

HECSU Funded Research Project

'To what extent has the fragmentation of careers education and guidance, offered to young people in schools and colleges, affected the level of career readiness which students have when they arrive at university?'

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1. Executive Summary

This report will show how the structural and political changes which have affected the careers guidance profession over the last 15 years has led to fragmented and inconsistent careers provision for young people in schools and colleges. It will then explore how this uneven careers support has impacted on the career readiness of higher education students. I will outline my findings from quantitative research which I carried out by asking a sample of LJMU students to complete a questionnaire. I will also recount my findings from interviews which I have completed with a sample of students. As part of my research, I have also conducted interviews with career practitioners who are working in either a school or college setting.

Research which has already been carried out over the last 5 years has highlighted the fragmented nature of careers education and guidance in schools and colleges. This was particularly evident following the 2011 Education Act which transferred responsibility for careers guidance from local authorities to schools and colleges. Langley, Hooley and Bertuchi highlighted the uneven nature of careers provision for young people in 2014 when they asked; 'is the development of a postcode lottery of careers provision an acceptable outcome of school autonomy?' My findings will demonstrate that LJMU students' past experiences of careers support are disparate and may well be reflective of the inconsistent nature of careers education and guidance which exists across the UK. My research will illustrate that some students have positive recollections of receiving some very thorough careers support, whilst other students report significant gaps in the careers provision which they encountered. My findings will show that this picture has also been echoed by the feedback received from the careers practitioners. Some of these practitioners give examples of some very good practice in the schools or colleges which they work in, whilst others suggest that careers support is patchy and underdeveloped in some of the institutions which they are linked to.

My report will then explore how the inconsistent level of careers support which LJMU students have encountered prior to coming to university, has impacted on their career readiness now they have entered higher education. My findings will show that LJMU students demonstrate varying levels of confidence in their employability skills and some of this lack of confidence may be linked to an earlier lack of careers input. However, my research will also evaluate the fact that a range of other socio-economic factors may well have impacted on LJMU students' career readiness and these factors must also be taken into account, alongside the prior careers education or guidance which our students have received.

My findings also show that where some students have had negative experiences of careers education and guidance in the past, they may feel some resistance to accessing it in the future, and this may also have an impact on their readiness to continue career planning once in university. Furthermore, my research illustrates that in some cases the lack of impartial careers advice (which some students received) has affected their awareness of the full range of options open to them. My research will also show that a significant number of students who were interviewed for this project have at some point discontinued from earlier courses of further or higher education. This provides evidence to indicate that lack of careers guidance may impede an individual's ability to make informed career choices, and that consequently this can increase their likelihood of failing to complete a course of study.

What is needed is a more standardised system for careers education and guidance in schools and colleges. The Gatsby Foundation's eight benchmarks (published in April 2014) provided a useful framework for schools and colleges to develop their careers provision (**see page five**). However, until this framework exists it would appear that this lack of consistency in earlier careers support for young people, presents a challenge for higher education

careers services. In the final section of my report I will give some recommendations as to how higher education careers services may respond to this challenge. Early intervention with undergraduate students from the first year onwards would appear crucial in addressing this lack of prior careers support which some students have reported. Many university careers services are already involved in partnership working with careers practitioners who are working in schools or colleges. However, one of my recommendations will be about ways in which this partnership working could be developed, to address even in a small way the lack of careers guidance which is prevalent in some schools and colleges.

My recommendations will also show that my research project has also highlighted a number of other issues which are worthy of further research. This could include further investigation into whether a lack of earlier careers support increases the probability of a student discontinuing from a further or higher education courses of study. For example, it would be helpful to identify a cohort of students who are at risk of discontinuing from a degree course, and to find out about their earlier experiences of careers education and guidance, to see if there are any common themes in their histories.

2. My background

Following a degree in modern languages (University of Leeds, 1996) I completed the Post-graduate Diploma in Careers Guidance at the University of Huddersfield from 1998 to 1999. I then gained employment with Staffordshire Careers from 1998 to 2001 where I was employed as an education based careers adviser and I worked in secondary schools across Staffordshire. During my time with Staffordshire Careers, I also completed Part 2 of the post-graduate Diploma in Careers Guidance. In 2001 I moved to London and worked for Capital Careers (which later became Central London Connexions) where I worked as a careers adviser in schools and colleges within Westminster and Camden, and eventually moved into a team manager role. In 2004 I made the move into higher education when I became a careers adviser for City University. During my time in London, I was also an associate lecturer for the University of East London where I taught on the Post-graduate Qualification in Careers Guidance (QCG) Course. I moved to Liverpool John Moores University in 2007 to work as a careers adviser.

My past career history was instrumental in giving me the idea for this research project. In my previous roles, I had seen the process which young people go through to make career decisions prior to university. I then witnessed the difficulty faced by some students with the career decision-making process at higher education and wondered at what point this uncertainty had started. My past experiences therefore made me reflect upon the link between young peoples' early access to careers support and how this impacts on their willingness to engage in further career development once they enter university. Over time I developed an interest in researching this topic further and it was this which motivated me to design and undertake this research project. My time spent working in school and colleges also gave me an understanding of the issues likely to be faced by careers practitioners working in this setting, and this was very helpful when I was conducting interviews with these advisers, in order to gather qualitative feedback.

3. Context – ‘A Postcode Lottery’ of Careers Provision

There have been a large number of structural and political changes affecting the careers guidance profession over the last 15 years, which have led to significant changes in how career education and guidance is delivered in schools. The creation of Connexions by the Labour government in early 2000 was an attempt to create an integrated youth support service. There was a move away from a universal careers service towards a service which was targeted at those who were NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) or who were in danger of becoming NEET. As reported by Hooley, Matheson and Watts in 2014 (p.14), this also led to the ‘weakening of the careers element of the service and the erosion of its distinctive careers professionalism’. It was also common for careers advisers to be renamed as personal advisers, and to be encouraged to deliver guidance interviews in a more holistic way. Careers advisers worked alongside other professionals involved in delivering advice and support services to young people (such as youth workers), however this meant that situations arose where careers guidance was not always delivered by professionally qualified practitioners.

Following the General Election in 2010 and the appointment of the new Coalition Government, the remit for careers work was transferred with limited funding to schools and colleges. Significant funding cuts were made to education business partnerships such as Connexions. In 2014, The Career Development Institute reported that; ‘The Education Act 2011 transferred responsibility for careers guidance from local authorities to schools and colleges. Since September 2012, schools have been required to secure access to independent and impartial careers guidance for their students and in September 2013 this requirement was extended to colleges. At the same time the Government has removed the statutory duties on schools to provide careers education in the curriculum and work-related learning at key stage 4’ (p.4).

