured reflection enables students to make sense of learning, consolidate skills, and develop self-awareness. A suite of tools, informed by established reflective models (Schön, 1983; Rolfe et al, 2001; Donald & Straby, 2024), guides this process. Students use daily journals and STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) prompts to capture achievements, challenges, and teamwork examples. Peer discussions promote shared learning and support evolving ideas about workplace identity and confidence. Integrated into the placement workbook, reflection is continuous rather than retrospective. The week concludes with debriefings where staff and employers help students reframe experiences as valuable learning opportunities, supporting personal growth and career awareness.

Evaluate: Evaluation processes capture evidence of impact and inform ongoing improvement. Pre- and post-placement briefings identify shifts in student confidence and readiness, while end-of-week pulses mirror the baseline to track short-term change. Short teacher and employer forms record perceived skill gains and task fit, with one-page reviews noting adjustments for the next cycle. Schools may include light-touch destination or aspiration tracking to explore whether effects persist over time (Moote et al., 2025). The emphasis is on gathering practical evidence to refine delivery rather than conducting a formal evaluation (Hooley & Rice, 2019). Feedback from students, employers, and parents provides insight into relevance, inclusivity, and quality, while focus groups offer qualitative depth. Indicative signals might include more students naming unfamiliar roles, connecting classroom learning to real contexts, and showing greater confidence in professional interactions. Employers may value the structured briefs and visible outcomes; precisely the kinds of meaningful indicators the PERE framework aims to surface and strengthen (Percy & Hooley, 2024; Ofsted, 2024).

Limitations

The above illustration demonstrates the operational logic rather than reporting empirical findings. Its purpose is to show how the PERE model can be applied in practice through structured stakeholder roles and iterative learning cycles. A formal pilot is in early development. The example demonstrates how the model would operate under optimal conditions where processes and records are systematically maintained, serving as a design prototype for future testing.

Moreover, while the PERE model has been shaped through reflective professional practice and sector consultation, it is conceptually grounded, particularly in Kolb's experiential learning, and expected to scale, but this still requires testing. Scalability is anticipated because PERE relies on lightweight checklists/briefs and short feedback pulses that travel well across contexts; forthcoming pilots will test replication and iteration across multiple schools and Careers Hubs. Anticipated scaling frictions include timetable pressure, employer capacity, and safeguarding logistics. PERE mitigates these through modular planning templates, hybrid delivery options, and standardised brief/consent packs. Since the PERE model is designed for England's policy context (Gatsby Benchmarks; 2025 statutory guidance), it will require adaptation before using elsewhere.

Conclusion

The PERE Model offers a structured yet flexible approach for delivering high-quality experiences of workplaces that move beyond compliance toward genuine learner development. It provides educators and employers with a clear process to translate the ambitions of the Gatsby Benchmarks and the Department for Education's (2025) careers guidance into tangible, repeatable actions.

By guiding stakeholders through a continuous cycle of preparation, implementation, reflection, and evaluation, PERE transforms work experience from a one-off event into a developmental learning journey. Its cyclical nature means that each stage informs the next, embedding improvement over time. Practically, schools should expect gains from their young people in career confidence, role awareness (including lesser-known roles), transferability of skills to curriculum tasks, and professional interaction readiness; with parents engaged through structured briefings and follow-up signposting as part of wraparound support.

The illustrative case presented in this paper demonstrates how PERE can be applied to design coherent, hybrid experiences that respond to real-world challenges and local priorities. While future research and reports will test its impact empirically, this conceptual framing shows how the model functions as the *how* of workplace learning, translating policy ideals into meaningful practice. Ultimately, PERE provides a practical, scalable method to help schools and employers create consistent, reflective, and transformative experiences that prepare every learner to be 'first day, first hour' ready for the world of work.

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From representation to leadership: A case study in inclusive career progression

Research Article

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Abstract

This case study explores *Accelerate*, a leadership and career development programme delivered in partnership with a research-intensive UK university to support the progression of underrepresented staff at Grades 7 and 8. Drawing on practitioners' insights, participant feedback, and light-touch career theory, the article examines how inclusive leadership development can serve as a career intervention while also contributing to cultural change. The paper reflects on programme design, facilitation, and early outcomes, and offers transferable implications for career practitioners working in complex organisational settings.

Keywords: Career progression; inclusive leadership; career development; psychological safety; higher education UK; systems theory

Introduction

Career progression within higher education has long reflected wider structural inequalities present across the labour market. While universities have made progress in diversifying entry-level and early-career roles, this has not translated into proportional representation at senior levels (Advance HE, 2020). For many underrepresented groups, including women, racially minoritised staff, disabled colleagues and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, progression into senior leadership remains uneven, opaque and shaped by informal norms around leadership, visibility and 'fit' (Advance HE, 2020; Lumby & Morrison, 2010). As a result, talent is often present but not fully recognised, sponsored or supported to progress.

This case study explores *Accelerate*, a leadership and career development programme designed to support the progression of underrepresented staff at Grades 7 and 8 within a UK research-intensive university. Within higher education, Grades 7 and 8 typically represent experienced mid to senior-level professional and academic roles, often positioned immediately below senior leadership grades. Progression beyond this point, particularly into Grade 9 and above, which includes senior leadership, professorial and executive roles, is widely recognised as a critical transition point where representation drops sharply. *Accelerate* was developed to intervene at this juncture, where career trajectories often stall despite high levels of capability and contribution.

The programme was launched in 2024 as part of a wider institutional commitment to addressing inequalities in career progression. While framed as a leadership development initiative, *Accelerate* was intentionally designed as a career intervention, supporting participants to build leadership capability alongside career management skills such as self-advocacy, visibility, confidence in progression conversations and navigation of informal organisational structures (Bridgstock, 2009). In doing so, the programme sought to address both individual development and the cultural conditions that shape progression opportunities.

Across the UK higher education sector, this challenge is well documented. Data from Advance HE consistently shows that representation declines sharply at senior grades, particularly for racially minoritised and disabled staff (Advance HE, 2020). While recruitment processes have become more inclusive at entry points, progression systems remain less transparent and often rely on informal sponsorship, confidence signalling and alignment with dominant leadership norms (Advance HE, 2020; Lumby & Morrison, 2010). These dynamics can disadvantage those who have historically been excluded from leadership spaces or who do not see themselves reflected in senior roles.

The institutional context for *Accelerate* reflected these sector-wide patterns. Internal workforce data demonstrated that while representation was relatively balanced at earlier grades, significant disparities emerged at senior levels. Alongside this, staff engagement data revealed that colleagues at Grades 7 and 8 reported lower levels of confidence in career progression, limited access to developmental opportunities and uncertainty about what was required to move into senior leadership. Qualitative feedback gathered through inclusion-focused consultations reinforced these findings, highlighting experiences of invisibility, inconsistent feedback and a lack of sponsorship.

This context informed the decision to design a targeted intervention. *Accelerate* was not conceived as a remedial programme aimed at 'fixing' individuals. Instead, it was grounded in the recognition that underrepresentation at senior levels is rarely a consequence of individual deficit, but rather of systemic barriers embedded within organisational cultures, leadership norms and progression practices. As such, the programme aimed to equip participants with tools to navigate the current system, while also surfacing insights that could inform wider cultural change.

The programme was delivered in partnership with Embrace Inclusion, a consultancy specialising in inclusive leadership, career development and organisational culture change. My role as lead facilitator was shaped by a professional background spanning employment and skills, economic development, career practice and inclusion-focused consultancy across public and private sectors. Earlier work included the design of career initiatives addressing labour market exit among underrepresented groups, informed by research on lost talent and economic participation. This practitioner grounding influenced the design of *Accelerate*, particularly its focus on career ownership, systems awareness and identity-affirming leadership development.

Accelerate was also explicitly aligned with the university's commitments under the Equality Act 2010, including the use of positive action to address disadvantage and underrepresentation. While positive action is often underutilised within leadership development contexts, it provided a legitimate framework for targeted investment in underrepresented talent, signalling that progression is a shared institutional responsibility rather than an individual burden.

From the outset, the programme was co-designed with the university's Social Inclusion team and informed by insights from prior development initiatives. This collaborative approach ensured that *Accelerate* was grounded in lived experience and organisational reality, rather than abstract leadership models. Design considerations included creating psychologically safe learning spaces, acknowledging the impact of systemic inequality on confidence and aspiration, and supporting participants in articulating leadership identities that did not require conformity to traditional norms.

A central design principle was the integration of leadership development and career progression. Rather than treating leadership as a purely positional outcome, *Accelerate* framed leadership as a set of behaviours, practices and ways of influencing that support both individual progression and organisational impact. This framing was intended to help participants recognise leadership in their existing roles, build confidence in their contribution, and develop the career management skills required to pursue progression opportunities more intentionally.

Career practitioners are not always positioned to work with individuals at later career stages, particularly those already operating at senior or near-senior levels. However, *Accelerate* reflects growing recognition that targeted career support at this stage is critical to addressing representation gaps in positions of power and influence. Research highlights the role of career development interventions in supporting confidence, identity negotiation, and navigating complex systems, particularly for those experiencing impostor feelings or marginalisation within senior spaces. *Accelerate* contributes to this emerging practice by offering a structured, identity-aware approach to leadership and career development for underrepresented staff approaching senior transition points.

The sections that follow examine the programme in more detail, including its structure, inclusive design principles, participant outcomes and implications for career practitioners. Through this case study, the article aims to contribute practice-based insight into how leadership development can function as a meaningful career intervention, while also highlighting the limits of individual-focused programmes in the absence of sustained organisational engagement.

Programme overview and structure

Accelerate was delivered over a nine-month period from October 2024 to July 2025 and brought together a cohort of 20 underrepresented staff at Grades 7 and 8 from across academic, professional services and commercial roles. The programme was intentionally designed as a blended leadership and career development intervention, structured around two interconnected strands: *Leading Self* and *Leading Others*. This dual focus reflected an understanding that progression into senior roles requires both internal leadership confidence and the ability to navigate organisational systems, relationships and informal power structures.

Rather than adopting a linear or competency-driven model, *Accelerate* was designed to be scaffolded to support participants at a critical career transition point. Many delegates were already operating at a senior level in practice, but lacked confidence, visibility or sponsorship to progress formally. The structure, therefore, aimed to help participants consolidate their leadership identity, develop career management skills, and build the confidence to engage proactively with opportunities for progression.

In addition, participants were matched with alumni from other senior leadership programmes within the university, typically at higher grades. This created an opportunity for informal mentoring, offering insight into progression pathways, organisational expectations, and leadership at more senior levels. While not a core structured component, this element added value by extending participants' networks and access to experience beyond the cohort.

Programme focus and core themes

The programme comprised seven core thematic areas, delivered through a series of facilitated sessions, reflective activities and peer-based learning spaces. These themes are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Accelerate programme themes and focus

Programme focus	**Core emphasis**
Leadership identity	Values, strengths, leadership archetypes, and reframing leadership norms
Understanding barriers	Structural inequality and exploring internal
Resilience and confidence	Emotional regulation, self-belief, and navigating imposter feelings
Inclusive leadership	Power, privilege, psychological safety, and leadership impact on others
Relationships and feedback	Influence, trust, feedback, and difficult conversations
Career ownership	Visibility, self-advocacy, sponsorship, and progression pathways
Final reflections	Learning integration, sense-making, and next steps

Leading self

The first strand of the programme, *Leading Self*, focused on self-awareness, leadership identity and confidence. Early sessions explored structural barriers to progression, including bias, informal gatekeeping and the hidden curriculum of leadership. Framing these issues explicitly helped participants contextualise their experiences, reducing the tendency to internalise systemic challenges as personal shortcomings.

A key feature of this phase was the use of strengths-based leadership archetypes. This approach moved away from deficit-oriented development models and encouraged participants to recognise leadership behaviours they were already demonstrating. By validating existing capability, the archetypes supported participants to see themselves as leaders without waiting for external endorsement. This design choice was informed by both practitioner experience and evidence highlighting the role of confidence, identity and narrative in career progression, particularly for underrepresented groups (Bridgstock, 2009; Patton & McMahon, 2006).

Resilience and confidence were also addressed through reflective discussion and facilitated activities that acknowledged the emotional labour of operating in environments where participants were often underrepresented. Rather than positioning resilience as individual endurance, sessions focused on emotional regulation, boundary-setting and sustaining self-belief in the face of ongoing systemic challenge.

Leading others

The second strand, *Leading Others*, built on this foundation by shifting focus toward influence, relationships and organisational impact. Sessions explored inclusive leadership practices, including power, privilege and psychological safety, and encouraged participants to reflect on how leadership behaviours shape team culture and opportunity structures (Tulshyan, 2022).

Practical attention was given to relationships and feedback, particularly navigating difficult conversations, influencing without authority and building trust. These skills were framed not only as leadership competencies, but as career management capabilities that enable progression in complex organisations. Participants were supported to develop language and strategies for self-advocacy, articulating impact and engaging in progression conversations with greater clarity and confidence.

Career ownership formed a core theme in this strand. Rather than presenting progression as a linear or meritocratic process, discussions acknowledged the importance of visibility, sponsorship and informal networks. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their own career narratives and identify actions that would increase exposure to opportunities, while remaining aligned with personal values and leadership style.

Peer learning and action learning sets

Throughout the programme, peer learning was prioritised as a central mechanism for reflection and development. Action Learning Sets (ALS) were used to provide structured, psychologically safe spaces where participants could explore live career and leadership challenges. These sessions were conducted online and followed clear agreements around confidentiality, non-directive questioning and mutual support.

The ALS format enabled participants to test ideas, challenge assumptions and gain perspective from peers who shared similar experiences of underrepresentation. For many, this was the first time they had access to a trusted peer network at a comparable career stage. The emphasis on listening and questioning, rather than advice-giving, reinforced reflective capacity and supported deeper insight into both personal and systemic dynamics.

Line manager engagement

A distinctive feature of *Accelerate* was the intentional engagement of participants' line managers. Managers were invited to an inclusive leadership session early in the programme, designed to surface assumptions about leadership, progression and potential. While levels of sustained engagement varied, this early involvement signalled that participant development was not an individual endeavour alone, but part of a wider organisational responsibility.

Line managers were also invited to attend the final participant presentations, where delegates reflected on their learning, leadership development and next career steps. This created a moment of visibility and recognition, reinforcing participants' leadership capabilities and creating space for more meaningful conversations about progression.

Delivery approach

All core sessions were delivered in person, with careful attention paid to facilitation style, group dynamics and psychological safety. The programme avoided overloading participants with content, instead allowing space for reflection, dialogue and integration of learning between sessions. Materials and prompts were shared in advance, and objectives were co-created to ensure relevance and responsiveness to participant needs.

