Initiating Change in Career Decision-Making: An Action Research Approach

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Research Study for the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU)
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

This report builds on work carried out for the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU) by Greenbank and Hepworth (2008). Research suggests that graduates from working class backgrounds tend to perform less well in the labour market (in terms of both obtaining employment and earnings) than their middle-class counterparts (see for example Marshall et al., 1997; Smith et al., 2000; Naylor et al., 2002; Evans, 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Redmond, 2006). The Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study examined the extent to which the way working class students approached career decision-making might contribute to their disadvantage in the labour market. This study discovered that the students did not adopt a systematic and comprehensive (i.e. rational) approach to career decision-making and planning as promoted by those providing careers education and advice (see for example Law and Watts, 2003). It found that the students often failed to consider a wide range of career options. In addition, many of the students did not utilise professional careers advice, preferring to use informal sources of information (e.g. parents, relatives and friends) and more intuitive forms of decision-making. Also, the majority of students made little attempt to improve their employability by engaging in relevant extra-curricular activities.

The Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study concluded that the students’ values were an important factor influencing their behaviour. They had a preference for informal sources of information and more intuitive forms of decision-making. In fact, the students often resisted using formal ‘expert’ sources provided by people such as careers advisers. They also rejected the need to develop their employability and believed that a ‘good’ degree and work experience (of any kind) would be enough to secure a well paid job.

Such findings have important implications because research indicates that students who fail to engage in developing their employability are likely to perform less well in the graduate labour market than those who do (Pitcher and Purcell, 1998; Blasko, 2002; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Tchibozo, 2007). There are also drawbacks with the use of informal sources
of information and more intuitive forms of decision-making. For example, Bazerman and Moore (2009) identify a range of biases that often occur when decision-makers rely on their intuition. It has also been suggested that intuition is more effective when it is employed by expert decision-makers who are able (often unconsciously) to draw upon the experience they have accumulated over many years (see Simon, 1987; Henry, 2001; Phillips et al., 2004). The problem is that students usually have little or no experience of career decision-making or the graduate labour market upon which to base their intuition. Also, because they often fail to consult careers advisers, the type of information they are informally acquiring through conversations with parents, friends, relatives, etc. may not be of the highest quality.

The Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study also found that, at the time the interviews were carried out (between the end of February and the beginning of May), the majority of students had not applied for any jobs. Moreover, many indicated they were going to leave applying for jobs until after they had graduated, with a significant proportion of students indicating that their term-time jobs would provide them with interim employment. However, as Mason et al. (2009, p. 10), citing research by Elias et al. (1999), have pointed out ‘an initial period of under-employment was found to have lingering negative effects on those graduates’ salary and career development’.

FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH

One of the key conclusions to Greenbank and Hepworth’s (2008) study was that rather than ‘telling’ students how to behave they should be encouraged to critically evaluate the way they approach career decision-making and planning. This approach is supported by Watts (2005) who argues that we should not be telling people how to manage their careers but ‘helping them acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help them make better career choices and transitions’ (p. 69). There is a wide-ranging literature, covering both managerial decision-making and student learning, which suggests that managers/students can be encouraged to consider alternative ways of making decisions by comparing case studies side-by-side1 on different approaches to decision-making. Research suggests that this process - referred to as ‘analogical encoding’ (Loewenstein et al., 2003) - improves knowledge acquisition (Williams et al., 2007) and the subsequent recall of this knowledge (Gentner et al., 2003); it promotes a more active approach to learning (Kurtz et al., 2001); it

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1 This is better than utilising a series of cases over time. Gentner et al. (2003) found that participants were not able to recall relevant information from previous cases when a serial approach was adopted.
facilitates deep learning (Schwartz and Bransford, 1998); and it helps individuals to develop and utilise models of decision-making that can be applied to other situations (Loewenstein et al., 2003; Gentner et al., 2003; Gentner et al., 2004). This latter point is particularly significant because it means that the decision-making skills that students develop can be used in other contexts. The disadvantage of utilising a single case study is that participants, especially if they are novices, tend to only apply what they have learnt to situations with ‘surface similarities’ (Gentner et al., 2003, p. 394). It is also envisaged that the decision-making skills and understanding of the labour market acquired through analogical encoding will be used throughout the graduates’ careers. This is relevant because research suggests that the development of the students’ career management skills tends to be under-developed in universities (Watts, 2005).