All these changes in policy have led to significant structural changes in how careers support is delivered in schools and colleges. Unfortunately much of the evidence shows that the impact of these changes has not necessarily been positive. Hooley, Matheson and Watts stated in 2014; ‘It is possible to view the current government’s careers policy as an ill-founded and poorly delivered experiment. A whole system of career support was ripped out in 2011 with little thought about the consequences’ (p.33).

In September 2013, OFSTED published a report about their evaluation of careers provision in 60 schools and reported that ‘arrangements for careers guidance were not working well in just over three quarters of the 60 schools visited’ (p.11). They also reported that; ‘only one in five schools were effective in ensuring that all its students in Years 9, 10 and 11 were receiving the level of information, advice and guidance they need to support decision-making’ (p.5). They also stated that; ‘about four out of five schools visited did not evaluate the quality of their careers guidance effectively’ (p.6).

Further research which was published in 2014 highlighted the fragmented careers provision which was currently in operation in schools and colleges. In their 2014 report, Langley, Hooley and Bertuchi commented on the patchy nature of careers provision across the UK and ask; ‘is the development of a postcode lottery’ of careers provision an acceptable outcome of school autonomy?’(pvi). They also highlighted the fact that; ‘the decrease in budgets has resulted in the large scale decommissioning of Connexions services and severe cuts to employment within the (careers guidance) sector’ (p.9).

The government then published a number of documents which presented an action plan of how this shortfall in careers provision in schools could be addressed. In a 2014 Department for Education Report, the role of the careers professional seems to be largely overlooked in favour of using support from employers instead, to raise the aspirations of pupils. There is an emphasis in this report on school-business partnerships. This theme is further highlighted in a DfE report published in March 2015 where it was again stressed that schools should 'build strong links with employers' (p.5). This report also stressed that; 'the duty on schools, to secure independent careers guidance for all year 8-13 pupils, is intended to expand advice and guidance for young people so that they are inspired and motivated to fulfil their potential' (p.4).

More recently in June 2016 the Business, Innovation, Skills and Education Committee published a report which stated that; 'careers education, information, advice and guidance in English schools is patchy and often inadequate' (p.3). It recommended that; 'OFSTED's role should be strengthened and schools downgraded if careers provision is not effective' (p.3). This report also stated that 'the complex web of national organisations should be untangled' (p.3). This refers to the fact that there are now a range of organisations involved in giving careers advice and guidance such as local authority services, private careers companies, charities and the National Careers Service. The aforementioned report affirmed that 'the government is shortly to publish a careers strategy' (p.3).

In Good Careers Guidance (2014), the Gatsby Charitable Foundation identified a series of evidence-based benchmarks which, it suggested, constitutes good careers guidance **(which are listed on the next page)**. Currently, schools and colleges are not working to the Gatsby Benchmarks, although many may have procedures in place which address some of them. Hooley, Matheson and Watts suggest that '...the awards offer a clear, well-disseminated and popular framework against which schools and colleges can develop their provision. The Gatsby survey suggested that those schools and colleges which hold a Quality Award are more likely to meet a number of the benchmarks than those that do not' (p.27). The Gatsby framework therefore provides a framework by which schools and colleges can develop their careers provision.

Of course, since Brexit and the UK's referendum vote to leave the EU, there have been major political changes which could lead to further shifts in government legislation affecting careers education and guidance in schools and colleges. In the meantime though, the system of careers support which is available for young people would still appear to be inconsistent and fragmented, and (as will be seen in this report) this is reflected in the key findings from my research.

4. The Gatsby Foundation's Eight Benchmarks

The Gatsby study resulted in the identification of a series of eight benchmarks that represent quality careers provision. These benchmarks are referred to throughout this report and therefore they are detailed here for reference. They are:

- A stable careers programme
- Learning from careers and labour market information
- Addressing the needs of each pupil
- Linking curriculum learning to careers
- Encounters with employers and employees
- Experiences of workplaces
- Encounters with further and higher education
- Personal guidance

The Gatsby Charitable Foundation (2014), *Good Careers Guidance*, London: Gatsby Charitable Foundation.

5. Methodology

I used the methods listed below to gather data for this research project. This data was collected from September 2015 to July 2016.

Questionnaire – 343 first year LJMU students completed this questionnaire which was used to gather quantitative data. The students were from a range of degree courses and were selected randomly, as (to ensure a maximum number of completed responses) the questionnaire was distributed to students at the end of induction talks or careers sessions which were delivered by myself and my colleagues. The vast majority of these questionnaires were completed by LJMU students during their first term at the university. The questionnaire was distributed mainly to science students, as they form part of my caseload at LJMU and therefore I had easy access to these students. A proportion of the questionnaires were also distributed to students from other courses as two of my colleagues delivered sessions to these students early in the autumn term. The data from these questionnaires was then collated, using SPSS and the full report can be found in the **appendices (item one)**.

Interviews with first year LJMU students – I carried out 18 semi-structured interviews. I selected the first year students, as their memory of their experience of careers education and guidance at school or college was likely to be more recent, plus I wanted to assess their career readiness soon after their arrival at university. The questions which I asked the students can be found in the **appendices (item three)**. These students came from a range of different degree programmes, although they were mainly from science programmes, along with a couple of nursing students. These interviews were all conducted face to face and were also recorded. The interviews were mainly carried out on a one to one basis, however there were a couple of 'group' interviews with (one in a group of three and one interview conducted in a pair). The interviews generally lasted around 30 minutes.

The students were of course asked to participate in these interviews on a voluntary basis. There were students who initially agreed to participate in an interview and who then failed to attend for it. In fact, the number of interviews conducted would actually have been significantly higher, if all students had attended.

Interviews with career practitioners working in a school or college setting – I carried out ten interviews with careers advisers working in a school or in a college of Further Education. Some of these careers advisers were employed by a careers company or by a local authority. One was employed by a college of further education and another one was self-employed. The questions which I asked these advisers can be found in the **appendices (item four)**. Half of these careers practitioners were working in the Staffordshire area and two were working in Merseyside. Of the other three advisers; one was working in the Lancashire area, another one was working in the Greater Manchester area and another one was working in Cheshire. All of these advisers held a professional qualification in careers guidance (either the post-graduate Diploma in Careers Guidance, Qualification in Careers Guidance or the Level 6 Diploma in Careers Guidance and Development) and they had all been working in the profession for at least a decade or more. One of the advisers also had managerial responsibilities. These interviews lasted 30- 45 minutes.

Literature Survey – I carried out a survey of existing research which had been carried out which related to the aforementioned research question. I found a substantial amount of research and published papers about the impact of the changes in government policy since 2011, and how they have impacted on the careers education and guidance offered to young people in schools and colleges. I found comparatively little published research about how these structural changes had affected the career readiness of young people *once they entered higher education*.

