HECSU research notes

Employability and Career Progression for Full-time, UK-resident Masters Students

A summary of the final phase of the project, written by Professor Phil Hodkinson, University of Leeds, Lifelong Learning Institute.

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Research Findings

This project was commissioned by the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU) from the Lifelong Learning Institute of the University of Leeds; the research team comprised Helen Bowman, Helen Colley and Phil Hodkinson. We investigated the career trajectories of full-time UK-based Masters students, from the start of their course in September 2002, until about 18 months after they had left. This paper summarises the main findings from this research. A full report will be published on the HECSU website in the Autumn of 2005.

Methodology

We sampled four students from each of six different Masters courses in two universities (one pre-1992, one post-1992). We conducted four sweeps of semi-structured interviews with the students and with others significantly involved in their lives. The sweeps were conducted at the beginning and end of the Masters course, six months after they left and 18 months after they left.

The six Masters courses were as follows:

Vocational courses linked to or required for a specialised occupation:
- Interpreting - for skilled linguists to train them in interpreting.
- Applied Sciences - strongly linked with a particular industry.

Semi-vocational courses relating to a broad occupational area
- Graphic Art - for those with an established, or those aspiring to establish a practice.
- Business - a conversion course for those who had not studied the subject before.

Non-vocational courses
- Philosophy.
- Classics.

Stages of Transition

The nature of the Masters courses, all of which entailed one year of full-time study, suggests that the students’ transition into employment falls into three natural stages: life before the course; life during the course; and life after the course. This way of thinking can be helpful in focusing on the details of their experiences in each stage. We have provided greater detail about experiences after the course here, as the earlier stages were reported in a previous HECSU research brief (see www.hecsu.ac.uk under Research Notes).

Entry onto the Masters courses

The students’ experiences before the course are a natural focus if we wish to understand how and why students were studying those particular courses, including their career decision-making. Thus:
- Choice of a Masters course was influenced by prior dispositions and experiences. Students considered only a limited number of options. For some, the decision to continue studying was effectively a non-choice.
- Reasons for further study involved a combination of interest in academic work and in aspects of a student lifestyle, and a hope that the course would lead to greater employability and a fulfilling job.
- Choice of course and institution were often strongly influenced by social factors, including established friendship groups or family connections - especially the needs and interests of partners, in some cases.

Experiences on the Masters Course

For all students the Masters course was a time of change and transition. This was partly unwanted and unforeseen and partly desired and deliberately worked upon, though often not in ways resembling conventional career management strategies. These on-course transitions could be grouped into four types.

1. Confirmatory and socialising transitions: for eight students (mostly on vocational and semi-vocational courses), the Masters year reinforced their original decision. It socialised them into the norms and expectations of the course and the labour market they were targeting. Generally these students maintained the Masters as the central focus in their lives, either minimising distractions away from the course, or finding their other interests and commitments coherent with studying their subject area.

2. Confirmatory transitions: seven students (on non-vocational or semi-vocational courses) shared their focus between the Masters course and other interests, reinforcing their identities through both. Wider interests and concerns in their lives influenced their post-Masters plans, which were generally tentative and short-term, including temporary or freelance work, or ‘gap years’ seeking ‘any old job’ to save money in order to travel.

3. Contradictory/evolving transitions: five students (across all types of courses) had experienced problems within the Masters course, giving them a sense of ‘not fitting in’ and causing them to reconsider their options. All completed their course but took steps to move into other areas, evolving beyond the Masters into new territory.

4. Dislocated transitions: four students (across all types of course) had found the year to be a very uncomfortable experience. One vocational student reacted against sexist discrimination she perceived on the course and in the related industry. Others had applied to high-profile graduate training schemes and been repeatedly rejected.