Overall, *Accelerate*'s structure reflected a deliberate effort to integrate leadership development and career progression. By combining self-reflection, peer learning and organisational engagement, the programme sought to support participants not only to grow as leaders but to navigate progression pathways with greater agency and confidence.

In addition, participants were matched with alumni from other senior leadership programmes within the university, typically at higher grades. This created an opportunity for informal mentoring, offering insight into progression pathways, organisational expectations, and leadership at more senior levels. While not a core structured component, this element added value by extending participants' networks and access to experience beyond the cohort.

Inclusive Design and Facilitation

Inclusive design was a foundational principle of *Accelerate*, shaping not only what was delivered but how the programme was experienced. Rather than retrofitting inclusion into an existing leadership model, the programme was intentionally designed to reflect the realities faced by underrepresented staff navigating progression within a complex institutional environment. This included careful attention to facilitation style, learning environment, content sequencing, and the emotional dimensions of leadership development.

The programme was co-designed with the university's Social Inclusion team and informed by insights from previous staff development initiatives. Early design conversations focused on identifying the points at which underrepresented staff most often experience friction in progression. These included informal gatekeeping, inconsistent feedback, lack of sponsorship and unspoken expectations around leadership presence and confidence. The resulting programme design sought to surface these dynamics explicitly, rather than leaving participants to infer them independently.

A central design consideration was fostering psychological safety. For many participants, reflecting on leadership identity took place against a backdrop of prior exclusion, misrecognition or marginalisation. Sessions were therefore structured to establish trust early, with shared agreements around confidentiality, respect and permission to speak honestly. Facilitated check-ins and grounding activities were used at the start of sessions to support presence and connection, particularly when discussions touched on sensitive experiences, such as impostor feelings or microaggressions.

The facilitation approach was intentionally relational rather than directive. Rather than positioning facilitators as subject experts delivering content, the emphasis was on creating space for dialogue, reflection and peer learning. This reflected a practitioner's belief that underrepresented staff often possess significant leadership capability but lack environments in which it is recognised or affirmed. Facilitators modelled openness and reflective practice, sharing relevant aspects of their own professional journeys where appropriate, to signal that leadership development is ongoing and non-linear.

A key innovation within the programme was the use of strengths-based leadership archetypes. This tool provided participants with a shared language to explore leadership identity without defaulting to deficit narratives. Instead of focusing on gaps or readiness criteria, participants were encouraged to recognise leadership behaviours they already demonstrated in their roles. This approach was informed by career development practice and evidence highlighting the role of self-efficacy and identity in progression decisions. By validating existing strengths, the archetypes helped participants to reframe leadership as something they were already practising, rather than something to be earned through formal promotion.

Design choices also reflected an awareness of intersectionality and the varied ways in which identity shapes experience. Activities were structured to allow multiple modes of engagement, including reflection, discussion and written prompts, recognising that confidence and voice show up differently for different people. Care was taken in group composition and facilitation to avoid reproducing dominant voices, with facilitators actively monitoring participation and creating space for quieter contributions.

Peer learning was a deliberate design feature, rather than an emergent outcome. Action Learning Sets were used to provide a structured space where participants could explore real-world career and leadership challenges in a supportive environment. Conducted online, these sessions followed clear principles focused on listening, questioning, and reflection rather than problem-solving. For many participants, this peer support mitigated feelings of isolation and enabled a deeper sense-making around shared experiences of underrepresentation.

Positive action underpinned the programme's design and positioning. *Accelerate* was explicitly targeted at underrepresented staff and resourced accordingly, with senior sponsorship signalling institutional commitment. This framing was not about lowering standards but about levelling access to development opportunities that are often distributed informally. Eligibility criteria and aims were communicated transparently, countering opaque sponsorship practices that typically shape progression into senior roles.

Line manager involvement was also embedded as a design feature, reflecting an understanding that individual development alone is insufficient to shift progression outcomes. Managers were engaged early through an inclusive leadership session, designed to prompt reflection on bias, power and the assumptions embedded in progression decisions. While sustained engagement varied, this design choice reinforced the message that leadership development and career progression are shared responsibilities.

Accessibility considerations were addressed through collaboration with the university, which applied its existing reasonable adjustment frameworks to support participants as needed. Materials were shared in advance, objectives were co-created, and time was built in between sessions to allow reflection and application. This pacing recognised that development occurs alongside demanding roles, and that meaningful learning requires space rather than intensity.

From a practitioner's perspective, these design choices were intentional responses to the question of what underrepresented staff need to progress. Rather than prescribing behaviours or competencies, *Accelerate* prioritised belonging, recognition and agency. The programme's innovation lay not in the novelty of its content, but in the coherence among values, design, and facilitation. Inclusion was not an add-on but the foundation upon which leadership and career development were built.

Participant outcomes and early impact

As *Accelerate* concluded in July 2025, it was still too early to assess long term progression outcomes such as promotion or movement into senior roles. However, early evidence from participant feedback, facilitator observation and stakeholder reflection indicates meaningful impact at both individual and cultural levels. These outcomes are particularly relevant in the context of career development, where shifts in confidence, identity and agency often precede visible progression.

Participation and data sources

The programme cohort consisted of 20 participants from across academic, professional services and commercial roles. Participants represented a range of underrepresented backgrounds, including women, racially minoritised staff and disabled colleagues. Feedback data was gathered through a voluntary post-programme survey and written testimonials. Not all participants submitted formal feedback, a pattern consistent with internal development initiatives of this nature. In total, written feedback was received from approximately half of the cohort.

Feedback responses were reviewed thematically by the facilitator to identify recurring patterns in participant experience. This analysis was supplemented by observational insights gathered throughout the programme and reflections shared by line managers and senior stakeholders during the final presentations. While the dataset is modest, it offers credible qualitative insight into how participants experienced the programme and the types of outcomes it supported.

Confidence and leadership identity

A consistent theme across participant feedback was increased confidence in leadership identity. Many participants described entering the programme with uncertainty about whether leadership roles were accessible or appropriate for them. This uncertainty was often linked to prior experiences of being overlooked, receiving ambiguous feedback or operating in environments where few senior leaders shared similar backgrounds.

Through reflective exercises, peer discussion and strengths-based framing, participants reported a shift in how they understood their leadership capability. Several described moving away from deficit narratives towards greater recognition of their existing contribution. One participant reflected:

> *Accelerate* has been a really transformative experience. The programme not only helped me understand my own leadership style, but also gave me the tools and confidence to lead others effectively.

This shift is significant from a career development perspective. Research suggests that leadership identity and self-belief play a central role in whether individuals pursue progression opportunities (Cashman, 2017; Bridgstock, 2009). For underrepresented staff, these internalised narratives are often shaped by systemic exclusion rather than lack of capability. *Accelerate* supported participants to reframe these narratives and recognise leadership as something they were already practising.

Career ownership and self-advocacy

Participants also reported increased confidence in career ownership. Sessions focused on visibility, self-advocacy and progression pathways helped participants develop language to articulate their impact and aspirations. Several participants described initiating conversations with line managers about development, progression or stretch opportunities during or shortly after the programme.

Importantly, not all participants equated success with immediate promotion. For some, impact was reflected in greater clarity about career direction or confidence in applying for opportunities when ready. As one participant noted:

> *Accelerate* helped me stop waiting to be noticed and start thinking more intentionally about how I want my career to progress.

These outcomes align with career development practice emphasising the importance of career management skills such as networking, self-advocacy and proactive planning, particularly in environments where progression relies on informal processes (Bridgstock, 2009; Patton & McMahon, 2006)

Peer connection and belonging

One of the most frequently cited outcomes was the value of peer connection. Participants described the cohort as a rare space where shared experiences of underrepresentation could be discussed without explanation or defensiveness. The Action Learning Sets were highlighted as particularly impactful, offering structured opportunities for reflection and mutual support.

Participants noted that these peer relationships reduced feelings of isolation and increased confidence in navigating organisational challenges. Several expressed intentions to maintain connections beyond the programme, including informal peer support and future collaboration. In a sector where senior roles can be experienced as isolating, this sense of collective solidarity represents a meaningful outcome in its own right.

Line manager and stakeholder perspectives

The involvement of line managers in the final presentations added an additional layer of impact. Managers reported gaining deeper insight into the experiences and aspirations of their team members. Several reflected that the presentations prompted reconsideration of how leadership potential is recognised and supported.

A senior stakeholder commented:

> It was inspiring and challenging to hear the reflections shared. *Accelerate* is not just developing individuals, it is encouraging the organisation to reflect on itself.

While sustained engagement from all managers was uneven, this moment of shared reflection reinforced the programme's dual focus on individual development and cultural awareness. It also highlighted the limits of individual focused interventions where wider systems remain unchanged.

Cultural signals and early ripple effects

Beyond individual outcomes, *Accelerate* contributed to broader conversations within the institution about leadership, inclusion and career support. Participants shared learning informally within their departments, and the programme generated interest among colleagues and senior leaders.

Several participants described a raised sense of expectation about what development should look and feel like. One noted:

> I now know what good leadership development can look like, and I am more confident asking for support that reflects that.

While subtle, these cultural signals are important. Career progression is shaped not only by formal structures but by shared assumptions about who leadership is for and how it develops. *Accelerate* began to challenge some of these assumptions by making underrepresented leadership visible and valued.

Limitations and critical reflection

Participant feedback also highlighted limitations. Some questioned the extent to which line manager engagement translated into sustained behavioural change, noting that those already inclusive were most responsive. This reflects a broader challenge in leadership development where programmes risk supporting individuals without sufficiently shifting the systems around them.

These reflections reinforce the need for career development interventions to sit alongside wider organisational strategies. *Accelerate* did not claim to resolve structural inequality on its own. However, it offered a credible model for supporting underrepresented staff at a critical transition point, while generating insight into where further institutional effort is required.

Taken together, the outcomes of *Accelerate* suggest that inclusive leadership development can function as an effective career intervention. By supporting confidence, identity, peer connection and career ownership, the programme addressed factors that often inhibit progression long before formal promotion decisions are made.

Reflections and implications for career practitioners

Accelerate was never designed as a stand-alone solution to structural inequality in career progression. Instead, it functioned as a focused intervention within a much wider organisational context, offering insight into what career development support can achieve when it is intentionally designed for underrepresented talent approaching senior transition points. From a career practitioner perspective, several practice-relevant reflections emerge.

Leadership development as career development

A central learning from *Accelerate* is the importance of framing leadership development explicitly as career development. Participants did not experience leadership as an abstract concept or future aspiration, but as something already embedded in their roles, relationships and influence. By making leadership visible in this way, the programme supported participants to recognise transferable career capital, including decision-making, boundary-setting, influencing and relationship management.

For career practitioners, this reinforces the value of broadening how leadership is discussed in career conversations. Leadership behaviours often develop well before formal leadership titles are acquired. Supporting clients to recognise and articulate these behaviours can strengthen confidence, readiness and narrative coherence when navigating progression pathways, particularly in environments where informal signals carry significant weight.

Designing for systems awareness and psychological safety

Accelerate highlighted the importance of systems awareness in career development practice. Participants benefited from explicit discussion of how organisational structures, power dynamics and informal practices shape opportunity. Naming these influences reduced self-blame and supported more strategic engagement with progression decisions.

Career practitioners may not always be positioned to change systems directly. However, they can play a critical role in helping individuals interpret and navigate those systems. This includes supporting clients to distinguish between personal development needs and structural constraints, and to make informed choices about when and how to pursue progression.

Psychological safety emerged as a key condition for this work. Participants engaged most deeply when they felt able to reflect honestly on doubt, frustration and ambition without fear of judgement. For practitioners, this underscores the importance of facilitation style, language and pacing. Career conversations that allow space for uncertainty and emotion are not a soft addition, but a necessary foundation for meaningful reflection and decision-making.

Strengths-based leadership identity and career narratives

The use of strengths-based leadership archetypes had a notable impact on how participants understood themselves as leaders. By shifting attention away from perceived gaps and towards existing capability, participants developed more confident and authentic leadership narratives.

This has direct relevance for career practice. Career narratives are often shaped by dominant norms about what success looks like, which can marginalise those whose leadership does not conform to those norms. Practitioners can support clients to construct narratives that reflect their values, strengths and lived experience, rather than encouraging assimilation into narrow models of leadership.

This approach aligns with career development research emphasising self-efficacy, identity and narrative as key drivers of progression decisions (Bridgstock, 2009). It also resonates with systems-based frameworks that recognise career development as relational and context dependent rather than purely individual (Patton & McMahon, 2006).

Supporting navigation of formal and informal pathways

Accelerate reinforced the significance of informal pathways in career progression. Participants frequently identified visibility, sponsorship and access to networks as decisive factors in advancement. While these dynamics are often difficult to address directly, career practitioners can support clients to engage with them more intentionally.

This includes developing career management skills such as self-advocacy, strategic relationship building and preparation for progression conversations. Importantly, these skills were not framed as self-promotion, but as clarity of contribution and intent. Practitioners can help clients practise language that feels authentic while still making impact visible.

At the same time, *Accelerate* highlighted the limits of individual strategy in the absence of organisational change. Some participants noted that despite increased confidence, structural barriers remained. This underscores the need for career practitioners working within organisations to complement individual support with advocacy, partnership and influence where possible, particularly when designing development provision for underrepresented groups.

Working at later career stages

Accelerate also raises questions about how career development support is distributed across the career lifespan. Career guidance is often prioritised for early career transitions, with less structured support available for individuals approaching senior leadership. Yet this is precisely the stage at which representation gaps widen most sharply.

This case study suggests that targeted career development at later stages can play a critical role in addressing inequalities at the top of organisations. Practitioners working with experienced professionals can support reflection on identity, readiness and aspiration in ways that differ from early career guidance, but are no less necessary.

Practitioner reflexivity and role

Finally, *Accelerate* emphasised the importance of practitioner reflexivity. The facilitator's role extended beyond programme delivery to holding space, modelling inclusive practice and attending to group dynamics. This relational labour was central to outcomes, yet often remains invisible in formal evaluation.

For career practitioners, this invites reflection on how our own identities, assumptions and facilitation choices shape client experience. Inclusive career development is not only about tools and frameworks, but about how those tools are used and the conditions created for reflection.

In sum, *Accelerate* offers a practice-informed illustration of how leadership development can operate as a career intervention when designed with systems awareness, psychological safety and identity at its core (Patton & McMahon, 2006). For career practitioners, the challenge is not to replicate the programme wholesale, but to apply its underlying principles in ways that fit their own contexts, roles and constraints.

Conclusion

Accelerate was conceived as more than a leadership development programme. It was a deliberate career development intervention, designed to address a persistent and well documented gap in progression for underrepresented staff approaching senior leadership within higher education. By intervening at Grades 7 and 8, the programme sought to support individuals at a critical career transition point, while also surfacing insights about the organisational conditions that shape who progresses and who does not.