For analogical encoding to be successful it is important that students identify features that are common across the cases (Kurtz et al., 2001; Gentner et al., 2003). This helps them to understand that although cases may have different ‘surface features’ (Thompson et al., 2000) there are general principles that can be applied to different situations. The literature on analogical encoding tends to emphasise the need to identify commonalities, but Scheiter et al. (2004) and Idson et al. (2004) suggest that it may also be useful to identify differences that exist across cases. This is relevant because students need to understand why it may make sense for individual approaches to career decision-making to differ.

Working in groups also supports the process of analogical encoding because group members are able to provide different perspectives and therefore more opportunities for identifying commonalities (and differences) between cases (Thompson et al., 2000; Loewenstein et al., 2003). Moreover, Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) found that students were influenced by the normative behaviour of their peers. This indicates that there may be benefits to classroom activities that aim to change the behaviour of groups of students and not just individuals. Similarly, Lewin (1999) points out that a number of studies demonstrate that individuals are more likely to change in a group setting than in one-to-one situations. Bendixen and Rule (2004) also refer to how individuals influence each other in group situations creating a multiplier effect.

RATIONALITY AND APPROACH

This report is based on an action research project that aimed to evaluate the efficacy of using the principle of analogical encoding as a way of improving the way undergraduates
approach career decision-making and planning. The report, therefore, focuses on the process students go through when making career decisions and how we can encourage them to critically evaluate the way they make such decisions and plan for their future careers. According to Vilhjalmsdottir (2007) research into the effectiveness of the methods of teaching and learning used in careers education is not common. This research aims to contribute to this neglected aspect of careers research.

**STRUCTURE**

In the chapter following this, the methodological approach adopted for this research is discussed. Chapter 2 also analyses the initial findings from the first cycle of this action research project. The remainder of the report considers the key findings from the much larger and more in-depth second cycle of the study. In Chapter 3 the students' career objectives, their aspirations and the factors influencing their engagement with career decision-making and planning are discussed. Chapter 4 analyses the students' attitudes to sources of information and approaches to career decision-making. Chapter 5 focuses on the students participation in activities related to career preparation.

The influence of the sessions on career decision-making and preparation are discussed throughout the report. However, Chapter 6 focuses on the impact these interventions had on the students' attitudes and values. The final chapter (Chapter 7) discusses the implications for careers education and advice and reflects on the changes that need to be implemented in the next cycle of this action research project.
CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH DESIGN AND INITIAL FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

An action research approach was adopted for this study. This type of research entails testing ideas and theories in a practical setting. Action research involves a cycle that begins with a change being planned, this plan is then implemented and the extent to which it ‘works’ is evaluated. The action researcher then reflects on what changes need to be made before commencing a new cycle of planning, action, evaluation and reflection (see Coghlan and Brannick, 2001; McNiff, 2002; Artess, 2007). This process often involves groups of people working together in what is referred to as ‘collaborative’ or ‘participative’ action research (see Greenbank, 2007).

There is still a belief amongst some commentators that action research ‘is not ‘proper’ research, in the sense of contributing valid and reliable findings’ (Cain, 2008, p. 89). Yet action research enables ideas to be evaluated for their effectiveness in a practical context (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Elliot, 1991). It can be argued that the effectiveness of any changes introduced is evaluated by the subjective criteria employed by the action researcher (Argyris, 1997). However, in this study the use of participative forms of action research (involving both academic and careers staff) - and a range data collection techniques (e.g. questionnaires, interviews and observations) - ensured a rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of the interventions took place.

In this chapter the approach adopted for the first two cycles of this action research project are described. The chapter provides a detailed commentary on how the interventions and the research methodology have evolved over time. Also, the factors influencing the changes that were introduced are discussed.

FIRST CYCLE (ACADEMIC YEAR 2007/08)

For the first cycle of this action research – which was effectively a pilot study - it was decided to introduce the concept of analogical encoding to a small group of first year students
studying the full-time accountancy degree. The case studies on career decision-making were utilised in a three-hour workshop as part of a compulsory module linked to Personal Development Planning (PDP). This meant that the intervention could not be targeted at working class students. However, the inclusion of all the students did enable comparisons to be made between working class and middle class students. It also meant that the difficulties associated with targeting support at particular groups of students were no longer an issue. For example, problems of stigmatisation can arise when students are labelled as ‘disadvantaged’ (Morey et al., 2003) and it is not, in practice, easy to classify people by social class (NAO, 2002; Archer, 2003; Elias and Purcell, 2004).

The Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study also found that many of the generalisations frequently made about the values and behaviour of working class students, either did not apply to all the students interviewed, or their values and behaviour needed to be analysed in more depth in order to obtain a better understanding of the complex range of factors influencing them. For instance the working class are said to lack ambition and have low aspiration levels (Marshall et al., 1997; Roberts, 1999; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Walpole, 2003; Maguire, 2005). As Bourdieu (2003, p. 75) argues:

> expectations and aspirations … are very unequally distributed … by virtue of the law that, through the dispositions of habitus (themselves adjusted, most of the time, to agents’ positions) expectations tend universally to be roughly adapted to the objective chances.

However, Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) found that the students had ‘realistic rather than low aspirations’ (p. 8). Moreover, although referring to younger people (aged 15 years), Croll (2008) found that nearly half of those whose parents were in manual occupations aspired to professional, managerial and technical occupations. As Table 2.1 demonstrates, this is a lower proportion than those young people from skilled non-manual and professional, managerial and technical backgrounds. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of young people, from what can be referred to as ‘working class backgrounds’, are indicating that they are aspirational. Croll (2008, p. 246) citing Schneider and Stevenson (1999) argues this is not surprising given that young people today can be characterised as the ‘ambitious generation’.

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2 PDP is defined as ‘a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development’ (HEA, 2009, p.1).
Table 2.1 Occupational choice and family background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental occupations</th>
<th>Professional, managerial and technical</th>
<th>Skilled non-manual</th>
<th>Manual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional, managerial and technical</td>
<td>75.8%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled non-manual</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number</strong></td>
<td><strong>236</strong></td>
<td><strong>101</strong></td>
<td><strong>161</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Croll (2008, Table 5, p. 252)*

Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) also point out the students in their study had already demonstrated that they were more aspirational than many of their peers by going to university. These working class students may, therefore, not be typical of their class. They have also lived and worked in a university habitus for nearly three years which should influence their values.

It can also be argued that factors other than class can influence aspiration levels. For example, Sweet (2009, p. 19) citing research by Croll (2008), argues that levels of confidence and self-esteem can be influential:

> [U]sing data from the British Household Panel Survey, [Croll] shows that low ambitions and aspirations can compound the effects of low achievement and disadvantaged backgrounds, but that high ambitions and aspirations can help counteract them: where young people from disadvantaged families are both ambitious and educationally successful, educational outcomes are as good as those of young people from advantaged families.

Other studies also identify significant intra-class differences between students (see for example Reay et al., 2005; Greenbank, 2008). The work of Archer (2007) is also relevant because it shows that people’s aspirations are often influenced by the way they make decisions. For example, some people are what Archer (2007) refers to as ‘autonomous
reflexives’. This type of person tends to make decisions on their own with little reference to the opinion of others. In contrast, Archer (2007) identifies ‘communicative reflexives’ who are more likely to be dependent on the views of friends and relatives. According to Archer (2007) the way people make decisions determines their aspiration levels, with communicative reflexives often demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice personal ambition in order to meet the needs of those around them. Equally important to this discussion is the fact that Archer (2007) did not find class to be a factor determining the way people make decisions.

Therefore, in addition to problems of stigmatisation and the technical difficulties associated with defining social class, there appear to be significant levels of within-class heterogeneity. This made it difficult to justify targeting a particular group, such as the ‘working class’ because it may result in the exclusion of (middle class) students who may have benefited from interventions such as analogical encoding.

**Stages**

The first cycle of this action research project involved three stages:

**Stage 1 Pre-Analogical Encoding Questionnaire**: The students were invited to complete a written questionnaire (this was referred to as the Pre-Analogical Encoding Questionnaire: ‘Pre-AE Questionnaire’). This asked the students about the type of extra-curricular activities they were engaged in. It also enquired about their career aspirations and when and how they intended to start researching and applying for jobs. For some questions a five-point fully anchored rating scale (see Johnson and Christensen, 2008) was used to find out about their perception of the quality of advice from various sources (e.g. parents, relatives, friends, lecturers, careers advisers, etc.) and where they were most likely to seek advice. The questionnaire also used open questions to elicit more detailed information from the students. Twenty-five students completed the Pre-AE Questionnaire.

**Stage 2 Analogical encoding**: The students then participated in a workshop based on the concept of analogical encoding. This involved students working in small groups (five groups, each with five students). They were asked to analyse both common features and differences in the way a number of students portrayed in a series of case studies3 approached career decision-making and planning. The students were also required to identify the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches adopted by those depicted in the case studies. The

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3 These case studies were based on research carried out by Greenbank and Hepworth (2008).
session concluded with a class discussion of how career decision-making and planning might be undertaken and the factors influencing the approach adopted by the different students in the case studies.