Definition – Throughout this report I refer to the term ‘career readiness’. I have produced a definition of this term which is detailed below.

An individual who is ‘career ready’ would be able to:

- Feel confident in making decisions about the next stage of their career path.
- Navigate their way through the range of choices available.
- Have confidence in accessing reliable sources of careers information.
- Demonstrate awareness of the options available for employment, training and further study.
- Have employability skills which would support him or her in this process i.e. in selling him or herself on paper and in person.
- Demonstrate awareness of services which are available to support him or her in the above.

6. Key Findings

(a) Lack of consistency in our students' past experiences of careers support

The data collected illustrates the vastly different experiences of careers support which our students have encountered prior to coming to university. 65.6% of LJMU first year students stated that they recalled having a careers guidance interview at school or college, with 22.2% reporting that they didn't have an interview and 12.2% stating that they couldn't remember if they had an interview or not. 68.5% of students who ticked that they had an interview, had one or two interviews (with 10.7% recalling that they had three or more interviews). This does at least indicate that our students were offered ongoing support in some cases. Of those students who had had an interview, 36.9% said the interview was only 15 minutes or less (which would seem a relatively brief interaction), and 44.9% said the interview was 15-30 minutes. Only 4.4% of our students remember having a longer interview of 30-45 minutes.

60.1% of our students ticked that they had received some careers education at school or college (for example careers lessons, PSE, group sessions or employer events). Whilst the highest positive response rate for this question was in Years 9-13, it is interesting that a small proportion of students report receiving some careers education in Year 7 (12.6%) and Year 8 (14.6%). This shows that some schools are actually attempting to deliver careers support to young people at a much earlier stage.

The above figures correlate with other national research which has been carried out. Archer and Moote carried out a survey in 2014/15 of young people in Year 11, to find out about the careers education which they had received. The survey was completed by 13,421 pupil from 340 secondary schools in England (296 state schools and 44 independent). Their findings (published in February 2016) showed that 62.5% of these young people reported receiving some careers education.

The data gained from my sample of LJMU students does indicate then that roughly two thirds of them do *remember* receiving some careers education and guidance at school or college. However, this still leaves a significant proportion of around a third who do not recall receiving any careers support at school or college. We are of course reliant on what our students *remember* about the careers input which they received at school or college. There was no real way of finding out if those respondents who said they hadn't benefitted from any careers support previously had really had no prior access to it. Sometimes in interviews with students, some of them said that there hadn't been any careers support available to them at school. However, when this was explored with them further there had actually been some help available even if this had been quite limited, and for example in the form of a one off careers convention. Therefore, when analysing the data gained from the questionnaire we have to acknowledge that we are reliant on our students 'self-reporting'.

Clearly it is not only the level of exposure which the sampled students have to careers education or guidance which is significant, it is also the *impact* that this careers input had on them as well. In answer to the question about how useful the students found their careers interview(s), 60.2% of students responded that they found it 'quite useful' or 'very useful'. When asked how useful they found the careers education which they received at school or college, 65.3% of students said that they found it 'quite useful or very useful'. Again this still leaves a proportion of students who were less sure about the validity of the careers support which they had received at school. If some students stated that they cannot remember if they had a careers interview at school, it could be argued that if they had accessed a one to one careers appointment but don't remember it, then perhaps this interaction had not had a significant impact on them.

Students gave varying feedback about how useful they had found the careers support which they had received at school or college. Some students felt that the advice which they had received was too general. One student wrote the following comment on the questionnaire;

'It had to focus on a broad spectrum of opportunities to accommodate the whole class. It was not very personal to me and my choices.'

One student (aged 19, studying applied sports psychology) was very honest about why he had not found the careers education which he had received in school useful;

'We had careers lessons during ICT in Year 11 and it was kind of pointless and annoyed everyone. I don't think at that age loads of us knew what we wanted to do. It wasn't real and it didn't matter back then.'

This raises a point (which was also highlighted by other students) that sometimes the students felt that the careers education which they received at school was too early for them, as they were still working out what they wanted to do in the future. There is of course an argument that perhaps more could have been done to contextualise the careers education which some of our students received at school, and to explain to them why it is important to start thinking about careers at an earlier stage. During my interviews with students a number of them also said that at school, they already felt under pressure to succeed academically and they found it difficult to take career planning on board at that point as they perceived it as another pressure.

Other students also expressed a few doubts about the expertise of the person who delivered their careers education. One student wrote the following;

'We got taught careers by the Latin teachers who just stuck an episode of 'The Apprentice' on every session.'

On the other hand, there were students who were very positive about the careers support which they had received at school or college. Of the 18 students whom I saw for an interview, eight recalled having a careers interview at school or college. Almost all the students felt that this interview had been useful, in giving them the opportunity to discuss their future plans with an impartial professional. One applied psychology student (aged 18) described how she had a number of careers interviews with a careers adviser during Years 11, 12 and 13 and that this had been very helpful to her in clarifying options with regards to Higher Education, at a time when she felt very uncertain about her future. She also recounted how she had accessed a comprehensive range of employer talks and conventions whilst at school. Another student (aged 26, studying biochemistry) remembered having a number of interviews with a careers adviser at college, and said that the adviser had been very helpful in helping him to organise some voluntary work. Other students who were interviewed also recalled 'options talks' at school, and almost all could remember careers or employer conventions which they felt were useful.

(b) Negative preconceptions which may be held by some students about accessing careers support at university

The next question to ask is; if our students have had a mixed experience of careers support at school or college how does this affect how they will engage with higher education careers services? The written responses from our students indicate that (despite mixed prior experiences) many of them *do* still intend to engage with our services. 66.2% of our students said that they were likely to book a careers interview with a careers adviser to discuss their future career direction. A similar percentage of 66.5% of students said that

they were likely to arrange an appointment with an employability adviser to have their CV, cover letter or any future job application forms checked.

However, a much lower percentage of the sampled students (38.2%) said that they would be likely to attend optional careers sessions and an even lower percentage (24.5%) said that they intend to participate in employability related webinars. It is difficult to know if this reluctance stems from our students' past experiences, or if it is because the majority of students were surveyed during their first term at university. Therefore, they may still have a developing awareness of the wide ranging careers services available and what these workshops can offer them. However, it does perhaps suggest a need to emphasise to students the benefits of attending these sessions and to highlight to them that the dedicated provision which is available to them might be very different to what they have previously encountered. On the positive side, a greater percentage of students (58%) said that they intended to attend employer events, to network with relevant professionals.