The case study demonstrates that inclusive leadership development can function as a meaningful career intervention when it attends to identity, confidence and systems alongside skills. For participants, *Accelerate* created space to recognise existing leadership capability, develop clearer career narratives and engage more intentionally with progression pathways. These outcomes did not rely on a single element of the programme, but on the coherence between design, facilitation and values. Psychological safety, strengths-based framing and peer connection were not incidental features, but foundational conditions that enabled participants to reflect honestly and act with greater agency.

At the same time, the programme revealed the limits of individual-focused interventions. While participants reported increased confidence and clarity, feedback also highlighted the uneven impact of line manager engagement and the persistence of structural barriers. This reinforces an important message for career practitioners and organisations alike: supporting underrepresented individuals to progress must go hand in hand with sustained attention to the systems and cultures that shape opportunity. Leadership development programmes alone cannot dismantle inequality, but they can make visible where further institutional effort is required.

For career practitioners, *Accelerate* offers several transferable insights. It highlights the value of working with leadership identity in career development, particularly at later career stages when formal guidance is often limited (Cashman, 2017). It underscores the importance of systems awareness in helping clients navigate informal progression pathways without internalising structural constraint as personal failure (Patton & McMahon, 2006). It also draws attention to the relational and facilitative dimensions of career practice, where trust, pacing and psychological safety shape the depth and impact of career conversations (Brookfield, 2017; Tulshyan, 2022).

More broadly, this case study contributes to growing practice-based evidence that career development plays a critical role in addressing representation gaps in positions of power and influence. When career support is extended beyond early career transitions and designed with inclusion at its core, it can help individuals not only progress but do so in ways that are authentic, sustainable, and aligned with their values.

Accelerate does not offer a blueprint for universal replication. Instead, it provides an example of how leadership development and career development can be intentionally integrated to support underrepresented talent within complex organisations. For career practitioners working across sectors, the challenge is to translate these principles into their own contexts, while continuing to ask difficult questions about whose potential is recognised, whose progression is supported and what leadership is ultimately for.

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Research Article

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Examining secure childhood parental attachment, age, and academic progress in relation to vocational identity in undergraduate students

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Abstract

Vocational identity, a critical factor in career development, reflects an individual's clarity and commitment to career goals. This study examined the influence of age, secure childhood parental attachments to mother and father figures, and academic progress (credit hours) on vocational identity among undergraduate students. Using a cross-sectional design, data from 298 students were analysed via multiple linear regression and descriptive statistics. The My Vocational Situation Scale measured vocational identity, with mother safe and father safe assessed via the Adult Scale of Parental Attachment-Short Form. Results indicated that the model explained 15.7% of variance in the total score of My Vocational Situation Scale. Age, mother safe, and father safe were significant predictors, with credit hours marginally significant. Descriptive analyses revealed higher vocational identity means for high mother safe and high father safe groups, with the high mother safe/high father safe group showing the strongest vocational identity. Findings suggest that secure childhood parental attachments and younger age enhance vocational identity, with academic progress playing a marginal role. Implications for career counselling include attachment-informed interventions to support students' career clarity. Future research should explore longitudinal designs and additional predictors to enhance model explanatory power.

Keywords: vocational identity, career development, parental attachment, career counselling, academic progress

Introduction

Vocational identity, defined as an individual's clear and stable understanding of their career-related interests, values, goals, and roles, is a critical psychological construct in career development (Holland et al., 1980). It reflects the extent to which individuals feel confident in their career decisions and committed to their chosen paths, encompassing a coherent sense of self in occupational contexts. A well-developed vocational identity is associated with fewer career decision-making difficulties and greater career satisfaction (Holland et al., 1980; Super, 1990). As a dynamic construct, vocational identity is shaped by an interplay of personal, developmental, and contextual factors, including early attachment experiences, age, and academic engagement. Understanding these influences is essential for educators, counsellors, and policymakers to support healthy career development, particularly among undergraduate students navigating critical transitions in emerging adulthood.

The present study investigates the relationships between vocational identity (measured by the My Vocational Situation Scale, MVS) and selected predictors: age, secure childhood parental attachment (Mother Safe [MS] and Father Safe [FS]), and academic progress (credit hours). While prior research has explored the roles of attachment, gender, age, and socioeconomic status (SES) in vocational identity formation, preliminary analyses indicated that age and secure childhood parental attachment were particularly salient predictors, with credit hours showing a marginal effect. This study employs a simplified multiple linear regression model to examine these factors, complemented by descriptive analyses of MVS means across high and low MS and FS levels. By focusing on these predictors, the study aims to elucidate their contributions to vocational identity among undergraduate students, offering insights for career counselling and educational interventions.

Literature review

Vocational identity

Vocational identity, a central construct in vocational psychology, refers to an individual's clear and stable understanding of their career-related goals, interests, abilities, personality, and values (Holland et al., 1980; Jansen & Roodt, 2015). It seeks to answer the question, 'Who am I at work?' and serves as a critical framework for understanding career-related behaviour, decision-making, and commitment (Coetzee et al., 2003; Savickas, 2005, 2013). According to Holland et al. (1980), vocational identity represents 'the possession of a clear and stable picture of one's goals, interests, and talents' (p. 1191), which enables individuals to navigate uncertain labour markets and make informed career choices.

Drawing on Holland's (1996) definition and Savickas's Career Construction Theory (CCT), vocational identity is conceptualised as a lifelong process in which attitudes, interests, abilities, and values are individually constructed. Individuals with strong vocational identities demonstrate mature career behaviours, including exploration, goal-setting, and decisive action, whereas those with weaker vocational identities often experience career indecision, identity confusion, and difficulty committing to a career path (Holland et al., 1980; Savickas, 1985). Empirical research supports these claims; for example, adolescents and emerging adults with stronger vocational identities are more adept at making career-related decisions and navigating the complexities of occupational development (Holland et al., 1980; Arnett, 2000).

Vocational identity is also embedded within broader theories of identity development. Erikson (1968) emphasised that identity encompasses a coherent sense of self, consistency in beliefs and values, and a framework for personal commitments. Within this perspective, vocational identity is an essential component of overall identity formation, reflecting an individual's values and beliefs about work and providing a stable foundation for occupational decision-making. Together, these theoretical and empirical perspectives highlight vocational identity as a dynamic, developmentally influenced construct with significant implications for career counselling, educational interventions, and lifelong career development.

Early childhood attachment and vocational identity

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) posits that early relationships with caregivers form a foundation for psychological development, influencing self-esteem, self-efficacy, and exploration behaviours critical to vocational identity. Secure attachments, characterised by consistent and supportive caregiving, foster confidence and autonomy, enabling individuals to explore career options with assurance (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Securely attached individuals tend to exhibit clearer career aspirations and more stable vocational identities, as they approach decision-making with trust in themselves and others (Ketterson & Blustein, 1997). Conversely, insecure attachments (e.g., anxious or avoidant) may lead to identity confusion, indecision, or reliance on external validation, hindering career commitment (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

In the university context, the transition to higher education mirrors Ainsworth's 'Strange Situation,' presenting opportunities for independence alongside challenges such as anxiety and loneliness (Hiester et al., 2009; Kenny & Rice, 1995). Secure parental attachments provide a 'secure base' for students to retreat to when facing academic or career-related stressors, facilitating exploration and resilience (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991). Specifically, secure mother and father attachments (MS and FS) may differentially influence vocational identity, with mothers often providing emotional support and fathers offering instrumental guidance (Blustein et al., 1991). Research suggests that secure attachments correlate with proactive career behaviours and stronger vocational identities, while insecure attachments may impede decision-making and exploration (Tokar et al., 2003).

A study by Strate, Michael, and Hammond (2023) further supports the role of childhood parental attachment in vocational identity among university students. Using structural equation modelling (SEM) with undergraduates, they examined the effects of childhood attachment, gender, age, and SES on vocational identity. Their findings indicated an acceptable model fit, with parental attachment significantly influencing vocational identity, suggesting that secure attachment experiences enhance career clarity and commitment. The study also explored gender and SES, finding nuanced effects on vocational identity. This research provides a robust empirical foundation for the current study, which focuses specifically on secure mother and father childhood attachments (MS and FS) using a simplified linear regression approach, excluding gender and SES based on preliminary findings of their non-significance.

Age and vocational identity

Vocational identity evolves across the lifespan, with distinct patterns in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Younger university students often engage in broad career exploration, driven by optimism and openness, while older students may face pressures to commit to specific paths as graduation approaches, potentially leading to indecision or weakened vocational identity (Super, 1990). Age-related transitions can prompt shifts in career goals, influenced by developmental milestones and life experiences. Studies indicate that younger students may report stronger vocational identities due to exploratory freedom, whereas older students may experience identity re-evaluation (Savickas, 2002). Strate et al. (2023) included age in their SEM model, finding that it contributed to vocational identity, though the direction and magnitude of its effect were not specified. The current study tests age as a direct predictor, hypothesising a negative association based on preliminary findings.

Academic engagement and vocational identity

Academic progress, measured by credit hours, reflects students' investment in their educational and career trajectories. Greater academic engagement is associated with increased exposure to career-relevant experiences (e.g., coursework, internships), which may clarify vocational goals and strengthen identity (Super, 1990). Research suggests that students further along in their academic programmes exhibit greater career commitment, though this effect may vary based on individual and contextual factors (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The current study includes credit hours as a predictor to capture the role of academic progress, building on prior work that links educational experiences to career development.

Study objectives

While prior studies, including Strate et al. (2023), have examined vocational identity in relation to attachment, age, gender, and SES, few have focused on the specific contributions of secure childhood parental attachment and academic progress within a simplified model. This study addresses this gap by testing a multiple linear regression model with vocational identity (MVS) as the dependent variable and age, Mother Safe (MS), Father Safe (FS), and credit hours as predictors, excluding gender and SES based on their non-significance in preliminary analyses. Additionally, descriptive analyses explore vocational identity means across high and low MS and FS levels to elucidate their combined effects. The research questions are: 1) To what extent do age, secure parental attachment, and credit hours predict vocational identity? 2) How do high and low levels of secure childhood mother and father attachment influence vocational identity? By integrating attachment theory and vocational psychology, this study aims to inform career counselling practices and support systems for undergraduate students.

Methodology

Study design and participants

This cross-sectional study examined the relationship between demographic, academic, and parental attachment factors and vocational identity among undergraduate students. Participants were 310 full-time undergraduates enrolled at a midsize public university in the south-eastern United States. Data were collected via an online survey administered through Qualtrics. Inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 18 years of age.

The sample was predominantly female (n = 184, 59.4%) and White (n = 236, 76.1%), with a mean age of 20.2 years (SD = 2.1, range = 18–31). Socioeconomic status was self-reported on a five-point scale (1 = low, 5 = high), with a mean of 3.2 (SD = 1.1). Academic classification was distributed as follows: freshmen (n = 89, 28.7%), sophomores (n = 78, 25.2%), juniors (n = 72, 23.2%), and seniors (n = 71, 22.9%). The mean cumulative GPA was 3.1 (SD = 0.5, range = 0.0–4.0), and the mean number of credit hours completed was 52.4 (SD = 28.3). Nearly all participants had declared a major (n = 298, 96.1%), with 42.3% reporting at least one formal major change and 31.6% reporting informal changes.

After listwise deletion of cases with missing data on key variables (MVS, AGE, MS, FS, or Credit Hours), the final analytical sample included 298 participants, which was sufficient for regression analyses with four predictors (Green, 1991). Participants were recruited through department announcements, student organisations, and class presentations, and were entered into a raffle for one of four $15 gift cards. All participants provided informed consent, and study procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participant confidentiality was maintained through a two-level identification system.

Measures

Dependent Variable. Vocational identity was measured using the My Vocational Situation Scale (MVS; Holland, Gottfredson, & Power, 1980), which assesses career-related confidence and clarity of vocational goals. The scale consists of 18 items scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), with total scores ranging from 18 to 90; higher scores indicate stronger vocational identity. In this study, MVS was calculated as the sum of all 18 items, with complete data available for all 298 participants. The scale has demonstrated adequate internal consistency in prior research (Cronbach's α = .85).

Predictor variables

The Adult Scale of Parental Attachment–Short Form (ASPA-SF; Michael & Snow, 2019) is an instrument designed to obtain information about an adult's perception of their patterns of relating to both mother and father childhood figures. These relational patterns help determine an individual's attachment style, which influences how relationships are formed and maintained throughout life (particularly the parent–child relationship). By assessing these patterns, individuals gain insight into how early attachment experiences may shape relational tendencies. Individuals experiencing safe patterns of relating to parents typically feel secure and supported in relationships, which can influence emotional regulation and career-related confidence in adulthood. The ASPA-SF assesses parental attachment based on childhood experiences and includes five subscales: Safe, Dependent, Parentified, Distant, and Fearful. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Constantly).

The following predictor variables were included in the analyses:

1. Age (AGE): A continuous variable representing participants' age in years, as reported in the demographic survey.

2. Mother Safe Attachment (MS): Secure attachment to the mother was measured using the Safe subscale of the ASPA-SF. This four-item subscale uses a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Constantly), with total scores ranging from 4 to 20; higher scores indicate stronger secure attachment. An example item is, 'I had

my mother with me when I was upset.' Cronbach's alpha for MS was previously established as .92 (Michael & Snow, 2019).

3. Father Safe Attachment (FS): Secure attachment to the father was also measured using the Safe subscale of the ASPA-SF. This four-item subscale is rated on the same 5-point scale (1 = Never, 5 = Constantly), with total scores ranging from 4 to 20; higher scores indicate stronger secure attachment. An example item is, 'I turned to my father for many things, including comfort and reassurance.' Cronbach's alpha for FS was previously established as .91 (Michael & Snow, 2019).

4. Credit Hours (CreditHours): A continuous variable representing the total number of academic credit hours completed by participants, reflecting their academic progress.

Data collection

Data were collected via a comprehensive online survey that included demographic questions (e.g., age, gender), academic information (e.g., credit hours), and validated psychological scales (MVS and ASPA-SF). Responses were stored securely and processed using Python (version 3.9) with the *pandas* and *statsmodels* libraries.

Data Cleaning

The initial dataset contained 310 records. Cases with missing values on MVS, AGE, MS, FS, or Credit Hours were excluded via listwise deletion, resulting in 298 complete cases. The parental attachment scales (MS, FS) were provided as summed scores (4–20), and no further calculation was required. Descriptive statistics confirmed that MS and FS scores fell within the expected range (4–20), and MVS scores ranged from approximately 18 to 90, consistent with theoretical expectations.