Experiences after the course

For all students, the period after leaving the Masters course was one of continuing transition. Their experiences could be grouped into four types:

1. Moving on track - transitions into work: Only one of the 24 was employed doing the job he originally aimed for at the start of the Masters course. Six were in roles similar to those they had envisaged. Five of these
seven had returned to their fulltime Masters courses after a period in the labour market and the other two had had substantial periods of work experience. In their initial moves beyond the Masters three of these students were finding their feet in the freelance market, making contacts and trying to secure recognition from key professional bodies. Three were working in temporary or part-time positions and contemplating alternative careers. By the final interviews all were becoming established in the field they had targeted at the start of the course. They had all relied heavily on their experiences during the Masters year to move them into their work. However, experiences from life outside the course and prior to it were significant in helping them secure work.

2. **Changing tack - transitions through work:** Ten were in jobs or doing postgraduate study that they hoped would embed them into new fields. Temporary, voluntary and agency work had been influential in clarifying what they did and didn’t want to do. Eight had secured employment. Two were completing a further year of fulltime study. All were making tentative moves into new fields, of which they had no experience prior to leaving the Masters course. Some were starting to think about pursuing other directions, often involving more study. They had forged their new routes through the employment situations they had experienced since exiting their course. All had used contacts and networks from their past lives and their new employment to help them to move on.

3. **Staying on - transitions to research degrees:** Four students had moved onto fulltime PhDs. Only one had considered this whilst still on the Masters course. The other three ended up doing a PhD because of frustration with the opportunities in their target field of work and a growing realisation that they didn’t want, or were unlikely to get the jobs they had originally sought. By the final interview they had concerns about what they would do in the future and where the PhD would lead, whilst enjoying working flexibly in a pleasant environment. The decisions to pursue further study had been inspired by offers of funding and familiarity with educational enjoyment and success, rather than a clear desire to undertake a research degree.

4. **Balancing act - transitions to alternative careers and lifestyles:** Two students were working in jobs which don’t require a degree and are unrelated to their subject area or ambitions. One placed the family before a career, and the other still had hopes of a career through a rock band he was part of. Their work was more secure than employment through temping agencies, allowing them to take paid leave. However, they were relatively low paid and their opportunities for progression were extremely limited.

**An Integrated Transitioning Process**

In many ways this view of transition as three different stages is misleading. It makes more sense to see a continuous process of change, which began long before the Master course, and will continue well after our research was completed. Throughout this process, the students were learning about themselves and their place in the world. They actively constructed their own sense of student and employment identity, and their own employability. In this transitioning work, students went through phases of greater or lesser pro-activity. Also some students demonstrated higher levels of confidence and drive than others. Sometimes transitioning was relatively strategic. At others, it was more serendipitous and opportunistic. This transitioning process resembled a linear progression for only one student, and that linearity could change at any time. All the others experienced changes of direction and intention through the period we were tracking them - often more than once.

This transitioning can be understood as the changing relationship between three elements, each of which also changes. These elements are position, disposition and opportunities. That is, through the transitioning process, individuals found themselves positioned differently at different times. These changing positions were related to changing opportunities for study, for employment or for other important facets of life, such as family or leisure. Both these were also related to changes in the ways in which individuals saw themselves and the world in which they lived - their dispositions. At any moment in time, a student’s **horizons for action** - their scope for transitioning - was influenced by these three things. As any or all of them changed, so did the horizons for action within which proactive transitioning took place.

Of course, this transitioning process was also strongly influenced by other people and organisations – partners, friends, family, tutors and university courses, employment agencies, employers. It entailed struggle and conflict, as well as support and negotiations. Transitioning was also a highly unequal process.

**Social Inequalities**

Access to education and employment in the UK is becoming more unequal, and the Masters degree experience reflects this wider pattern. Our data throws up inequalities between students in the sample and between them and others in British society.

The first issue relates to social position. Most of our sample were middle class and white. Many came from relatively prosperous family backgrounds, and 11 had been through a private schooling process. Others had a more mixed and less privileged situation, but none were from what are often described as socially disadvantaged parts of society. There were significant gender differences within the sample, which was constructed to include equal numbers of men and women. Several men were partly supported by a female partner, to a greater extent than the reverse. Some courses, like applied science, were predominantly male, and some of the women on that course experienced stressful levels of sexism. It was no surprise that one male put his musical life before his career, whereas it was a woman who put family first.