(c) Lack of information about alternative options other than higher education

Some students felt that there was a lack of information given to them about career options other than Higher Education. Some students suggested that they (or their friends) could have been informed more about other options which were open to them, such as higher level modern apprenticeships, foundation degrees or employment with companies who target school leavers with A-levels or equivalent qualifications. I interviewed one applied sports psychology student (aged 19) who commented on this;

'My sixth form was all about university so if you didn't want to go to university or you wanted to get an apprenticeship, you were sort of left to your own devices. There wasn't much support for those who weren't going to university.'

Likewise a sports science student (aged 20) described the culture at his secondary school as follows;

'In Year 12 and 13 there was a big university push. I just felt people were saying to me; you must go to university, you must go now.'

The above student then went on to describe how he felt quite pressurised so he took a gap year to decide if he really wanted to go to university, and then he did decide to eventually continue to higher education after this year. Of course it could be said that our students (having all completed a level 3 qualification) are likely to have been in cohorts at school or college that would have been identified as likely to progress onto university. Therefore, it follows that the teachers, lecturers or careers staff working with them would have recognised the need to advise them appropriately on higher education options, and to offer them the appropriate support to make this progression.

However, some of the feedback from our students does indicate that they would have liked to hear more about the other options open to them. It could also be argued that if some students reluctantly feel compelled to go onto higher education as this seems to be the most 'accepted' option open to them, then this could possibly have an effect on retention rates for degree courses. There may be cases where students find themselves on degree courses which they do not feel suited to, when in fact they may have preferred a more work-based way of learning. In 2015, the government introduced degree apprenticeships which will allow students to combine academic study from a traditional university degree, with practical workplace experience. With the range of apprenticeship options which are open to young people increasing, it has therefore become even more important for young people to receive information about these options.

Some of the careers practitioners who were interviewed also commented on this focus on progression to higher education at the expense of advice about other options. One careers adviser, (who works mainly in a secondary school) made this comment;

'The schools are so busy telling them rather than asking them. The schools seem to focus on college or university an awful lot and they don't really expand on the other options.'

Conversely, one careers adviser (working in a further education college) felt that the students which she gave guidance to *did* receive very good information about modern apprenticeships;

'Our Level 3 students do have talks on apprenticeships. The college is quite a large provider of apprenticeships so we have quite a large apprenticeship team.'

The overall picture then regarding the information which young people receive about options other than higher education, is again one of inconsistency.

(d) A possible link between the level of careers support which a student has received at school or college and their likelihood of discontinuing from a course of further or higher education.

This became apparent via the interviews which I carried out with students. Of 18 students interviewed, seven of the students had at some point discontinued from a further or higher education course. It may well also be significant that of these seven students, none recalled having a careers interview with a guidance practitioner, before coming to university. This does provide anecdotal evidence that lack of careers guidance may impede an individual's ability to make an informed choice about the most suitable progression route open to him or her.

Some of these students felt that some careers guidance may have made a difference to them and prevented them from taking a 'wrong turn'. One applied psychology student (aged 24) told me that she had spent a year on a computing course at an FE college which was totally unsuitable for her and she felt that with some advice she could have made a more appropriate choice;

'I went on to college to do computers and I had no intention of going into computers but it was only because I had to do something because I couldn't get a job.....I think if there had been someone there to advise me on what else was available I would have pushed myself to pick something more appropriate....that I really wanted to do.'

Likewise, a sports science student (aged 20) described how he had left school and started a plumbing course. He then realised halfway through this course that it wasn't right for him and he then took a year out before taking a BTEC National Diploma in Sports Studies which was a more suitable choice for him and from this he progressed onto his degree course. He reflected upon why he had not chosen the right course at first;

'I left school and decided I wanted to go to college to study something but I didn't have much idea of what....I thought construction could have been for me but really wasn't sure...I definitely felt careers guidance was lacking at school. If I have known about the other opportunities available I would have chosen differently first time around.'

This student's experience also shows that it isn't merely a case young people being pushed into higher education when it isn't right for them, but that in other cases young people can be discouraged from pursuing higher education when it is in fact the right choice for them.

An applied psychology student (aged 21) also recounted to me how she discontinued from studying A-levels at the end of Year 12 and then took a year out (before going back into education to start another set of A-levels);

'I didn't know if I wanted to go to university definitely so I wanted to just take some time out to really think about it because it is a lot of money to invest in something.'

She then reflected upon if she had received some careers guidance at school, whether this would have made a difference to her;

'I can't really remember getting much advice at all. I think maybe if I had had more guidance it would have helped, I don't really remember getting much guidance at all to be honest....but I found my way eventually.'

Thankfully, all of the students interviewed had been able to rectify the fact that they had taken the 'wrong path' at one stage, and were now on what they felt was the right degree programme for them. They had been able to demonstrate resilience in 'turning around' the situation. However, these stories do raise questions about what happens to the individuals who choose the wrong route and who are (for any number of reasons) not able to rectify this and to restart on a more suitable career path. This could lead to situations where individuals do not realise their potential or where they become trapped on the wrong course or in an unsuitable job role, which does not make best use of their skills or talents.

(e) The range of other factors which affect our students' career readiness which must also be taken into account

It became apparent that it was not just that level of careers support at school or college which our students had received which impacted on their career readiness. The survey showed that 55.1% of students indicated that 'talking to friends and family' was one of the key ways in which they made the decision about which degree subject to study and which university to choose. Furthermore 51% said that 'talking to teachers at school or college' also influenced their choice of degree subject and university. These findings echo Bill Law's community interaction theory (1981) which states that one of the most influential factors on an individual 'can be pressure to follow particular paths based on what is considered acceptable by family or community groups' (p59). Given that the mean age of the students who completed this questionnaire was 19, it is perhaps not surprising that they cited parents and friends as key influences upon them. A lower percentage of 16% of students cited that seeking advice from a careers adviser had influenced them.

Sometimes when interviewing students it became apparent that careers guidance had influenced their choice of career path, even when they did not initially identify this to be the case. For example, an applied psychology student (aged 19) described how work experience in a hospital which she had completed in Year 12 had influenced her decision not to pursue nursing. She then went on to explain that it was a careers adviser who had suggested that she undertake this work experience, and she was grateful that she had done it as otherwise she would have ended up on an unsuitable degree course. Therefore a careers adviser had influenced her thinking, albeit indirectly.

Other socio-economic factors were also revealed as influencers on our students' career planning. At one interview a student (aged 19, studying sports science) reported that he felt that the secondary school which he went to had been pivotal in shaping his future. He described how he was meant to go to a school which was in 'special measures' but he and his parents had successfully won an appeal for him to go to his preferred school which had a rating of 'outstanding' from OFSTED and which was also geared to sports. He said;

'I have thought how different I would be as a person and the different choices I would have made if I hadn't gone to my secondary school. I mean, I don't think I would even have made it to university.....The environment that I was in definitely did push me into getting the best out of myself.'