Statistical analysis

Regression Analysis

A multiple linear regression was conducted to examine the effects of AGE, MS, FS, and Credit Hours on MVS. The model was specified as:

$$\text{MVS}=\beta_0+\beta_1\cdot\text{AGE}+\beta_2\cdot\text{FS}+\beta_3\cdot\text{MS}+\beta_4\cdot\text{CreditHours}+\epsilon$$

where β_0 is the intercept, β_1 to β_4 are regression coefficients, and ϵ is the error term. The analysis was performed using the statsmodels library in Python. Model fit was assessed using R^2, adjusted R^2, and the F-statistic. Significance of individual predictors was evaluated using t-tests ($p < 0.05$). Assumptions of linearity, normality, and homoscedasticity were assessed via residual diagnostics (Omnibus test, Durbin-Watson statistic, and condition number).

Descriptive Analysis

To explore the effects of MS and FS on MVS, the sample was categorised into high and low attachment groups using a median split (MS median = 14; FS median = 14). Four groups were created: Low MS/Low FS, Low MS/High FS, High MS/Low FS, and High MS/High FS. Mean MVS scores and standard deviations were computed for each group using pandas. This analysis provided insight into the combined effects of maternal and paternal secure attachment on vocational identity.

Ethical considerations

The study used de-identified data to ensure participant confidentiality, with no personal identifying information included in the dataset. All Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols and ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process.

Results

The final analytical sample consisted of 298 undergraduate students after listwise deletion for missing values in MVS, AGE, FS, MS, and CreditHours. Descriptive statistics for the dependent variable and predictors were as follows: MVS ($M = 52.27$, $SD = 8.65$, range = 18–90), AGE ($M = 20.24$, $SD = 2.12$, range = 18–31), FS ($M = 12.94$, $SD = 3.38$, range = 4–20), MS ($M = 13.22$, $SD = 3.14$, range = 4–20), and CreditHours ($M = 52.41$, $SD = 28.31$, range = 0–150). The distributions of MS and FS were approximately symmetric, with medians of 14 for both. These medians were used to categorise participants into high (> 14) and low (≤ 14) attachment groups for the descriptive analyses. Assumptions for linear regression were assessed: residual plots indicated approximate linearity and homoscedasticity; however, the Omnibus test ($p = 0.001$) suggested non-normality of residuals (skew = −0.468). The condition number (112) indicated a low risk of multicollinearity, which was further confirmed by variance inflation factors (VIFs) for AGE (1.03), FS (1.24), MS (1.26), and CreditHours (1.05), all well below the commonly accepted threshold of 5.

Multiple linear regression

A multiple linear regression was conducted to examine the effects of AGE, FS, MS, and CreditHours on MVS. The model was significant, $F(4, 293) = 13.64$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 15.7% of the variance in vocational identity ($R^2 = 0.157$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.145$). Table 1 presents the regression results.

Table 1: Multiple Linear Regression Results for MVS Total (N = 298)

Predictor	**β**	**SE**	**t**	**p**	**95% CI**
Constant	46.723	3.963	11.789	<.0001	[38.921, 54.525]
AGE	-0.345	0.092	-3.734	<.0001	[-0.527, -0.163]
FS (Father Safe)	0.460	0.147	3.135	0.002	[0.171, 0.748]
MS (Mother Safe)	0.352	0.147	2.388	0.018	[0.062, 0.642]
Credit Hours	0.297	0.173	1.723	0.086	[-0.042, 0.637]

Significant predictors included AGE ($\beta = -0.345$, $SE = 0.092$, $t = -3.734$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that older students reported lower vocational identity, with a 0.345-point decrease in MVS per year of age. Father Safe attachment (FS) was significant ($\beta = 0.460$, $SE = 0.147$, $t = 3.135$, $p = 0.002$), suggesting that a one-unit increase in secure father attachment was associated with a 0.460-point increase in MVS. Mother Safe attachment

(MS) was also significant ($\beta = 0.352$, SE = 0.147, $t = 2.388$, $p = 0.018$), indicating a 0.352-point increase in MVS per unit increase in secure mother attachment. Credit Hours was marginally significant ($\beta = 0.297$, SE = 0.173, $t = 1.723$, $p = 0.086$), suggesting a trend where greater academic progress may enhance vocational identity.

Descriptive Analysis of MVS by MS and FS Levels

To further explore the effects of secure parental attachment, MVS means were compared across high (> 14) and low (≤ 14) levels of MS and FS using median splits (MS median = 14; FS median = 14). Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to assess group differences, with Cohen's *d* reported as an estimate of effect size. Results are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean MVS Total Scores by Mother and Father Safe Attachment Levels (N = 298)

Group	N	Mean	SD	Cohen's d
Mother Safe Attachment (MS)				
Low MS (≤ 14)	151	50.43	8.72	0.43
High MS (> 14)	147	54.12	8.45	
Father Safe Attachment (FS)				
Low FS (≤ 14)	153	50.25	8.69	0.47
High FS (> 14)	145	54.31	8.38	
Combined MS and FS Levels				
Low MS & Low FS	94	49.20	8.61	–
Low MS & High FS	57	52.39	8.63	0.37 (vs. Low MS & Low FS)
High MS & Low FS	59	51.51	8.59	0.27 (vs. Low MS & Low FS)
High MS & High FS	88	55.83	7.97	0.77 (vs. Low MS & Low FS)

MS Levels

Students with high MS ($M = 54.12$, $SD = 8.45$, $N = 147$) reported significantly higher MVS scores than those with low MS ($M = 50.43$, $SD = 8.72$, $N = 151$), $t(296) = -3.70$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.43$. This moderate effect size indicates that stronger mother-safe childhood attachment is associated with enhanced vocational identity.

FS Levels

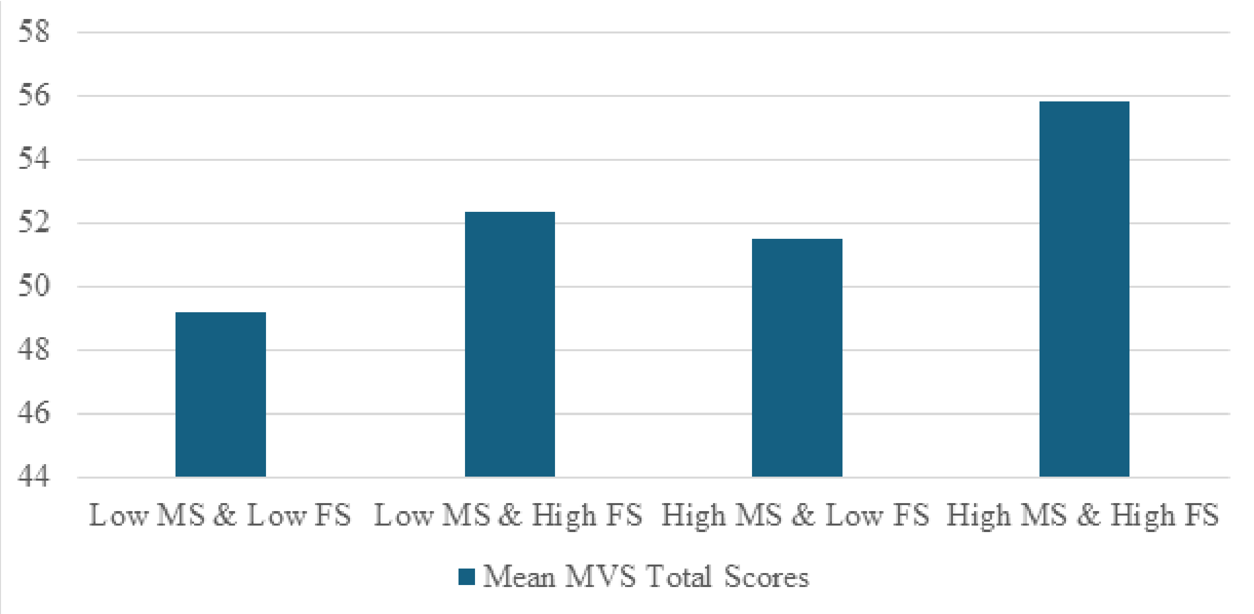
Students with high FS ($M = 54.31$, $SD = 8.38$, $N = 145$) reported significantly higher MVS scores than those with low FS ($M = 50.25$, $SD = 8.69$, $N = 153$), $t(296) = -4.02$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.47$. This moderate effect size suggests that stronger father-safe attachment is linked to stronger vocational identity, with a slightly larger effect than MS.

Combined MS and FS Levels

Mean MVS scores were compared across four groups: Low MS/Low FS ($M = 49.20$, $SD = 8.61$, $N = 94$), Low MS/High FS ($M = 52.39$, $SD = 8.63$, $N = 57$), High MS/Low FS ($M = 51.51$, $SD = 8.59$, $N = 59$), and High MS/High FS ($M = 55.83$, $SD = 7.97$, $N = 88$). A one-way ANOVA confirmed significant differences, $F(3, 294) = 7.23$, $p < 0.001$. Post-hoc

Tukey tests revealed that the High MS/High FS group had significantly higher MVS scores than the Low MS/Low FS group ($p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.77$), indicating a large effect. The Low MS/High FS group ($p = 0.049$, Cohen's $d = 0.37$) and High MS/Low FS group ($p = 0.208$, Cohen's $d = 0.27$) showed smaller, non-significant differences compared to Low MS/Low FS, suggesting that secure attachment to both parents has a synergistic effect on vocational identity. Figure 1 illustrates the mean MVS scores across the four MS/FS groups, highlighting the highest vocational identity in the High MS/High FS group.

Figure 1. Mean MVS total scores across the four MS/FS groups



Discussion

The current study examined the associations between demographic, academic, and childhood parental attachment factors and vocational identity among undergraduate students, using a simplified multiple linear regression model and descriptive analyses. The findings highlight the significant roles of age, mother-safe attachment (MS), and father-safe attachment (FS) in predicting MVS scores, with a marginal effect of credit hours. These results contribute to the literature on vocational development by underscoring the influence of secure parental bonds on career-related confidence, while also revealing the diminishing role of vocational identity with age.

Consistent with prior research on vocational identity formation (e.g., Holland et al., 1980), age emerged as a robust negative predictor of MVS, with older students reporting lower vocational identity. This finding aligns with theories of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), where younger students may exhibit greater optimism and exploration in career goals, whereas older students face increased pressures from impending graduation, leading to heightened indecision or barriers. The effect size ($\beta = -0.345$) suggests a meaningful impact, equivalent to a 3.45-point decrease in MVS for every 10-year increase in age, though the sample's age range (18–31) limits generalisability to non-traditional students.

Secure childhood parental attachments, particularly MS and FS, were significant positive predictors of vocational identity, supporting attachment theory's extension to career development (Bowlby, 1988; Ketterson & Blustein, 1997). Students with higher MS and

FS scores reported stronger MVS, with FS showing a slightly larger effect (β = 0.460 vs. 0.352). This may reflect differential parental influences, whereby father figures often provide instrumental career guidance (e.g., exploration, modelling), whereas mother figures offer emotional support (e.g., encouragement), both of which foster a secure base for vocational exploration (Blustein et al., 1991). The descriptive analysis reinforced this, with the high MS/high FS group exhibiting the highest mean MVS (55.83), significantly higher than the low MS/low FS group (49.20, Cohen's d = 0.77), indicating a large effect. Mixed attachment groups (e.g., high MS/low FS) showed intermediate means, suggesting compensatory effects where a secure relationship with one parent mitigates deficits in the other. These patterns extend prior work showing secure attachments correlate with career decisiveness (Tokar et al., 2003), emphasising the need for interventions targeting family dynamics in career counselling.

Credit hours was marginally significant (p = 0.086), with a positive trend suggesting that greater academic progress may enhance vocational identity. This could reflect cumulative experiences (e.g., internships, coursework) that clarify career paths, consistent with Super's (1990) life-span career development model. However, the marginal significance warrants caution and replication in larger samples.

The overall model explained 15.7% of the variance in vocational identity, representing a modest but meaningful proportion given the multifaceted nature of this construct. These findings suggest that while demographic and attachment factors play important roles, vocational identity is likely shaped by a broader set of influences, including environmental, relational, and contextual factors not captured in this model. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and incorporate additional predictors (such as peer relationships, mentoring experiences, or sense of belonging) to enhance explanatory power and provide a more comprehensive understanding of vocational identity development.

Implications

Theoretically, these findings strengthen the integration of attachment theory with vocational psychology, highlighting that secure parental bonds provide a critical foundation for career confidence and exploration during emerging adulthood. Students with strong mother and father attachments appear better equipped to navigate vocational decisions, suggesting that early relational security supports the development of career clarity, decisiveness, and resilience in the face of career-related challenges.

Practically, these results have several implications for career development and counselling practice. University career services and counselling centres could implement attachment-informed assessments to identify students with less secure parental attachments. For these students, targeted interventions (such as mentoring programmes, peer coaching, or structured career workshops) can help provide a 'secure base' similar to supportive parental relationships, fostering vocational exploration and identity consolidation. Additionally, the finding that younger students report higher vocational identity indicates that early interventions may be particularly effective, supporting proactive career planning initiatives during the first years of undergraduate study.

For older or non-traditional students, career counsellors should consider age-related barriers, including heightened pressure from impending graduation, work responsibilities, or delayed career exploration. Tailored programmes, such as re-entry workshops, career decision-making support, and individualised counselling, can help these students enhance their vocational identity and navigate career transitions more effectively.

Moreover, the marginal influence of academic progress suggests that integrating experiential learning opportunities (such as internships, service-learning, and career-related coursework) into career counselling interventions may further strengthen vocational identity. Overall, these findings underscore the importance of relational and developmental factors in career counselling, emphasising that interventions addressing both family influences and individual career experiences can support students' vocational clarity, confidence, and long-term career development.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences; longitudinal studies are needed to track how parental attachments influence vocational identity over time. Second, the sample was from a single institution, predominantly White and female, limiting generalisability to diverse populations. Third, non-normal residuals (Omnibus $p = 0.001$) suggest potential violations of normality; future analyses could employ robust regression or transformations. Fourth, the median split for MS and FS simplifies continuous variables, potentially losing nuance; treating them as continuous in regressions mitigated this. Finally, self-report measures may introduce social desirability bias, and unmeasured variables (e.g., peer attachments, socioeconomic barriers) could confound results.

Future research

Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to examine how parental attachment, age, and academic experiences interact over time to influence vocational identity trajectories. Specifically, research could explore interactions between mother and father attachment (MS/FS) and age (e.g., moderated regression) to assess whether parental influences diminish with maturity. Expanding models to include environmental, relational, and institutional factors may enhance predictive power and provide a more comprehensive understanding of career development processes. Incorporating diverse samples and validating findings with objective career outcomes (e.g., employment post-graduation) would further strengthen the practical relevance of this work.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that secure parental attachments and age significantly influence vocational identity among undergraduate students, with academic progress playing a more limited role. Younger students and those reporting higher mother and father attachment security exhibited stronger vocational identity, highlighting the foundational role of relational security in career development. These findings underscore the value of integrating attachment theory into vocational psychology, suggesting that career confidence and clarity are shaped not only by educational experiences but also by early relational experiences.