Stage 3: Post-Analogical Encoding Questionnaire: The students were given several weeks to reflect on what they had learnt from the case studies and class discussion. They were then asked to complete a second questionnaire (this was referred to as the Post-Analogical Encoding Questionnaire: ‘Post-AE Questionnaire’). In this questionnaire the students were asked many of the same questions included in the Pre-AE Questionnaire. This enabled the results of the Pre-AE and Post-AE questionnaires to be compared in order to see if any changes in student attitudes had occurred. Seventeen of the 25 students (68 per cent) returned the Post-AE Questionnaires.

Reflection
The responses to the Pre-AE and Post-AE questionnaires were initially analysed quantitatively. For example, the number of responses to particular questions (e.g. who the students envisaged seeking careers advice from) were measured before and after analogical encoding. Also, where rating scales were used these were averaged to measure changes in Pre-AE and Post-AE responses. The nature of the questions and the small sample size meant that further analysis of the data (e.g. tests of correlation and statistical significance) was not felt to be appropriate. More importantly, however, the statistics provided a useful starting point for analysis, but it was the student’s written responses to the open questions that provided the most useful data.

This first cycle in the action research project only involved a small sample so the results need to be treated with caution. Nevertheless, the findings indicated that some changes in student attitudes towards career decision-making and planning had taken place. Several students, for instance, demonstrated a willingness to obtain part-time jobs that were more relevant to their career aspirations. About half the students also seemed to have become more critical in their evaluation of different sources of careers advice. There were, however, also aspects of career decision-making and planning where students demonstrated a reluctance to change. For example, many students resisted the idea of engaging in extracurricular activities. Moreover, even though the drawbacks of intuition were discussed, almost all the students continued to have complete confidence in the efficacy of this form of decision-making. Finally, the study identified issues that require additional investigation - such as the fact that the students often did not regard the quality of advice as the key factor determining who they approached for careers guidance.
This pilot study did not identify any significant patterns of behaviour that could be related to social class apart from the fact that students from middle class backgrounds indicated a greater willingness to try and obtain a part-time job that was more relevant to their future careers. In the second cycle of this project the influence of social class, particularly in relation to part-time employment, will continue to be analysed.

SECOND CYCLE (ACADEMIC YEAR 2008/09)

For the second cycle of this action research project a number of changes were made to (a) the sessions provided to the students; and (b) the data collection methods used to evaluate this input. Each of these will be considered in turn.

Sessions
As discussed above some students had fixed ideas about how they should make decisions and there was often resistance to changing particular aspects of their decision-making behaviour. For example, the students wanted to maintain their reliance on intuition. There is, however, evidence to suggest that individuals can become more receptive to new ideas by a process known as ‘unfreezing’ (see Lewin, 1999). This involves providing decision-makers with feedback about limitations in the way they have made decisions in the past (Bazerman and Moore, 2009). As Schein (1987, p. 94) argues the ‘pain’ or ‘disequilibria’ arising from this unfreezing process can motivate people to reflect critically on the way they make decisions and encourage them to change their decision-making behaviour (cited by Teale et al., 2003). Similarly, Bendixen and Rule (2004) contend that individual change comes about when people can see that their ‘current beliefs are no longer working satisfactorily’ (p. 22). It was, therefore, decided that the workshop activities in the second cycle of this action research project would begin by asking the students to reflect on how they had made decisions in the past.

The use of multiple case studies encourages students to develop their own interpretation and understanding of the way career decision-making should be approached. There was, however, a feeling amongst the lecturers participating in this project that many of the students in the first cycle of this action research project had not fully grasped all the concepts introduced in the case studies. Schwartz and Bransford (1998) argue that analogical encoding does not preclude the use of formal transmission-based input such as lectures. Indeed, they contend that the process of analogical encoding can be enhanced by
the provision of an explanatory framework that helps students to better understand and contextualise the conclusions they arrive at. As they argue ‘deep understanding requires both a differentiated knowledge structure (as develops when discerning the contrast among cases) and an explanatory knowledge structure (as often comes through telling)’ (Schwartz and Bransford, 1998, p. 504). Therefore, in the second cycle of this project the workshop was followed up with a lecture in which the key ideas identified through the process of reflection and analogical encoding were placed within a theoretical framework. By doing this it was hoped that the students’ understanding of the concepts introduced in the workshop would be enhanced.