This student's perspective was reminiscent of Krumboltz's social learning theory (1994), and how this affects career decision making. According to this theory 'people construct schemata or beliefs about themselves and the world, which organise their learning, and which subsequently guide their selection of goals and the choices they make' (p.34).

A mature student also explained how her career choices had been shaped by the array of work experience which she had acquired along the way, and she had decided upon a career path through 'trial and error'. She is a nursing student who had originally done a degree in theatre studies. After that degree she had been unable to find a job related to her degree so she had by chance taken a job as a support worker. Following eight years of working in this job, she decided to train as a nurse, and was relieved to have eventually found a career path which suited her as she told me;

'...for a long time I didn't really know what I wanted to do.'

This student's experience reflects Robert's opportunity structure theory (1977) which suggests that the career choice of individuals may be guided by the opportunities which are most immediately apparent to them, and that 'people may need support to identify opportunities actually open to them' (p.52)

(f) Taking into account the employment history of students

It is worth emphasising that 78% of the respondents to the questionnaire had either done or were currently doing part-time work. Of course, not all of these students were in part-time work which is relevant to their field of study, but it does illustrate that there are students who are engaging with the job market. Some of these students were in part-time work relevant to their degree subject. For example there were many examples of sports science students who were involved in coaching. From this data, then, it can be seen that many of our students are already developing their career readiness through part-time work which may even have started before they came to university. This workplace experience also needs to be taken into account, alongside the careers education and guidance which they may or may not have received, prior to coming to university. This could be further built upon and consolidated through work experiences or placements which they could undertake during their undergraduate degree, which are more relevant to their desired future career path.

(g) The impact of technology on our students' career readiness

The way that students use technology to develop their awareness of different options open to them, also became apparent. 41.7% of students who completed the questionnaire ticked that they made the decision about which degree subject to study by 'reading information on websites'.

Some of the comments made by students in interview also revealed that the vast range of information (which is available to them on the internet) made them question why they needed to access careers guidance. One applied sports psychology student (aged 19) made the following comment;

'At school I thought well if I needed to know about a job, I could just go and google it.'

Sometimes though, when some students were asked at interview to name reliable sources of careers information which they could use to identify future career options, they struggled to do so. This then points to the importance of careers education and guidance, to help

students navigate their way through the many sources which are available on the internet, and to ensure that the information which they are accessing is current and accurate.

It is also important to say that there were a number of examples given by career practitioners of how they were using technology in a positive and supportive way with their clients. For example, some advisers mentioned the use of packages such as UNIFROG (which can be used as a search tool for apprenticeships and degree courses) and Skills Explorer (which enables users to assess their skills and match them again specific job roles).

(h) Differences between the careers education and guidance which our students had received at school and/or at FE colleges

This was a finding which revealed itself in the one to one interviews with LJMU students. Some of the students who had studied at an FE College for a Level 3 vocational qualification described how they had completed a careers module as part of their course. One sports science student (aged 20) described the module which he had completed as part of his BTEC National Diploma course;

'One of the units was dedicated to employability....jobs, CVs and interview skills and so we had to pass that module to pass the course and so we were required to create a CV, fill out an application form effectively and then have an interview with an employer.'

The above student described how this module had been delivered by college tutors and he had found it very beneficial. He felt that as a result of completing this module, he had a much greater awareness of how to prepare for job interviews, and how to present himself effectively to employers. Likewise a biology student (aged 20) told me about an 'employability unit' which she had completed as part of her BTEC National Diploma course which was a compulsory element of the course and which was taught for 2 hours a week.

(i) How students' inconsistent past experiences of careers education and guidance affects their career readiness when they enter university

The respondents to the questionnaire were asked to comment on how able (or confident) they felt in undertaking certain tasks. The highest percentage of students (73.4%) said that they felt quite able or very able to choose a career path. This could be due to the fact that a significant proportion of the students surveyed were on a course with a vocational emphasis to it (such as law), and that some of them may have had a pre-determined idea of their career path before even beginning the course. 67.7% of the sampled students stated that they felt quite able or very able to find relevant job vacancies, work experience or voluntary work. This could be explained by the fact that (as previously stated) a large proportion of the students surveyed have already engaged with part-time employment so have already developed some confidence in finding job vacancies. The percentages were lower for our students' confidence to complete certain tasks which could be a measure of their employability skills. For example, only 52.1% of students felt able or quite able to produce a strong application form, and 61% of students felt able or quite able to perform well at a job interview.

It could be said that even if a student says that they they feel able to complete a certain task, *we have not measured if this is actually the case*. However, from the figures above, we can see that when asked to assess their confidence in a particular employability skill approximately around two thirds of our students answered that they felt able or very able to complete a certain task. It is also interesting that roughly two thirds of our students recall having a careers guidance interview, or access to careers education at school or college. The correspondence between these two sets of figures is striking, although it is difficult to prove if the two thirds of students who had accessed careers education and guidance are

the same two thirds who said that they felt able or quite able to demonstrate a particular employability skill.

Some further analysis of the data also revealed that there were some differences in male and female responses in how able LJMU students felt to complete certain tasks (**see appendices item two**). The data showed that females assessed themselves as less able to complete some (though not all) of the tasks, than male students did. 66.5% of males said that they felt 'able or very able' to write an effective CV, whereas the percentage of females who felt 'able or very able' to do this was 55.2%. 57.5% of males felt 'able or very able' to produce a strong application form, whereas a lower percentage of 48% of females felt 'able or very able' to do this. Similarly, 67.1% of male students said that they felt 'quite able or very able' to perform well at job interview whereas a lesser percentage of 55.9% of female students said that they felt 'able or very able' to do so. For five out of the seven questions where LJMU students were asked to assess their ability to complete certain tasks, male students demonstrated higher levels of confidence than female students. For two other questions about how confident LJMU students felt about finding relevant job vacancies, or how able they felt to choose a career path, there was a less marked difference in responses. In fact, for both these questions the percentage of female students who said that they felt able or very able to complete these tasks was about one percentage higher.

Overall, the aforementioned data does show that there are still a significant number of LJMU first year students who (when they completed this questionnaire during their first term at university) did not feel confidently able to choose a career path, or to engage in other tasks such as selling themselves to an employer effectively on paper or in person. Of course, by accessing the range of support which is available from The World of Work Careers Centre at LJMU, then our students can develop these employability skills during their time at university, and can start to address some of these gaps. However, it may be possible to draw from the data gathered, that the fragmented careers education and guidance which some of these students have accessed (or not accessed) prior to coming to university, has impacted on the career readiness of some of them, at least to an extent.