From a practical perspective, the results support attachment-informed career counselling interventions, targeted mentoring programmes, and age-sensitive support strategies that promote vocational exploration and decision-making. By identifying students at risk for lower vocational identity, career services can implement proactive interventions that foster career clarity, resilience, and confidence, ultimately supporting more successful transitions into post-graduate careers. Overall, this study contributes to the literature by emphasising the interplay of developmental, relational, and academic factors in shaping vocational identity and informing effective career counselling practices.

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Reframing later life: The ThriveSpan framework for ages 60-80

Conceptual Article

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Abstract

Increased longevity has reshaped later life, yet many psychological and career development models continue to reflect assumptions formed in earlier demographic contexts. In particular, the period between approximately 60 and 80 remains under-theorised, often compressed into narratives of decline, disengagement, or retirement transition. This paper reviews selected life-stage and ageing theories and examines their limitations in relation to contemporary later life. Drawing on this analysis, alongside empirical research on meaning and sustained career psychology practice, the paper introduces ThriveSpan, an integrative, meaning-centred framework designed to support wellbeing, identity, and intentional living in the 60–80 life phase.

Keywords: Later life; ageing; lifespan development; meaning-making; later-life wellbeing; career development

Introduction

Increased longevity has fundamentally altered the shape and experience of later life. In many Western societies, individuals can now expect to live well into their eighties and beyond, often with decades of relatively good health following the end of full-time work (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Yet the psychological and career development models most commonly used to understand the life course were developed in social, economic, and demographic contexts where such longevity was far less common. As a result, many prevailing frameworks struggle to account adequately for the lived realities of contemporary later life.

These shifts have implications not only for individual wellbeing, but also for how work, retirement, health, and ageing are understood at policy, organisational, and cultural levels. Conceptual models that fail to reflect contemporary longevity risk reinforcing outdated assumptions about capability, dependency, and value in later life.

Traditional life-stage theories tend to compress later life into a single stage or frame it primarily through decline and disengagement (Erikson, 1982; Neugarten, 1974). Career development models commonly assume linear progression towards retirement and withdrawal (Super, 1990). While more recent affirmative narratives challenge deficit-based views, they often prioritise productivity or perpetual reinvention without fully engaging with existential depth or the realities of ageing bodies (Gullette, 2004; Holstein & Minkler, 2003). Together, these approaches struggle to capture the prolonged, psychologically complex period that now characterises later life, particularly the decades between sixty and eighty.

This period is psychologically distinctive. Individuals in their sixties and seventies may remain physically capable and future-oriented, while simultaneously becoming more conscious of ageing, mortality, and time as a limited resource (Carstensen, 1993, 2021). Many navigate multiple generational responsibilities, including supporting adult children, responding to the increasing needs of ageing parents, and anticipating their own future health and care trajectories. Questions of meaning, identity, contribution, and alignment often come to the fore, not primarily as a desire for reinvention, but as a deeper developmental reckoning with what matters now.

This reorientation is often subtle and internally experienced, emerging through shifts in motivation, tolerance, and attention rather than through overt role transitions. It may be felt as growing discomfort with previously satisfying roles, reluctance to commit to new busyness, or a sense that prevailing narratives of 'successful ageing' no longer fit lived experience. Such changes can be difficult to recognise within existing developmental frameworks.

The absence of affirming, differentiated models of later life also has intergenerational consequences. As Baars (2012, p. 5) observes, contemporary society often treats older people as 'another human species,' disconnected from one's own possible future. This failure of identification limits communication across generations and narrows developmental imagination for both younger and older adults. Cultural resistance to ageing, evident in phrases such as 'I'm not old, I'm ageless,' may appear to challenge ageism but can paradoxically reinforce it by positioning 'old' as something to be denied rather than inhabited with intention and authenticity. Frameworks that articulate later life as a legitimate developmental phase can therefore offer both older and younger generations more realistic and humane ways of understanding ageing.

This paper contributes to later-life theory in two ways: first, by challenging the tendency of lifespan models to compress later life into a single, undifferentiated stage, and second, by introducing ThriveSpan as an integrative conceptual framework for understanding the distinctive psychological and developmental characteristics of the 60–80 phase of later life.

Defining the 60–80 phase

While lifespan psychology emphasises chronological age and biological development, and stage theories focus on psychosocial tasks, contemporary later life requires both lenses. Box 1 sets out a framework for understanding the phases of life in which the age ranges provided are markers rather than boundaries – they reflect when particular psychological orientations commonly emerge while acknowledging individual variation. The model recognises that developmental stages describe inner experience and social context, which chronological age influences but does not determine.

This framework recognises the tension between stage and age. Life stages describe inner experience and social context, which may be disrupted by illness, caregiving, or non-normative life paths. At the same time, biological ageing remains a material reality that shapes capacity and vulnerability. A differentiated approach to later life must therefore attend to both psychological stages and chronological ageing, rather than assuming one negates the other.

Box 1: The five stages

Ages 0–20: *Formation*. A period of growth, dependency, and preparation. Identity is shaped largely by family, education, and circumstance. The primary developmental task is becoming someone able to engage with the wider world.

Ages 20–40: *Establishment*. A phase of building. Work, relationships, qualifications, and often parenting begin or intensify. Attention is predominantly outward, energy is typically high, and time is experienced as expansive. Even where life is difficult, the dominant orientation remains one of becoming.

Ages 40–60: *Responsibility and strain*. Often described as 'prime years', but frequently experienced as compressed and demanding. Career responsibility tends to peak, while emotional and practical demands from both adolescent and young adult children increase rather than diminish as they navigate their own transitions. Parents may begin to require support. This stage is not characterised by decline, but by sustained load-bearing.

Ages 60–80: *Reorientation* (ThriveSpan focus). Marked by the completion or loosening of primary life structures. Attention shifts from 'building toward' to what matters now, bringing questions of meaning, legacy, and how time and energy are used.

Ages 80+: *Reckoning and narrowing*. In advanced old age, change often accelerates. Loss becomes more frequent, physical and cognitive capacities may alter, and social worlds tend to contract. This stage is not defined solely by decline, but it involves different psychological tasks and support needs. Importantly, it should not be used to characterise later life as a whole, yet this conflation underpins many of the theoretical limitations identified in Section 2 and perpetuates ageist assumptions that obscure the developmental distinctiveness of the 60-80 phase.

Although there are no formal definitions distinguishing older workers, and age thresholds vary widely across research contexts (Brader, 2022; Stein & Rocco, 2001), this paper adopts a distinction commonly used in career development practice, and set out in Box 1, between midlife (approximately 45–60 years) and later life (60+ years) (Brown & Freedman, 2024). While midlife transitions have been widely examined (Infurna et al., 2020; Lachman, 2004; Walker, 2019), the developmental landscape of later life remains comparatively under-theorised.

Later life is not psychologically uniform, yet many lifespan and gerontological frameworks continue to treat it as a single, extended stage (Baltes, 1987; Cohen, 2005; Neugarten, 1974). In contrast, the period between approximately 60 and 80 years can be understood as a distinct developmental phase, characterised by identifiable psychological markers that differentiate it from both the preceding decade and advanced old age.

The years immediately preceding this phase, particularly the late fifties, are often marked by identity disentangling, role renegotiation, and efforts to consolidate or reinvent earlier life structures. From around age sixty onward, however, the orientation commonly shifts from reinvention toward reorientation. While chronological age provides a useful marker, these changes are better understood as stage-related rather than strictly age-determined, with considerable individual variation in timing.

Common markers of the 60–80 phase include increased discernment in the use of time and energy, a shift from optimisation and accumulation toward meaning and sufficiency, and heightened attentiveness to what sustains rather than depletes. Rather than withdrawal, this period often involves more selective engagement with work, relationships, and contribution, consistent with findings from socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1993, 2021) and later-life meaning research (Frankl, 2004; McAdams, 2001; Tornstam, 2005). In advanced old age, typically beyond the late seventies or eighties, the developmental terrain shifts again, with greater likelihood of physical contraction, dependency, and higher density of loss, accompanied by different psychological and support needs.

Recognising the 60–80 period as a distinct phase therefore allows for a more precise understanding of later-life development, one that acknowledges both continuity and change without defaulting to narratives of decline or perpetual productivity. While this paper focuses specifically on the 60–80 phase, it is situated within a broader life-course perspective that recognises multiple later-life stages. ThriveSpan is proposed as a within-stage framework for navigating the psychological, relational, and existential terrain of this particular phase.

Review of key life-stage and ageing theories

A wide range of psychological and career development theories have sought to explain how individuals grow, change, and adapt across the lifespan. Many were groundbreaking in their recognition that development continues into adulthood and later life. However, when viewed through the lens of contemporary longevity, their limitations become more apparent, particularly in relation to the extended and heterogeneous period of early later life. This section reviews selected theories that have shaped thinking about adult development, focusing on how later life has been conceptualised and where theoretical gaps remain.

The review that follows examines each theory on its own terms, assessing its contribution to understanding later life while identifying conceptual limitations in relation to the contemporary 60–80 phase. In response to the gaps identified, this paper proposes ThriveSpan, an integrative framework designed specifically for this developmental period. ThriveSpan comprises nine dimensions organised across three interconnected paths: Self and Wellbeing, Connection and Contribution, and Exploration and Fulfilment. Throughout the review, brief observations are made about how ThriveSpan builds on or extends beyond each theory, with full details of the framework provided in Sections 3 and 4.

Erikson's psychosocial stages of development

Erikson's psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1982) remains one of the most influential lifespan models in psychology. His eight-stage framework conceptualised development as a sequence of psychosocial tasks extending across the life course. Of particular relevance to later life is the stage of integrity versus despair, which emphasises reflection, life review, and the integration of lived experience into a coherent whole.

Erikson's contribution lies in recognising later life as a period of meaning-making rather than psychological stasis. The concept of ego integrity captures the capacity to accept one's life as it has been lived, while despair reflects regret, bitterness, or fear of death. These ideas continue to resonate with later-life accounts that foreground reflection, coherence, and existential evaluation.

However, Erikson's model compresses later life into a single developmental stage, implying a relatively uniform psychological task across what may span several decades. The lived experience of individuals in their early sixties, often still physically capable and future-oriented, differs markedly from that of those in advanced old age facing increased frailty and dependency. Yet both are subsumed within the same frame.

Joan Erikson's later addition of a ninth stage acknowledged the complexities of very old age, including physical decline and the need for what she termed 'vital involvement' (Erikson et al., 1986). While this extension recognised greater heterogeneity, it continued to reflect a historical context in which retirement was shorter and later-life meaning was strongly oriented toward family lineage. In the context of extended longevity and more diverse life courses, Erikson's framework offers limited differentiation across the decades following full-time work, a gap that contemporary later-life models must address.

Super's life-span, life-space theory of career development

Super's life-span, life-space theory (Super, 1990) represented a major advance in vocational psychology by situating career development within the broader context of life roles and stages. He conceptualised career as a lifelong process and proposed stages including growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline, later reframed as disengagement.

The model was empirically grounded and reflected mid-twentieth-century labour market conditions, characterised by linear careers and fixed retirement ages. Within this context, positioning later life as a period of maintenance followed by withdrawal was culturally and structurally coherent.

In contemporary contexts, however, this framing has become increasingly limited. Many individuals now work beyond traditional retirement ages, engage in portfolio careers, or pursue forms of contribution that extend beyond paid employment. More fundamentally, Super's model remains primarily occupational in focus and does not engage with the existential, identity-related, and meaning-based questions that often come to the fore during the extended post-work period of later life.

Super's later Life-Career Rainbow broadened career theory by recognising multiple simultaneous roles across the lifespan, including family, community, and civic identities (Super, 1990). While this represented important conceptual progress, the model continued to frame later life primarily through occupational disengagement and did not theorise the post-work period as a distinct developmental phase with its own psychological terrain. As such, while Super's work remains foundational for career development, it does not adequately capture the expanded and psychologically complex nature of contemporary later life.

Levinson's life structure and transitional model

Levinson's theory of adult development emphasised life as a sequence of relatively stable periods punctuated by transitions (Levinson, 1978; 1996). His concept of life structure described the pattern of roles, relationships, and aspirations that organise an individual's life at a given time. Levinson identified a Late Adult Transition around ages 60–65, followed by Late Adulthood, thereby recognising that development continues into later life.

A key strength of Levinson's model lies in its normalisation of reappraisal and restructuring as ongoing features of adult development. His work helped legitimate questioning and reorientation in later life, countering assumptions of developmental closure.

However, Levinson's treatment of later life remains limited. While he identified transition points around age sixty, he did not offer a sustained account of the psychological tasks or orientations characterising the extended period that follows. In addition, the concept of life structure remains anchored primarily in external roles and social organisation, such as work and family, rather than internal developmental processes. As a result, the model offers limited insight into the experiential, existential, and meaning-making dimensions that often become more salient as traditional structural markers recede. ThriveSpan addresses this gap by extending beyond life structure to encompass the varied ways individuals may orient toward thriving in later life.

Baltes' lifespan development perspective

Baltes' lifespan developmental perspective emphasises that development involves both gains and losses across all stages of life (Baltes, 1987, 1997). His model of selection, optimisation, and compensation (SOC) describes how individuals adapt to changing internal and external resources by prioritising goals, enhancing capacities, and compensating for limitations (Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

Central to this framework is the proposition that developmental change reflects the joint occurrence of gain and loss. While gains tend to predominate earlier in life, losses become more prominent in later years. Crucially, development does not cease but continues as a dynamic process of adaptation rather than simple decline. Baltes also emphasised the multi-directionality of development, whereby different capacities may follow divergent trajectories within the same life phase. For example, declines in processing speed may coexist with growth in emotional regulation, practical judgement, or crystallised knowledge.

Baltes' work provides important theoretical grounding for understanding adaptation and agency in later life and offers a clear challenge to deficit-based models of ageing. However, the framework is primarily functional rather than existential or experiential. It explains how individuals adapt to changing resources but does not address why particular domains are prioritised, nor how questions of meaning, identity, and existential orientation are experienced. ThriveSpan builds on Baltes' recognition of adaptive capacity while extending into the domains of meaning-making and psychological interiority that his model leaves largely unaddressed.