There were significant inequalities between the two universities in the study. One was far more prestigious than the other, and had greater access to prestigious employers. Its careers service also had far greater resources than did the other.

Inequalities influenced all stages of the transitioning process. Combinations of economic, social and cultural capital were vital in securing the progression of many successful students. For example, many were partly supported financially by parents and partners. Progression for many was enhanced through contacts and networks developed through family, earlier schooling and leisure. Such social capital was sometimes gendered, as when one
young man got a good job through contacts made within his cricket club. Cultural capital was most obvious in relation to course entry. These were people who knew how to succeed in education, although some lacked cultural capital or were naive about employment. Through the transitioning process, these educationally successful individuals continued to develop and acquire social and cultural capital.

Uses of Guidance
Throughout the whole transitioning process, very few of our sample had much direct engagement with either HE careers services, or with the Prospects website. Few saw the relevance of such guidance whilst on the course. Paradoxically, those who knew what they wanted to do assumed that careers services catered for those who did not, whilst those who were unclear about their intentions assumed the careers services catered for those who knew what they wanted to do!

At all stages, what might be termed informal guidance was more widespread and influential. This often included family, friends and partners, but two other sources were also significant. Masters course tutors were influential in decisions to enter the course in the first place, in decisions to continue into PhD work and, especially in vocational and semi-vocational courses, in supporting progression into the targeted occupational fields. Employment agencies also played a key role in moving students from education into work. Many students used them, and if the student was knowledgeable about their differing roles and proactive in working with them, such agencies played a guidance role, as part of their experiences of finding placements. The quality of informal guidance varied considerably. One problem was that on the vocational courses, all the advice was geared to a particular, quite narrow job field. However, in the cohort where we conducted the research, only a very small minority of students progressed in the expected manner. For the rest much of the on course guidance was largely irrelevant.

The research showed up a widespread need for the things that good career guidance can provide. We uncovered many examples of unnecessary ignorance; many examples of poor career management skills and strategies; and many examples of people who needed help but were either unwilling to seek it, or did not know that it was available.

Implications for Guidance
The research throws up some issues and problems for the provision of career guidance for fulltime Masters students such as these.

Guidance needs
* Though there is no distinct post-Masters degree labour market, these students see themselves as different from undergraduates. It may be necessary to target them as a distinct group, if careers services are to engage adequately with them.
* Standard patterns of career guidance and education developed for a three-year degree do not work well on a one-year Masters programme. One problem is the early application cycle for graduate trainee schemes or industry recruitment drives, if these are relevant to the student.
* There are significant career guidance needs before Master degree entry, and after students have left the course. These may be relatively difficult for HE services to meet, in the current context.
* Current approaches to guidance for Masters students emphasise labour market entry and employer needs. Yet these students face other issues of personal development, for which a more person-centred, holistic guidance provision would have great potential value.

Approaches to guidance
* Approaches to career guidance based on assumptions (even if implicit) of linear career progression and matching of students to job vacancies, are at odds with the experiences students live through, and may be counter-productive. They can also be off-putting for some students.
* The more impartial and client-centred nature of guidance provided by the careers service may be significant for some students. Embedding careers education and guidance in the Masters curriculum, though valuable for many, may be less effective for students who decide to pursue directions not related to their subject of study, or who feel excluded from or marginalised within that course or occupational area.
* There may be benefits from greater liaison between careers services and course tutors. Both have a potentially important guidance role. They are different, but can be complementary.
* Appropriate use of ICT may also be valuable. E-guidance may be particularly useful for those who have concerns about the careers service being influenced by its location within their own university, or who are reluctant for any reason to engage in face-to-face guidance.
* Guidance providers might also take advantage of the strong peer effect we have noted, by encouraging former Masters students to contribute.
* One careers adviser who has developed work with Masters programmes suggested that quite small interventions by the careers service during students’ induction can make a significant impact on their use of guidance provision and their ability to develop career management skills. If successful, such approaches might meet some of the guidance needs that our research identified.

Resources for guidance
* HE careers services vary enormously in resources. The services that are relatively poorly staffed and financed face particular difficulties in meeting the needs of a distinctive minority, such as Masters students.

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