Likewise, during the one to one interviews with students a mixed picture emerged of students' confidence in their ability to complete certain tasks. Almost all the students expressed concern about looking for work experience which was relevant to their degree and said that they were likely to seek support from The World of Work Careers Centre at LJMU, with this. Almost all of the students felt that they had some idea about how to put a CV or application form together, but a number of them recognised that they would need to develop the kind of CV which they have previously used if they were to apply for graduate jobs. A number of the students who were interviewed expressed concern about their ability to fill in application forms for graduate jobs. A nursing student (aged 22) said to me;

'The application forms which we have to fill in are long....I don't know how much detail I need to put an application form, I'm a bit unsure of things like that really.'

Quite a few of the students had concerns about their ability to perform well at job interviews. One applied psychology student (aged 19) said to me;

'I am not really great at interviews or presenting myself.'

A biochemistry student (aged 26) described his concerns about job interviews as follows;

'When it comes to job interviews, I'm quite unconfident....I have never attended a formal interview for a full-time job. I'm not sure what to expect. I would benefit from some practice interviews definitely. I'm terrified about how I will come across.'

On the positive side, we can say that the fact that these students were able to reflect upon areas where they needed to develop their skills and confidence, means that they will then hopefully seek to address some of these areas during their time at university.

As a practitioner, the above data highlights to me the importance of continuing to integrate workshops about topics such as CV-writing and interview skills, within the curriculum. These findings demonstrate why it is helpful to offer ongoing support to students in the above areas, and to make them aware of support available such as the opportunity to have a mock interview with myself or one of my colleagues.

7. The Career Practitioners' Perspective

(a) Vastly different models of delivery of careers education in schools

A number of the advisers who were interviewed were attached to at least two (or even three) schools. All the advisers talked about the fact that the careers programmes in place were very different in each school and this depended largely on the level of engagement which that school had with the careers adviser(s) attached to it. One adviser stated how in one school which she worked in;

'The careers programme is very structured and starts with pupils from Year 7 and then continues right through to Year 13.'

In the other school which she is attached to;

'There is no established career programme at all.'

One adviser talked about the lack of a structured approach to delivering careers education in several of the schools in which she worked;

'Careers co-ordinators are under an awful lot of pressure but it is another add-on to their day job and they just haven't got the time. There is no dedicated time for careers education so it is lucky if it just gets a few days dedicated to it. Whereas when I started there was a structured careers programme which ran for a length of time for a few years...'

The same adviser also talked about how she felt that there was a lack of theoretical basis to how careers programme were put together;

'Some careers co-ordinators don't have any theoretical basis to their knowledge of careers education...they may not have any idea of what they are doing and why they are doing it...even if you go back to the DOTS model, it may be out of date but it did give us something which we can all draw on.'

Another adviser reflected on the vast difference in the careers provision in the two schools which she worked in;

'In one school careers is very much an afterthought...it is not structured at all...in the other school is very much the opposite.'

The same adviser also recounted how;

'A lot of schools don't have a PSHE set time anymore, there tends to be set careers days, rather than making time for it throughout the week.'

One adviser talked about the importance of tailoring the careers education programme to the school;

'The programme and a strategy for a school has to be right for it to make sense to their pupils...in some schools it is all a bit higgledy piggledy and it doesn't make sense, you need someone to pull it all together.'

All the advisers who were interviewed described how they were involved in delivery of events such as 'careers days' which involved input from employers to talk about a variety of options, and higher education awareness days which included presentations or exhibitions from local universities.

It was also encouraging that a number of advisers mentioned that they were involved in delivery of careers education with young people from as young as Year 7. One adviser even

mentioned a pilot project which she was involved in with a local primary school, which involved delivering a careers awareness day to Year 3 pupils.

There were also advisers who reported examples of very good practice of careers education in certain schools which they had been linked to. For example, one adviser described a school in which he worked where he said that;

'The careers programme (which has been put together by a careers teacher) is fantastic and has been created according to the Gatsby framework and the 8 benchmarks.'

Some advisers also talked about how they were involved in running continuous professional development sessions for teachers, to support them in enhancing their careers education programme.

The overall picture though is of a vast range in the quality of careers provision in secondary schools. As one adviser said to me;

'What is on offer in schools is very piecemeal.'

(b) A variation in how one to one careers interviews are delivered in schools

Some of the advisers described how they still took a 'blanket interviewing' approach, particularly for Year 11 pupils, and they tended to see all of those in Year 11 at least once, if they possibly could. Some advisers stated how in some of the schools they worked in, they only saw around half of Year 11 pupils. The way in which the advisers gained access to the pupils was also crucial, as those advisers who managed to see all of the Year 11 pupils had some good mechanisms in their schools for arranging interviews, and had a designated contact in the school who set up the appointments for them. Other advisers talked about a 'self-referral' system where pupils themselves could sign up for interviews. There were also others systems in place whereby some schools preferred that the adviser focussed on the Year 11 pupils who were at risk of not progressing onto employment or education. One adviser recounted how in one school in which she was working, it was a challenge to even gain access to the pupils as she had to go and seek out pupils from lessons herself. She also recounted how as there was no designated interviewing space in the school, she had to carry her careers interviews out either in a spare classroom, or in a corridor.

All the advisers also described how they did interviews with pupils from other year groups as well, such as with Year 8 and 9 pupils to support them with GCSE option choice. Those advisers who were working in schools with sixth forms, also described careers interviews with Year 12 and 13 pupils as well, although only one adviser said that she saw all of the Year 12 and 13 pupils. Other advisers tended just to see a proportion of these year groups, and were reliant on self-referrals from pupils and teachers.

Overall, then again a mixed picture of the provision of careers interviews in schools emerges. Some advisers were making valiant efforts to make sure that large cohorts of Year 11 pupils were seen for one to one interviews, and all of them reported how they also tended to see Year 11 pupils, in particular for follow up appointments. As one adviser said to me;

'We always try and see as many people as we possibly can and we try and do this in the most efficient way.'

In other cases though, it appeared that the adviser's access to the pupils depended upon the referral mechanisms which were in place in the school, or the adviser's persistence in 'seeking out' the pupils when these systems were not in place.

(c) It is not just qualified careers practitioners who are giving advice and guidance

Some advisers mentioned the fact that they were working alongside others who were giving careers advice to clients, despite the fact that these colleagues were not qualified in the field of careers guidance. One adviser described how in a FE college in which she worked there were 'progression coaches' and she described their role as follows;

'Progression coaches deliver the tutorial system and so they deliver the UCAS application process and advise students on what should go into a personal statement and whether university is the right route for them. The coaches are the college's own staff not qualified careers advisers. They would refer to us if they decide it is not their area of expertise.....We are reliant on the referral system from the coach.'