Socioemotional selectivity theory

Carstensen's socioemotional selectivity theory (SST) provides influential insight into motivational shifts associated with perceived time horizons (Carstensen, 1993; Carstensen et al., 1999). According to SST, when time is perceived as expansive, individuals prioritise knowledge acquisition and exploration, whereas when time is perceived as limited, emotional goals become more salient. With increasing awareness of finitude, people prioritise emotionally meaningful relationships, present-focused experience, and emotional wellbeing (Carstensen, 2021).

This shift reflects adaptive reorientation rather than withdrawal. Empirical research demonstrates that older adults proactively reduce peripheral social ties while maintaining or deepening emotionally close relationships (Carstensen, 1992; Lang & Carstensen, 1994). This selectivity is associated with improved emotional regulation, fewer negative emotions, and greater emotional complexity compared to younger adults (Carstensen & Charles, 1998; Carstensen et al., 2000). Experimental studies further suggest that perceived time, rather than chronological age alone, drives these motivational changes (Fredrickson & Carstensen, 1990).

SST challenges deficit narratives by demonstrating that emotional functioning often remains stable or improves with age. Phenomena such as the 'positivity effect' and the capacity to hold mixed emotions simultaneously reflect goal-directed attention rather than cognitive decline (Reed et al., 2014). For ThriveSpan, SST provides strong empirical grounding for the claim that the 60–80 phase involves not merely coping with limitation but active reorientation toward emotional depth, relational quality, and present-focused engagement. It helps explain why later life often calls for different priorities from those assumed in occupational career models centred on expansion and future-oriented achievement.

Gerotranscendence and meaning-based approaches

Tornstam's theory of gerotranscendence offers a complementary perspective on later-life development, focusing on meaning-making, wisdom, and existential reorientation (Tornstam, 2005). Gerotranscendence describes a shift from materialistic, achievement-oriented values toward a more contemplative perspective characterised by increased interiority, reduced emphasis on external validation, and heightened awareness of life's interconnectedness.

Research grounded in this theory suggests that such changes are not signs of disengagement but reflect developmental maturation. Higher levels of gerotranscendence are associated with decreased materialism, reduced fear of death, greater acceptance of ambiguity, and increased selectivity in social relationships (Tornstam, 2005). While these patterns overlap with socioemotional selectivity, gerotranscendence extends the analysis into existential and spiritual domains, challenging cultural assumptions that equate successful ageing with continued activity and productivity defined in midlife terms.

For ThriveSpan, gerotranscendence offers theoretical support for understanding inward-focused meaning-making as a legitimate mode of thriving in later life. Reduced emphasis on accumulation, increased comfort with reflection or solitude, and prioritisation of being over doing need not signify withdrawal from life, but rather engagement with greater depth and coherence. While gerotranscendence emphasises transcendence and cosmic connection, and ThriveSpan also includes more active expressions such as creativity and contribution, both frameworks support the recognition of multiple valid modes of thriving during the 60–80 phase.

Cohen's developmental intelligence and later-life phase differentiation

Cohen's work on developmental intelligence represents a significant attempt to differentiate later life into multiple phases rather than treating it as a single, undifferentiated period (Cohen, 2005). He proposed four fluid phases of adult maturity, ranging from midlife re-evaluation to liberation, summing up, and later-life encore, emphasising variability and overlap rather than fixed sequencing.

Cohen grounded this framework in neuroscientific research demonstrating continued brain plasticity well into later life, challenging deficit-based assumptions about cognitive decline. The phases of liberation and summing up, in particular, resonate with later-life accounts of experimentation, reflection, and desire for contribution.

However, Cohen's model presents limitations when applied to the contemporary 60–80 life phase. The age ranges associated with his phases are broad and heavily overlapping, making it difficult to identify distinct psychological markers or developmental tasks within this extended period. As a result, substantial differences between early later life and advanced old age remain insufficiently specified.

More broadly, Cohen's work reflects a wider tendency in lifespan models to aggregate large portions of later life into broad categories. Such approaches risk obscuring the meaningful transitions that occur between the early sixties and late seventies, despite significant differences in orientation, energy, and existential awareness. While Cohen's framework validates the principle that later life comprises multiple phases, it does not offer the level of precision required to theorise the 60–80 period as a distinct developmental terrain.

ThriveSpan builds on this recognition of later-life differentiation while offering a more focused and psychologically grounded articulation of the 60–80 phase, characterised by heightened time awareness, selective engagement, increased discernment in the use of energy, and a shift from optimisation toward meaning and sufficiency.

Summary of theories

The theories reviewed in this section have each made important contributions to understanding development across the lifespan, illuminating processes such as adaptation, reflection, motivational change, meaning-making, and later-life differentiation. However, none provide an integrated or sufficiently differentiated account of the extended and psychologically distinctive 60–80 life phase.

Stage models tend to compress later life into a single developmental period, while career development theories focus primarily on occupational exit rather than the prolonged post-work phase. Process-oriented models explain adaptive mechanisms but give limited attention to existential and identity-related dimensions. Motivational and meaning-based theories address specific facets of later-life reorientation but do not offer a comprehensive framework spanning wellbeing, identity, and purpose.

What remains needed is an integrative framework that reflects contemporary longevity and captures the multidimensional nature of thriving during this distinctive developmental period. This conceptual gap provides the context for the development of ThriveSpan, introduced in the sections that follow.

The conceptual gap in the 60–80 Life phase

Gerontological research has long acknowledged that later life is not uniform, often distinguishing between the 'young-old' and the 'old-old' to capture differences in health, functional capacity, and dependency. However, this distinction has remained largely descriptive rather than developmental. While existing life-stage and ageing theories offer valuable insights, they leave a significant conceptual gap in relation to the 60–80 life phase, which is frequently subsumed under broad categories such as 'later life' or 'old age' despite being psychologically, socially, and existentially distinctive.

This lack of differentiation reflects, in part, the historical embeddedness of developmental theory. As Baltes (1987) observed, development is shaped not only by age-graded influences but also by history-graded and non-normative factors. The contemporary 60–80 phase differs markedly from the same chronological period in earlier generations, shaped by increased longevity, altered retirement structures, evolving family configurations, and changing expectations of later life. Even frameworks that attempt later-life phase differentiation have struggled to specify clear boundaries or articulate the distinctive developmental characteristics of this period. As a result, theoretical models developed in earlier demographic contexts often inadequately capture the lived reality of this phase today.

The 60–80 life phase is not simply an extension of midlife, nor is it synonymous with advanced old age. For many individuals, it is characterised by relatively good physical health, cognitive capacity, and functional independence, alongside increasing awareness of mortality, finitude, and change. This coexistence of vitality and vulnerability creates a particular psychological tension that is poorly captured by models framing later life primarily in terms of disengagement, decline, or retrospective evaluation.

During this phase, individuals often navigate multiple and sometimes competing realities. They may feel capable, curious, and future-oriented while simultaneously becoming more aware of ageing bodies, shifting social roles, and the limits of time. Relationships with work, identity, and contribution are frequently renegotiated, not always through discrete transitions such as retirement, but through gradual reorientation of values and priorities. For some, this involves continued paid or unpaid work; for others, stepping back from roles that once provided structure and recognition without yet having new ones fully formed.

The relational landscape is similarly complex. Many people in their sixties and seventies hold responsibilities across generations, supporting ageing parents while remaining engaged with adult children, alongside changes in intimate and social relationships. Experiences of loss, through bereavement, declining health among peers, or contraction of social networks, become more visible during this period and often prompt reflection on belonging, connection, and loneliness, including the recognition that loneliness can occur even in the presence of others.

Crucially, the 60–80 phase is often marked by a shift in psychological orientation rather than by a single transition point. Instead of asking how to achieve more or progress further, individuals may increasingly ask how to live well, how to integrate past experiences, and how to align daily life with what now feels meaningful. These questions are not necessarily crisis-driven but reflect increased perspective, involving a movement from accumulation toward discernment and from external validation toward inner coherence.

Despite these distinctive features, the 60–80 life phase remains under-theorised. Psychosocial stage models tend to aggregate it with later old age, career development theories focus primarily on exit from work rather than the extended period that follows, and process-oriented theories explain adaptation without fully addressing existential and identity-related concerns. Popular contemporary narratives often emphasise reinvention, positivity, or agelessness, risking the marginalisation of reflection, ambiguity, and limits.

This lack of conceptual clarity has practical consequences. Without frameworks that reflect the lived experience of this phase, individuals may struggle to make sense of their own transitions, and practitioners lack adequate conceptual tools for supporting later-life development. ThriveSpan responds to this gap by offering an integrative framework that speaks directly to the psychological, relational, and existential realities of the 60–80 life phase. Its foundations are outlined in the following section.

Rationale for the Development of ThriveSpan

In response to this conceptual gap, the ThriveSpan framework emerged from a combination of doctoral research (Taylor, 2021, 2023, 2026) and three decades of practice as a career and later-life psychologist working with adults in midlife and beyond. It represents an integrative synthesis of empirical research, practice-based insight, and established psychological theory, developed to address recurring patterns not adequately captured by existing lifespan or retirement models.

As outlined in the preceding sections, prevailing theories offer limited guidance for understanding the 60–80 phase as a psychologically distinctive period. Many frame later life through disengagement or compress it into a single stage, while attempts at phase differentiation often rely on imprecise boundaries. Career development theories, in particular, continue to prioritise occupational identity, leaving questions of meaning, coherence, and inner alignment relatively underexplored.

In practice, individuals in their sixties and seventies frequently present with concerns that sit outside these frameworks. These rarely centre on career advancement or reinvention alone, but instead involve how to live well with increased awareness of time, how to integrate past achievements and losses, how to remain connected and contribute without depletion, and how to shape a life that feels coherent rather than merely busy. Conceptual gaps in the literature were often mirrored by uncertainties expressed in applied settings, suggesting a convergence between theoretical limitation and lived experience.

Doctoral research exploring how individuals construct meaning after the end of full-time work reinforced these observations (Taylor, 2021). This qualitative study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis with seven participants who had retired within the previous decade and self-identified as having found meaning in later life. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' lived experiences, revealing three superordinate themes: search for knowledge, a change in time, and who am I? Meaning in later life emerged as an ongoing process of reflection, integration, and adjustment, shaped by health, relationships, autonomy, contribution, and the capacity to live in alignment with personal values. Participants' accounts frequently reflected a desire for spaciousness and depth rather than acceleration, and for frameworks that supported discernment rather than prescription.

ThriveSpan was therefore not developed as a replacement for existing theories, nor as a universal model of ageing. Instead, it arose from the recognition that contemporary later life requires conceptual tools that are both psychologically grounded and experientially resonant. The framework holds together vitality and vulnerability, agency and limitation, and continuity and change, without imposing narratives of decline, compulsory positivity, or perpetual reinvention.

Focused specifically on the 60–80 phase, ThriveSpan brings together nine dimensions organised across three interconnected paths: Self and Wellbeing, Connection and Contribution, and Exploration and Fulfilment. This structure reflects a deliberate resistance to overly instrumental accounts of later life. ThriveSpan does not assume that development must be externally visible, measurable, or productivity-driven. It recognises that thriving in later life may involve refinement, contraction, or quiet realignment as much as expansion, encompassing wellbeing, meaning-making, autonomy, relationships, contribution, creativity, and time awareness within a coherent whole.

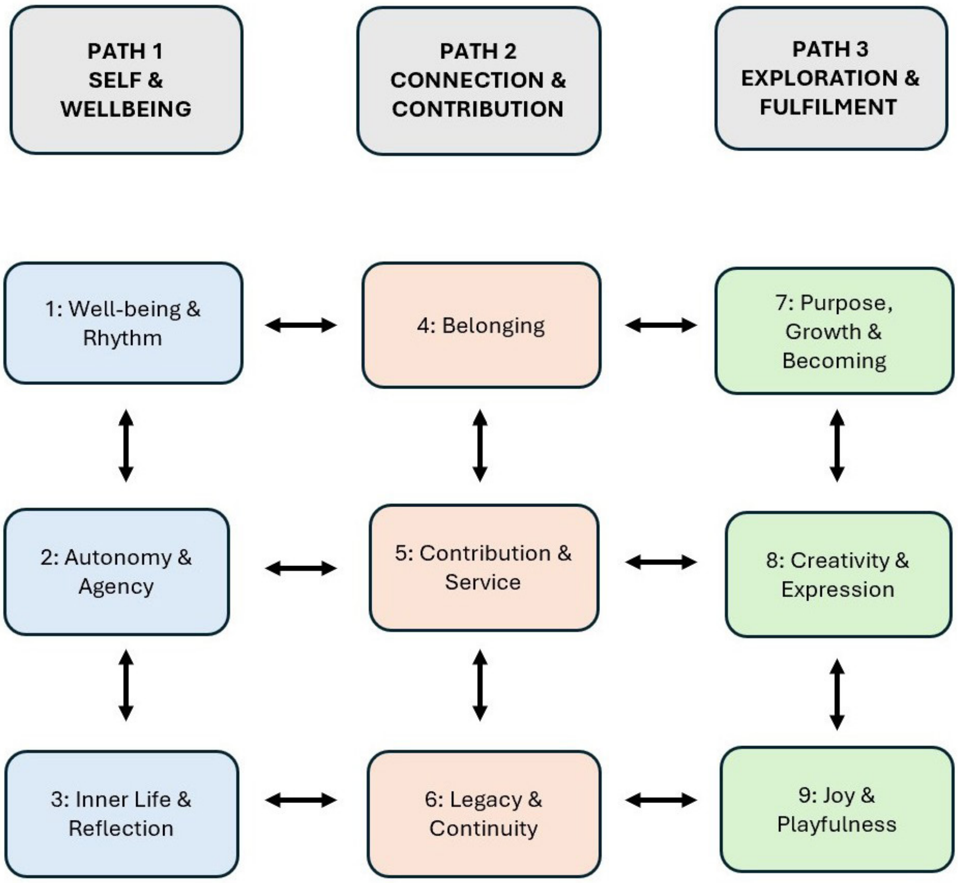
Rather than prescribing a single pathway through later life, ThriveSpan offers a flexible structure for understanding how individuals may reorient their lives in ways that are sustainable, internally aligned, and responsive to changing capacities and priorities. It acknowledges that thriving in this phase may take diverse forms, and that vitality and depth can coexist with vulnerability and limitation.

Theoretical foundations of the ThriveSpan domains

Having established the purpose and orientation of ThriveSpan as a flexible, non-instrumental framework for the 60–80 life phase, this section outlines the theoretical foundations underpinning its domains. The ThriveSpan domains are grounded in an integrative body of psychological, wellbeing, and meaning-focused theory rather than in any single disciplinary tradition.

In practical terms, ThriveSpan comprises nine interlocking domains organised across three interconnected paths. Self and Wellbeing includes wellbeing and rhythm, autonomy and agency, and inner life and reflection. Connection and Contribution encompasses belonging, contribution and service, and legacy and continuity. Exploration and Fulfilment includes purpose, growth and becoming, creativity and expression, and joy and playfulness.

Figure 1. The ThriveSpan Framework. Nine dimensions across three interconnected paths



The arrows reflect the fluid, non-hierarchical and interconnected nature of ThriveSpan. The dimensions can be entered in any order and often overlap in lived experience

These domains are not conceived as stages or tasks to be completed, but as interrelated aspects of later-life experience that may move into the foreground at different times, depending on individual circumstances, capacities, and priorities. They were identified through an integrative synthesis of psychological theory, empirical research on meaning and wellbeing, and sustained engagement with lived experience in later life. The theoretical foundations informing the domains are outlined below.

Wellbeing as a multidimensional and interdependent construct

Across lifespan psychology, wellbeing is understood as multidimensional rather than singular. Psychological models emphasise autonomy, purpose, personal growth, and self-acceptance, while relational perspectives highlight connection, belonging, and contribution (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1998). Health psychology further underscores the role of physical capacity, energy, and bodily awareness in enabling engagement with life, particularly in later years (Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

This multidimensional understanding of wellbeing is also reflected in contemporary policy frameworks. The OECD defines subjective wellbeing as encompassing life evaluation, affect, and eudaimonia, and emphasises its interdependence with health, social connection, autonomy, and broader life conditions rather than treating it as a standalone outcome (OECD, 2025).

ThriveSpan draws these strands together by treating wellbeing in later life as interdependent rather than additive. Changes in physical health can reshape identity, autonomy, and social participation, while shifts in purpose, meaning, or connection can influence emotional and physical vitality. Wellbeing is therefore understood not as a discrete outcome to be optimised, but as a dynamic condition shaped by the interaction of multiple life domains over time.

Identity, continuity, adaptation, and autonomy

Research on ageing and identity suggests that later life involves an ongoing negotiation between continuity and adaptation. Individuals seek to remain recognisably themselves while responding to change, loss, and new constraints (Erikson, 1982). This process is best understood as dynamic integration rather than static preservation, incorporating new realities while maintaining narrative coherence.

Baltes' model of selection, optimisation, and compensation provides a valuable account of adaptive functioning in later life (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). However, while it explains how individuals adjust to changing resources, it does not fully address the subjective and existential dimensions of these choices, including how adaptation is experienced in relation to identity, meaning, and selfhood.

ThriveSpan extends this functional perspective by explicitly supporting reflection on who one has been, who one is becoming, and how these identities can be integrated with changing capacities and priorities. Autonomy is understood not as unlimited choice, but as alignment between values, capacities, and lived reality. In this way, ThriveSpan allows for agency within constraint, without assuming either wholesale reinvention or passive acceptance.

Meaning-making and existential orientation in later life

Meaning-making research provides a central foundation for ThriveSpan. Studies consistently show that meaning in later life is constructed through multiple pathways, including relationships, contribution, creativity, reflection, and engagement with what feels larger than the self (Frankl, 2004; McAdams, 2001; Tornstam, 2005). Compared with earlier life stages, meaning in later life is often less oriented toward striving or achievement and more toward coherence, alignment, and presence. Recent conceptual work on fulfilment reinforces this shift, framing later-life meaning less in terms of future-oriented accomplishment and more in terms of coherence, congruence, and perceived value across the life as a whole (Baumann & Ruch, 2025)

Frankl's emphasis on the discovery rather than invention of meaning resonates strongly with later-life accounts, in which individuals often describe recognising what has always mattered rather than creating new purpose from scratch. McAdams' narrative identity framework similarly highlights the importance of integrating past and present into a coherent life story as future time narrows.

ThriveSpan reflects this shift by orienting attention toward what matters now rather than toward externally defined goals or outcomes. Meaning-making is addressed explicitly through the Purpose, Growth and Becoming, Inner Life and Reflection, and Legacy and Continuity domains, recognising meaning as an ongoing process of integration shaped by accumulated experience, loss, and increasing awareness of finitude.

Relational depth, belonging, and selective engagement

Later life is frequently characterised by changes in social networks and relational priorities. As demonstrated by socioemotional selectivity theory, increasing awareness of limited time leads individuals to prioritise emotionally meaningful relationships over broader social engagement (Carstensen, 2006; Carstensen et al., 2003). This pattern reflects adaptive reorientation rather than social withdrawal.

This reorientation is also reflected in recent fulfilment research. Baumann and Ruch (2025) argue that fulfilment in later life is increasingly grounded in relational depth, alignment with personal values, and a sense that one’s life has mattered, rather than in role accumulation or activity volume. Fulfilment is thus shaped less by the breadth of engagement and more by the experienced quality, reciprocity, and meaning of connection.

ThriveSpan incorporates this insight while extending beyond network size to encompass relational depth, reciprocity and emotional literacy. It recognises that belonging is not solely a function of contact or activity, and that loneliness can occur even in the presence of others. The framework therefore attends to the quality of connection across friendship, intimacy, community, and contribution, and to how these relational patterns may shift during the 60–80 phase.

Health, capacity, and embodiment as enabling conditions

Within ThriveSpan, health is treated not as a separate or purely medicalised domain, but as an enabling condition that interacts with all other aspects of life. This perspective aligns with contemporary gerontological and health psychology approaches that view health as lived experience rather than simply the absence of illness (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Ryff & Singer, 1998).

By acknowledging the role of physical energy, mobility, and bodily maintenance without allowing these factors to dominate the narrative, ThriveSpan avoids both denial of ageing and reduction of later life to bodily decline. Health is understood as shaping what is possible, influencing rhythm, choice, and engagement, while remaining one dimension among many rather than the defining feature of later life.

This approach reflects Baltes’ emphasis on plasticity and developmental reserve capacity, recognising that adaptive potential remains present in later life, albeit within changing limits. ThriveSpan therefore attends to enabling conditions rather than assuming fixed limitations, supporting intentional adjustment and realistic cultivation of wellbeing.

Narrative integration, reflection, and time awareness

Narrative approaches to ageing provide a further foundation for ThriveSpan. Later life offers a distinctive opportunity to integrate accumulated experience, transitions, and losses into a coherent narrative that connects past, present, and anticipated futures (McAdams, 2001; Erikson et al., 1986). As future time narrows, unresolved narrative threads often take on greater psychological significance.

ThriveSpan supports this integrative process through its emphasis on reflection and time awareness, particularly within the Inner Life and Reflection and Legacy and Continuity domains. Awareness of finitude is treated not as a source of despair, but as a context that can sharpen discernment, deepen presence, and inform choices about how life is lived now.

Integrative positioning of the ThriveSpan domains

Taken together, the ThriveSpan domains represent an intentional synthesis of established psychological theory, empirical research on meaning and wellbeing, and sustained attention to lived experience in the 60–80 life phase. Each domain is grounded in multiple theoretical traditions, while collectively they reflect the interdependent nature of thriving in later life.

ThriveSpan is therefore best understood not as a checklist of areas to optimise, but as a reflective map that supports depth, discernment, and intentional living. By holding multiple domains in relationship rather than isolation, the framework offers an integrative lens for understanding the 60–80 phase, one that honours its variability, complexity, and developmental distinctiveness.

Discussion and conclusion

The review of life-stage theories and the development of ThriveSpan highlight a broader challenge in how later life is conceptualised and supported. While psychological and career development frameworks have made substantial contributions to understanding adult development, many remain poorly aligned with contemporary longevity and with the lived experience of individuals in the 60–80 life phase. ThriveSpan responds to this gap not by rejecting earlier theory, but by reworking and integrating existing perspectives in light of current demographic, social, and psychological realities.

This need for conceptual updating reflects Baltes' argument that lifespan development is shaped not only by age-graded influences, but also by history-graded and nonnormative factors (Baltes, 1987). Although biological ageing remains significant, its effects interact with historical context and individual life histories to produce considerable heterogeneity. The contemporary 60–80 phase is therefore not simply a biological stage but a historically situated and individually variable developmental terrain. ThriveSpan reflects this complexity by accommodating diversity without prescribing a single normative pathway, recognising that later life is shaped by what has come before as well as by the times in which one is ageing.

Conceptual work of this kind begins with language. Models that frame later life primarily in terms of decline, disengagement, or perpetual reinvention can unintentionally narrow the range of experiences recognised as legitimate (Gullette, 2004; Holstein & Minkler, 2003). ThriveSpan supports a more expansive vocabulary, one that allows for vitality alongside vulnerability, reflection alongside engagement, and discernment alongside contribution. Such shifts in language matter in practice, shaping how individuals interpret their own experiences, how practitioners frame conversations, and how later-life support is designed and delivered.

For practitioners working in coaching, guidance, or later-life development contexts, ThriveSpan offers a structure capable of holding complexity without overwhelming. Rather than directing individuals towards predefined outcomes, it supports reflective inquiry across multiple interrelated domains, aligning with evidence that later-life wellbeing is best supported through meaning-making, autonomy, and relational depth rather than through narrowly defined productivity goals (Ryff, 1989; Carstensen, 2006; Frankl, 2004). Used in this way, ThriveSpan functions as a conversational map, enabling individuals to explore what matters now and where attention may be most needed, without imposing a prescriptive model of ageing.

The framework also highlights the importance of clearer differentiation within later life. Administrative categories such as '65+' or broad cultural references to 'old age' obscure substantial variation in lived experience, psychological orientation, and developmental task (Neugarten, 1974). While earlier formulations of the 'young-old' extended into the mid-seventies, continued improvements in health, later retirement, and changing social expectations support recognising the 60–80 period as a distinct developmental phase. This differentiation reflects the observation that individuals in their mid-to-late seventies often share more psychological and functional commonality with those in their sixties than with those in advanced old age. By articulating the 60–80 phase more precisely, ThriveSpan responds to this flattening and offers a framework that better reflects contemporary longevity.

ThriveSpan also reframes how transitions in later life are understood. Events such as retirement, health changes, or shifts in family roles are often treated as discrete turning points (Atchley, 1989; Wang & Shi, 2014). In contrast, the framework encourages viewing later life as an extended phase of orientation and integration. This perspective moves beyond binary narratives such as work versus retirement or independence versus dependence and allows for fluid movement between roles, capacities, and priorities over time.

At a conceptual level, ThriveSpan contributes to debates within psychology and ageing studies by explicitly addressing the under-theorised 60–80 life phase. By differentiating this period from both midlife and advanced old age, it challenges the tendency to flatten later life into overly broad categories and brings greater attention to meaning, identity, and lived coherence during early later life.

Finally, the development of ThriveSpan underscores the value of integrating lived experience with theory. Later life is not only an object of academic inquiry but a domain of ongoing personal and collective negotiation (McAdams, 2001; Baars, 2012). Frameworks that emerge from sustained engagement with this reality are better positioned to support individuals navigating the psychological, relational, and existential dimensions of ageing. ThriveSpan represents one such contribution, offering a reflective structure intended to accompany, rather than prescribe, the unfolding of later life in an era of extended longevity.

Limitations and future directions

While ThriveSpan is grounded primarily in Western psychological and career development traditions, this necessarily brings cultural assumptions that merit acknowledgement. Much of the lifespan and career theory on which it draws has emerged from individualistic, market-oriented societies, where identity and paid work are often privileged.

Non-Western lifespan models offer important complementary perspectives. Arulmani and Nag-Arulmani's (2004) account of the four Indian *ashramas* conceptualises life as a developmental journey encompassing learning, householding, societal service, and spiritual orientation. While there is some correspondence with Erikson's concept of generativity, the Indian framework extends this by embedding value, contribution, and transcendence as normative aspects of later life rather than optional concerns.

As a conceptual and practice-informed framework, ThriveSpan is not presented as a definitive or exhaustive model of later-life development. Several limitations warrant acknowledgement.

First, although the framework is grounded in established psychological theory and informed by qualitative research on meaning in later life, it has not yet been subject to systematic empirical validation. Future research could examine how the ThriveSpan domains are experienced, interpreted, and prioritised across different later-life contexts and populations.

Second, ThriveSpan focuses specifically on the 60–80 life phase within contexts of relative resource availability and choice. Its applicability may be more limited in circumstances of severe economic constraint, systemic marginalisation, or advanced frailty, where agency and reflective capacity are significantly constrained.

Third, while ThriveSpan is designed to accommodate individual variability, it does not directly address the structural inequalities that shape access to thriving in later life, including disparities in health, income, social support, and cumulative disadvantage across the life course. Future work might explore how the framework could inform interventions, services, or policy approaches that attend to these broader determinants of later-life wellbeing.

Fourth, longitudinal research would strengthen understanding of how engagement with the ThriveSpan domains shifts over time, particularly as individuals move from the 60–80 phase into more advanced old age. Such work could clarify both the framework's utility and its boundaries, indicating where different conceptual models may become more appropriate.

Finally, ThriveSpan's focus on the 60–80 phase represents both a strength and a limitation. While this precision addresses the tendency of existing models to aggregate later life into overly broad categories, it raises questions about boundary flexibility. Psychological markers associated with this phase, such as heightened time awareness, selective engagement, and movement from accumulation toward meaning, may emerge earlier or later depending on health, life circumstances, and cultural context. Chronological age therefore serves as a practical marker rather than a definitive boundary, and future research could examine whether these markers cluster predictably around this period or are better understood through psychological criteria alone.

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Book reviews and news

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Book Review

10.20856/jnicec.5618

Supporting achievers to unblock sustainable career success: Theory, strategy and practice

Author: Carolyn Parry

Publisher: Trotman

Publication year: 2026

Number of pages: 176

ISBN: 978-1-911724-75-9 (paperback)

eISBN: 978-1-911724-76-6

Price: £34.99 GBP

Reviewed by **Michelle Stewart**, NICEC Fellow & Independent Careers Consultant, UK.

This is a ground-breaking handbook for practitioners and professionals engaged in helping others to unlock and sustain their careers. Its author, Carolyn Parry, considers the rise of neoliberalism, meritocracy and parental pressure and how these have influenced the growth of an 'achievement culture', and the specific challenges (which she describes as 'career thieves') that this growth brings to sustaining career success. She addresses the complex inter-relationships between purpose and fulfilment, happiness and achievement in a clear, accessible and practical manner. Drawing on her in-depth knowledge and considerable experience, she skilfully grounds the theoretical and neurological underpinning in real-life case studies and powerful coaching activities, thereby enabling practitioners to sustain their own careers, and enhance and develop their professional practice.

The book addresses seven 'career thieves' that are increasingly prevalent in the world today and can all too easily undermine sustainable success: perfectionism, comparison, approval-seeking, overwhelm, depletion, disconnection and burnout. Following an explanatory introduction and scene setting, each chapter is structured around a case study and addresses a different 'thief', with the final chapter outlining strategic ideas or 'seven guardians' that seek to ensure achievers receive the support they need to maintain clarity, energy, and purpose over the long term.