The same adviser did go on to describe how she worked with these coaches and delivered groupwork sessions to students in collaboration with them. However, this does raise questions about the quality and accuracy of advice which young people may receive, if it is not delivered by a qualified professional. It also shows that in some cases, the boundaries between the roles of different professionals, appear unclear. One adviser (who was also a manager) talked to me about how since 2011/12 there are now more providers who are offering careers guidance services to schools. She also felt that this had increased the risk of young people being given advice by someone who may not be qualified to do so;

'The marketplace has changed quite dramatically...over the last four or five years...there are more people offering careers services but to varying degrees of quality...everyone in our team (of advisers) is Level 6 qualified. Sometimes you have providers who aren't.'

This issues was also reflected by some of the feedback which LJMU students gave at interview. Some students reported that they had received advice whilst at school or college, but were unsure about the role of the person who had given the advice. In other cases, some of the students interviewed were very positive about the support which they had received from personal tutors at school or college who had given them quite a lot of ongoing support and helped them, for example with UCAS applications.

(d) Changes within the careers guidance profession since The Education Act 2011

All the advisers had seen significant changes within the careers guidance profession since the above legislation. These changes have also been reported in recent research, a report by Bertuchi, Hooley and Langley (2014) stated that; 'the new policy has had dramatic effects on the careers profession itself. Previous research has demonstrated that there have been very considerable numbers of redundancies from Local Authorities and Connexions companies' (p.28). Several of the advisers interviewed had been made redundant in 2011/2012 and had gone on to look for new job roles, but had stayed within the sphere of careers work. One of the advisers had, after being made redundant from a careers company, been employed directly by a school that she had previously been linked to. Those advisers who had not been made redundant had nonetheless encountered major structural changes within the companies that they worked for, and had experienced significant changes to their job role. The impression which I gained from those careers advisers was that they were working within an uncertain and ever-changing landscape. All of the advisers seemed to demonstrate resilience in the face of these changes, and to maintain their commitment to doing their best for their client group.

(e) How the shortfall in careers provision in some schools and colleges may affect disadvantaged client groups

One of the careers practitioners made an interesting point about how lack of access to careers guidance may impact particularly on more vulnerable clients. She said that she had advised some young people who have come to the UK as a refugee and who had initially ended up on the wrong course for one or two years as they had not understood the

progression routes from certain courses. Her viewpoint reflects recent research which has been carried which suggests that some groups were more likely to address careers provision than others. Archer and Moote stated in February 2016 that their analysis had suggested that 'careers provision is not just patchy but patterned – particularly in terms of social inequalities.' They found that 'careers education is failing to reach those most in need, notably girls, minority ethnic, working-class, lower-attaining students who are unsure of their aspirations or who plan to leave education post-16.'

(f) The issue of impartiality

A number of advisers spoke about how when schools had taken ownership of careers guidance in schools, following the Education Act in 2011, this had led to some issues in impartiality. One adviser described her concerns about this issue;

'Now the schools are buying in careers guidance it has changed the whole nature of the ball game. They want you to give out certain messages to students and it is not all unbiased and impartial, especially if that school has its own sixth form. This isn't good because from the students' point of view they are not getting a balanced picture and we are trying to stay impartial but are finding it more and more difficult as more schools have got their own sixth forms.'

Another careers adviser stated that;

'Even some very academic schools or independent schools have no coherent careers programme.'

He went on to say that this may be because an assumption is made by such schools that their pupils will progress onto the sixth form, or straight to university.

An OFSTED report in 2013 raised concerns about whether all schools were providing independent guidance as it reported that; 'most of the schools felt that their careers guidance would be impartial if it was provided externally. However, very few of the schools promoted the full range of progression routes that were available' (p6.).

(g) Partnership working between schools or FE colleges and universities

All the advisers talked about how in the course of their work, they did have regular contact with universities and how the majority of schools did organise events such as higher education awareness days. Some advisers talked about how university staff or undergraduate students had come into their schools or colleges, to talk about the content of particular degree subjects. All of them thought that this was very useful as it helped pupils to understand the realities of studying a particular subject. Some of the students interviewed had also attended 'taster days' at universities and had found these very helpful in heightening their understanding of a particular degree subject.

Some advisers felt that sixth form or college students needed more information about *progression* from certain degree subjects and what these could lead onto. These advisers were also honest in admitting that they themselves needed to gather more information about destinations from university degree courses, and this is a point which will be explored further in the next section.

(h) The impact on career readiness

All of the careers advisers were asked if they felt that the careers education programme which is in operation (in the school or college in which they work) results in career ready young people. All of the advisers who answered this question expressed uncertainty and a few emphatically felt that what was on offer in the institutions in which they worked *did not* result in career ready clients. Some of the advisers felt that although there were some

strengths in careers provision in the institutions which they worked in, the fragmented careers programme which was in place meant that there were too many gaps to ascertain if that provision fully addressed the needs of their clients. One adviser felt that some pupils were too young to really benefit from some of the careers education in place;

'There is far too much information given to them in schools when they are not ready for it.'

Another adviser measured the career readiness of her students in terms of the destinations which they progressed onto:

'It is difficult to say if what we have in place at the college does result in career ready students but the vast majority do go onto a positive destination. If that is deemed a success then the answer is yes.'

Another adviser felt that career readiness of young people whom she worked with was quite polarised;

'I would say yes and no... there are some young people who do have that understanding of the modern world and which options are available to them but then there are young people who absolutely don't, I would say it is probably half and half...it can differ dramatically.'

She also talked about the need for young people to have skills of career management;

'It is about that modern approach... they are not going to have a job for life, what they need to do is understand who they are as a person and recognise their skills and then they will be able to manage the job market...it can be quite a difficult concept to teach a young person.'

8. Conclusion

It can be seen that a fragmented picture has emerged of the careers provision which LJMU students have encountered before coming to university. Although there are some examples of some good careers support which students have previously accessed, the overall picture is of inconsistency. This picture has also been echoed by the feedback received from the careers practitioners, who acknowledge that careers provision is patchy and very disparate across the various schools or colleges which they work in. The results of the quantitative and qualitative data gathered, show that the selected samples of LJMU students demonstrate variable levels of confidence in their employability skills when they first arrive at university. Therefore it can be said that the limited careers education and guidance which some of them have been exposed to has affected their level of career readiness, to a certain extent. However, as has been shown there are also a range of other socio-economic factors which can have an impact a student's careers readiness as well, and these must also be taken into account.

In some cases, the lack of impartial advice which some students received has affected their awareness of the full range of options which are open to them. It is has also been shown that some of the students who have had negative experiences of careers education and guidance in the past may feel some resistance to accessing it in the future, and this may also have an impact on their readiness to engage in career planning once in university. Furthermore, the stories of students who have previously discontinued from courses of further or higher education have provided anecdotal evidence to indicate that lack of careers guidance does impede an individual's ability to make informed career choices, and that consequently this can increase their likelihood of failing to complete a course. This may well have a longer term impact on an individual's career readiness as he or she may experience a delay in accessing the most suitable career path.

As a careers practitioner, my findings from my research have made me reflect upon how I can address these differences in our students past experiences when I am teaching them in a group setting. On a practical level it has made me think about how I can use differentiation in teaching methods to accommodate those students who may have had some careers education already, and those who haven't. This will have a longer term impact on my work with students.

9. Recommendations

(a) Addressing the disparity in undergraduate students' past experiences of careers advice and guidance.

The research shows that there are clear differences in the careers support which LJMU students have accessed prior to coming to university. Given the political and structural changes which have affected careers guidance in schools and colleges over the last 15 years, it is likely that this lack of consistency in students' past experience of careers guidance is commonplace amongst university students across the country. The challenge then is how higher education career services address these differences in careers provision. The findings illustrate the importance of ensuring that students access careers support as early as possible, from the first year onwards, as a way addressing this deficit. One key way to do this is to ensure that employability support is integrated within the students' curriculum, from the first year of their degree course.

At LJMU, we have introduced The World of Work Skills Certificate which is an employer verified award. This certificate is designed to prepare students for the employer selection process, and to heighten their awareness of their strengths and values in relation to future job roles. Each stage requires the students to complete a competency based, assessed statement. The self-awareness (Bronze) stage of the statement is integrated within the curriculum for all of our first year students, so they are introduced to the process of career planning from an early stage. Many other universities also have employability awards which they have embedded within their students' curriculum. As well as The World of Work Skills Certificate, many other careers sessions are integrated into the curriculum for LJMU students from the first year onwards, as well.

(b) The value of assessing students, when they first commence their degree course

I found the process of asking our students to complete a questionnaire, to see exactly where they felt the 'gaps' were with regards to their employability skills, very useful. For example, the fact that a lower percentage of our students did not feel confident in completing application forms showed me that this is an area which I would continue to address through the employability sessions which I deliver to students. It could be said that there is a value in all university careers services asking their students to complete an assessment once they first arrive at university, to see if there are any common areas of deficit in their employability skills, which need to be addressed. It may well be the case that some university careers services are already carrying out such surveys.

(c) Challenging the negative preconceptions which some students may hold about accessing careers advice and guidance

If some students have not previously had a positive experience of careers education and guidance the challenge for higher education careers services may be how they 'turn this around' so that such students are encouraged to access careers support once they are at university. It is important to make students aware that the dedicated careers services which are available to them within higher education will be different than the fragmented provision which *some* students may previously have encountered. Many university careers services do invest in branding and marketing services to make sure that their services are effectively promoted to their students, and my findings show the importance of this. At LJMU, we produce for example a series of bespoke career planning guides, which as well as containing important employability information, are an effective means of promoting our services to students.

(d) Partnership working between higher education careers services and careers advisers working in the school and college sector

Many universities do have good links with local schools and colleges and offer a range of outreach activities. For example, LJMU's outreach department offer activities such as subject taster days, student life talks and sessions about writing a personal statement or succeeding at university interviews. They also run a Teacher and Careers Advisers' Conference. However, the majority of the careers advisers interviewed said they would find it beneficial to have more data available to them about the progression routes from undergraduate degree courses. They were already aware of some sources which they could use (such as the Prospects website) but some of them commented that they would like to access more specific data gained from the DLHE (Destination of Leavers in Higher Education) survey which university careers departments carry out. Some practitioners said they would like more specific intelligence about the type of job roles which students from certain degree courses go onto, to support them when advising Year 12 or 13 pupils. Some advisers said that they found case studies about the careers paths of graduates very useful, as well. This therefore shows that it would be helpful if university careers services could look at ways of sharing this information with school or college based practitioners.

Furthermore, there could also be scope for university careers advisers to work more closely with their outreach departments, to ensure that there is a careers guidance element incorporated within the activities which the outreach teams carry out with schools and colleges. This could, even in a small way, help to address the lack of careers education which is present in some schools or colleges. My research has also confirmed that parents have a strong influence on students' career choices, so involving parents in some of the careers education which young people receive (for example about degree course choice) would also be helpful.

(e) Carrying out further research into whether a lack of earlier careers support increases the probability of a student discontinuing from a further or higher education course of study.

This issue merits further research. The findings which were generated from this project showing that seven out of the 18 students interviewed had at one point discontinued from one course of further or higher education and started another. These findings could be anecdotal but are worthy of further investigation. It would be helpful to identify students who are at risk of discontinuing from a degree course, and to find out about their earlier experiences of careers education and guidance, to see if there are any common themes in their histories.

(f) Carrying out further research into whether there are any differences in the careers education and guidance which has been accessed by students who have chosen vocational or non-vocational courses

As already outlined, some of the students who were surveyed for this research project were already on courses with a vocational emphasis (such as law). It would be interesting to ask students on more purely vocational courses (such as nursing or pharmacy) to complete the same questionnaire, to find out if there are any differences in the careers support which they have previously accessed. It could be argued that students who have chosen these purely vocational courses have already been able to make a significant decision to commit to a certain career path, and it would be interesting to see if the earlier careers support which they have accessed has made a difference (or not) to their confidence in making this decision.

(g) Introducing a more standardised framework for careers education and guidance in schools and colleges

Clearly, the current 'postcode lottery' system of careers provision is a concern, and makes it difficult for universities to know what level of careers provision their students have had before entering Higher Education. Recent government reports have recommended that a common framework for careers education should be introduced into schools. The first joint report of the Business, Innovation and Skills and Education Committees of Session 2016-17 stated that;

'We consider the Gatsby Foundation's eight benchmarks a useful statement of the careers provision to which all schools should be aspiring. The Government's policy objective should be to incentivise all schools to ensure their career provision is brought up to a good standard and to hold them to account when they fail to do so' (p.9).

If there was a more standardised framework which was introduced in schools and colleges, then at least Higher Education Careers Services would know what careers support their students *should* have had before they came to university. This would also give students more of a common foundation in their careers education, which could be built upon once they entered university. The Gatsby Foundations eight benchmarks would provide schools and colleges with a valuable starting point when building a thorough careers programme.

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