The book's structure means that the reader can read it from cover to cover or dip into specific chapters depending on the needs of their client. The exploration and application of models and practical activities adopted in each chapter also provide a support framework that practitioners can draw on to inform and develop their own professional practice. Personally, I would have liked a more traditional style of referencing that enabled me to explore the supporting studies, especially the underpinning neuroscience. However, I appreciate that this could stilt the flow of the narrative and the appendix of key theory summaries is sufficient to enable the reader to investigate further should they wish to.

Notable strengths of the book are the ways in which the case study approach illustrates how hidden fears can be explored with sensitivity and compassion; how earlier experiences seen as failures can be reframed as signposts and patterns of behaviour can be seen not as flaws but as misplaced strengths – 'qualities that needed better boundaries, not abandonment'; how the need of approval can be transformed from being a driver to being an outcome of authentic action; how unhelpful internal dialogues can shift and unlock new narratives; and how it is possible to restore the balance between self-sacrifice and self-neglect.

If you work in career development or executive coaching then I can strongly recommend this book is as a worthwhile investment. It provides an understanding of those conundrums when our clients are seen as good at their job yet feel lost, unfulfilled or exhausted, and trapped in the pursuit of success. It offers a practical guide to helping clients restore their sense of agency, gently challenge internalised beliefs, reduce cognitive load, address career misalignment and (re)build realistic, authentic and sustainable careers.

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The careers leader handbook (3rd Edition)

Book Review

10.20856/jnicec.5519

Authors: David Andrews and Tristram Hooley

Publisher: Trotman

Publication Year: 2026

Number of pages: 312

ISBN: 978 – 1 – 911724 – 55 – 1

Price: £36.99, EBook £30.39

Price: £19.79

Reviewed by **Claire Nix**, NICEC Fellow, UK.

David Andrews and Tristram Hooley have both been active over many years in supporting the importance of careers leadership. They bring their considerable experience of the policy and practice of careers work to preparing this third edition of The Careers Leader Handbook. The first edition was published in 2018, and celebrated the struggles, challenges, solutions and inspiration of career leaders working on the frontline. The third edition of this best-selling guide has been updated to take account of the review of the Gatsby Benchmarks in 2024, and to reflect the ongoing need for high quality career leadership to respond to other changes in policy, educational and economic contexts. The third edition continues the focus on international reflections on practice started in the second edition in 2022. Reflecting one of the key themes underpinning the 2024 review of the Benchmarks of inclusion and impact for every young person, this edition incorporates work in both mainstream and SEND settings.

The book lays down a gauntlet for readers: 'Career leaders should step up and be assertive about placing careers at the heart of the school or college's mission.' It is careful to provide both a clear underpinning rationale and evidence based practical approaches to equip new career leaders and more experienced colleagues to meet that challenge.

The book is divided into five clear, well-structured sections and the style is accessible and engaging. The introduction presents the background and underpinning thinking for the career leader role as well as guidance on how to get the most out of the handbook. Section 2 offers clear and practical guidance on each of the eight Gatsby benchmarks, helping readers to see the connections between the benchmarks as part of a career learning programme, rather than just regarding them a list of interventions. There is a strong and helpful focus on learning outcomes, illustrative case studies and links to resources. The career leader role in leading, managing, coordinating and networking is explored in more detail in Section 3 setting out the breadth of the role – 'planning, implementing and quality assuring a careers programme, managing the delivery of career guidance, networking with external partners, including employers, coordinating the contributions of teachers, tutors and SENCO.' In the first edition, Sir John Holman said the Benchmarks are not enough, progress relies on leadership from careers leaders backed by senior leaders and this section explores how to manage upwards, build a team and distributed leadership. It also introduces the issue of Position and Pay and offers an International Reflection from Finland and Canada where the role is respected and pay relatively high. Section 4 addresses continuous improvements including the continuing professional development (CPD) of career leaders and the wider staff. Section 5 revisits the call to arms to value and promote professional career leadership.

The CDI is one of the contractors for the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) Career Leader programme and we actively recommend that learners buy the Careers Leader Handbook as part of their commitment to the course. The tone of the book, as well as its content, encourages the collaboration, commitment and creativity that the role needs. One of the challenges that delivering the course highlights is the churn in career leaders. It is good to see, in Section 4, the strong points about succession planning. It has not been possible for the Handbook to help career leaders to address the systemic barriers they face including the patchy nature of senior leader support and the shortage of careers advisers in the system but it offers a clear-eyed view on national policy and practical steps that can be taken to improve careers provision at a school or college level.

The following comments on the Handbook from recent or current students highlight the practical value placed on the Handbook.

> The Careers Leader Handbook provides a decent framework for quality assurance and strategic positioning and codifies what is effective practice in high performing FE settings. The Handbook gives weight to positioning careers as part of central infrastructure rather than bolt-on enrichments and has helped me to challenge senior leadership assumptions more effectively and show how we are core to mission delivery. Some of the stakeholder engagement theory assumes resources that just do not exist. (Ravin Anenden, Oaklands College)

> Reading the Careers Leader Handbook has been extremely valuable in supporting my learning on the Level 6 Careers Leader course, strengthening my confidence and strategic approach, and enabling me further to develop high quality careers provision for our students and wider community at Chessbrook. (Georjy Pantelli, Chessbrook)

> I referred to the Careers Leader Handbook regularly throughout the Careers Leader course. It was easy to read and understand with a perfect mix of examples of theory and practice, as well as many useful references for further reading and research. (Joanne Rodway, East Sussex College)

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News

Skills, growth and the role of career development: Report from NICEC's 50th anniversary event

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Abstract

This article summarises an event which celebrated NICEC's 50th anniversary and set the context for future discussions about career development policy. Speakers from various policy contexts discussed skills, employment and workforce development strategies and explored the challenges and opportunities for providing career support services.

Key words: career development, celebration, NICEC, skills, work

In September 2025 NICEC held a one-day event entitled *Skills and growth: The role of career development work.* The event celebrated NICEC's 50th anniversary and set the context for forthcoming NICEC discussions around the future of career development.

The audience was addressed by John Hall (West Midlands Combined Authority), Stephen Isherwood (Institute of Student Employers), Claudia Jaksch (Policy Connect, a UK wide cross-party think tank), Sandra Orbine (Skills Development Scotland) and Chris Percy (Independent researcher). The discussion explored the current labour market and examined the challenges and opportunities for providing career support services. Participants emphasised the importance these services have in addressing broader societal issues and concluded that there was a need for better communication of career development's value to policymakers and employers.

Speaker contributions

John Hall discussed the *West Midlands Growth Plan* and noted the need for integrated skills and employment support and career development provision. He argued that a robust all-age careers strategy is critical to achieving economic growth objectives. He described career development services as the glue which holds the skills and employment strategy together and would ensure that every young person has access to employment and skills support.

Stephen Isherwood highlighted the pressures that are shaping employment for graduates and others in early career. He stressed the importance of demographic changes, with the population of the UK getting older, living longer and the retirement and pension age is going up. There are fewer people aged 15 to 19 now in the UK than there are aged 55 to 59 leading to a change in the shape of the labour market. Employers are reflecting on these longer-term structural issues in the economy and society and are rethinking talent strategies accordingly. Inevitably this means that careers education must evolve to reflect the changing nature of work and broaden access to opportunity.

Claudia Jaksch highlighted the challenges young people face in accessing career development services and emphasised the need for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to career development. *Policy Connect* are currently working on a UK wide research inquiry entitled *Learning or earning: A new agenda for youth NEET reduction.* The inquiry examines policies and strategies from across the UK including Scotland's *Developing the young workforce* strategy and the *Young person's guarantee*, Wales' *Youth engagement and progression framework* and *Jobs Growth Wales+*, and labour-market interventions in Northern Ireland. She asked how all of this activity can be used to inform the development of UK policy in ways that support investment in skills and training and ensure access to career development services.

Sandra Orbine from *Skills Development Scotland* shared Scotland's approach to career development. She noted the important role of career development services in addressing issues of social mobility. She argued that career development remains central to Scotland's policy for growing an inclusive workforce.

Chris Percy presented an analysis of the impact of career development interventions. His analysis of the data demonstrates that the benefits associated with careers interventions increase as the volume of interventions grow. Exposure to multiple career options helps young people navigate a vast job landscape and the repetition of this exposure, when paired with varied delivery (e.g., different speakers and formats) increases the impact that interventions have. As career conversations become more frequent in classes, among peers, and in activities, they normalise and reinforce career exploration improving the outcomes for young people. Chris Percy reflected that AI tools such as chatbots may offer scalable ways to enhance access to career development and therefore contribute to improved outcomes.

Discussion

Following the contribution of the speakers, the discussion explored how to better communicate the value of career development services to policymakers and employers. Participants argued that a more strategic approach to career development which could demonstrate clear returns on investment was needed. Features of a more strategic approach should include:

- the adoption of long-term strategy and funding approaches, rather than a series of short term initiatives and projects;
- a focus on helping people to find meaningful and good work;
- a recognition of the importance of geography and an approach to localising service provision;

- the provision of strong services for young people which are capable of engaging them;
- the provision of career development support for those in mid- and later-life; and
- exploration of the role that AI can play in the delivery of career development services.

The event explored the role that career development services have in addressing the diverse skills needs of the UK. There was strong agreement that such services were critical in meeting a range of societal challenges and that there is clear evidence of the wider impacts of career development. Participants discussed the need to improve career guidance and increase public awareness of its value, emphasising the role of career development as a connective tissue in the education and employment system.

About the Career Development Institute

The Career Development Institute (CDI) is the UK's professional body for all aspects of career development, supporting our members to work to the highest standards and championing the profession.

Our role includes:

- ✓ Setting professional standards: We establish best practices, including the CDI Code of Ethics, which is recognised by the government.
- ✓ Regulation & qualifications: The CDI manages the UK Register of Career Development Professionals and oversees the Qualification in Career Development (QCD).
- ✓ Training & development: Through the CDI Academy, we offer training opportunities for both new and experienced professionals.
- ✓ Research and resources: We provide a wealth of resources to help practitioners build on their knowledge and develop.

We are proud to collaborate with NICEC on The Journal and host research-focused events twice a year for members across the UK. CDI members can access The Journal via our website.

Website: thecdi.net

Professional recognition

The CDI has a critical role to play in setting standards and articulating what quality looks like for the sector. Importantly we are an awarding body, managing the Qualification in Career Development (QCD) and the UK Register for Career Development Professionals, which is pivotal to our ongoing quality agenda and is fast becoming recognised as the sector's equivalent to chartered status.

Becoming professionally qualified: thecdi.net/professional-qualified

The Register: thecdi.net/professional-register

Valuing Careers campaign

The Valuing Careers Campaign highlights the essential role of career development in empowering individuals, strengthening the economy, and addressing workforce challenges.

Our campaign advocates for:

- ✓ Greater access to high-quality career development support at all career stages.
- ✓ Stronger collaboration between educators, employers, policymakers, and career development professionals.

✓ Policy recognition and increased investment in career development as a driver of economic growth, workforce resilience, and social mobility.

Valuing Careers campaign: thecdi.net/valuingcareers

Championing the profession within government

Career development is critical to individual success, economic growth, and social mobility—which is why we continue to advocate for it at policy level.

Through our partnerships with the Career Development Policy Group, the Skills Federation and other stakeholders, we ensure career development remains a national priority.

Career Development Policy Group: careerdpg.co.uk

Raising the profession's profile

We are committed to increasing awareness of the importance of career development through extensive media engagement. Our efforts include:

- Publishing articles in leading educational news outlets and providing expert commentary.
- Strengthening our social media presence to share press activity and contribute to themed awareness campaigns.

Search for 'Career Development Institute' on linkedin.com

A commitment to research

The CDI Research Directory provides curated, high-quality evidence to support careers guidance and inform best practice. Our aim is to ensure that policymakers and practitioners can access the best available research, and we will continue to grow this resource with new contributions.

thecdi.net/resources/research-directory

The Technical Education Resource Library offers career development professionals in England a single, convenient hub for information and resources designed to raise awareness of technical education pathways and the latest qualification reforms.

thecdi.net/resources/technical-education-resource-hub

We also undertake ongoing and ad-hoc research into the profession, including the Big Listen survey and other projects designed to explore key issues affecting career development practice.

Further CDI reports and briefings are available in the members-only Resources Library.

thecdi.net/resources/cpd-resource-library

CDI training, CPD and events

We offer a comprehensive range of initial and progression qualifications, as well as an annual CPD programme that provides members with access to free and discounted support to meet all their key professional development needs.

For the full training and events programme, including expert training sessions, conferences, webinars, CDI Academy courses and more, please visit thecdi.net/training-and-events.

NEW: AI in Careers Lightning Conference

Join careers professionals, educators, policy leaders and digital innovators for our new AI in Careers Lightning Conference. This fast-paced, discussion-led online session brings together high-impact insights and focused deep-dive conversations to help you build understanding, confidence and practical ideas you can apply in your own setting.

This event takes place Wednesday 29 April and is delivered in partnership with CareerChat UK and the University of Warwick Institute for Employment Research.

thecdi.net/LightningConference

The National Careers Leaders' Conference

The National Careers Leaders’ Conference (NCLC) is a key professional development event for Careers Leaders, Advisers, Hub Leads, and Enterprise Coordinators working across primary, secondary, SEND schools, and colleges. Organised by the CDI and iCeGS, it supports the development of best practice and tools to enhance careers programmes in response to evolving education policies and the changing world of work.

thecdi.net/NCLC

UK Career Development Awards

The annual UK Career Development Awards (UKCDAs) celebrate excellence and innovation across the career development sector in the UK and internationally. The event honours individuals and organisations making a significant impact through career guidance, education, and support services. With categories ranging from outstanding professionals and programmes to innovative resources and lifetime achievements, the awards highlight the dedication and creativity of those shaping futures.

thecdi.net/UKCDA

The CDI National Conference

The CDI National Conference is the flagship annual event for all professionals across the career development sector. It brings together practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and educators to explore the latest trends, challenges, and innovations in career development. It covers a wide range of topics relevant to career guidance for young people and adults and is designed to support continuous improvement and collaboration across the sector.

thecdi.net/national-conference

The National Research Conference

The National Research Conference, hosted by the Career Development Institute in partnership with iCeGS, AGCAS, and NICEC, is an annual event dedicated to showcasing and supporting practitioner-led research in the careers sector. It provides a platform for careers professionals from all settings to share their work, engage with evidence-informed practice, and build confidence in conducting and applying research.

thecdi.net/research-conference