Data collection methods
As discussed above, the use of written questionnaires limited the extent to which it was possible to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the factors influencing the career decision-making behaviour of students and their response to analogical encoding. As such, in the second cycle of this action research project it was decided to supplement the questionnaires with face-to-face interviews. The research also focused on a specific intervention and attempted to measure the students’ responses over a limited period of time. In reality a student’s values develop over a long period in response to multiple influences (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Bowman et al., 2005). It would, therefore, be useful to interview students at a later stage in the student lifecycle to see if, and how, their values have changed over time. There is also a likely to be a difference between intentions and practice (Bazerman et al., 1998; Brunsson, 2002; Johnston, 2003). A longitudinal study would provide the opportunity to see if students have put into practice what they said they were going to do. It was therefore decided to interview a sample of students in both their first year and the later stages of their final year of study.

Stages
The second cycle of this action research project involved the following stages:

Stage 1 First Questionnaire: First year undergraduates studying full-time in the Business School were asked to complete a questionnaire on attitudes to career decision-making. This included students studying for degrees in Accounting, Business and Management and Computing. The questionnaire was very similar to the one used in the first cycle of this research (a copy of the questionnaire used in the second cycle is included in Appendix I). The questionnaires were distributed in class in September 2008 and 128 questionnaires were returned.
Stage 2 Workshops, lecture and input from careers: The business and management students engaged in two one-hour workshop activities run over consecutive weeks as part of their PDP. These involved a critical reflection on a past decision and the analysis of a number of case studies on how students had approached career decision-making and planning (see Appendix II). These case studies had been updated from those used in the first cycle of this project. A few weeks after the workshop activities a lecture was delivered to the students on the process of career decision-making. This was followed by a session with the university’s careers centre which involved: a brief lecture on the need to engage in career planning and how the university careers service could help; a decision-making activity; a self-assessment exercise which aimed to find out what students wanted from work; and an exercise introducing students to the graduate careers website ‘Prospects’ (see www.prospects.ac.uk). We therefore adopted what Watts (2006) refers to as ‘parallel delivery’ where academic staff and careers staff deliver their sessions separately.

The accounting and computer students did not receive this input - for a discussion of the methodological and ethical considerations involved in the decision to exclude them see Greenbank (2010). The accounting students were engaged in PDP, but they were not due to receive any careers input until later in the academic year. The computer students did not have formal PDP sessions, but met with their personal tutor once a term.

Stage 3 Second Questionnaire: After completing Stage 2 the business and management students were asked to complete a second questionnaire on their attitudes to career decision-making (see Appendix III). These questionnaires were handed out at the end of the final session with Edge Hill’s Careers Service. This session lasted four hours and involved three separate locations. The level of engagement with this process is reflected by the fact that just over half the students (38 out of 69) stayed to the very end of this session and therefore completed the second questionnaire.5

4 It would have been better to run a single two-hour workshop. However, this was the way the PDP module was timetabled and it proved impossible to obtain rooms to run a single two-hour session. The rooms were also less than ideal for this exercise because they were IT (Information Technology) training rooms. One of the problems with action research is that you have to operate within the conditions you find yourself. The metaphor of the ‘swampy lowlands’ ascribed to practitioner research by Schön (1995) comes to mind.

5 The fact that the students moved rooms as they engaged in different activities enabled students to drop out at different stages. The level of attendance in the earlier sessions was obviously higher, with about three-quarters of the students engaging with the first session run by Edge Hill’s Careers Service.
In this questionnaire the students were asked many of the same questions included in the first questionnaire. This enabled the results of the first and second questionnaires to be compared in order to see if any changes in student attitudes had occurred. The students were also asked to comment on the different sessions they had attended. The accounting and computing students were asked to complete a similar questionnaire, but one without the questions about the input they had received. A summary of the number of students completing the questionnaire is provided by Table 2.2 (below).

Table 2.2 The number of students completing the ‘first’ and ‘second’ questionnaires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree programme</th>
<th>First questionnaire</th>
<th>Second questionnaire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and Management</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computing</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stage 4 Interviews: A cross section of students in terms age, gender and social class were selected for interview. These interviews took place at the beginning of 2009. The sample also aimed to include students with varying levels of engagement with the different sessions (i.e. the two workshops, the lecture and the careers input). The interviews involved an in-depth discussion of each student’s response to the questionnaires they had completed. This involved taking the students through the questionnaires they had completed and asking them to elaborate on their answers. The interviews provided better quality data than the questionnaires because the students were able to explain the rationale behind the answers they provided.

Sample
Thirty-four students were interviewed for this study. As can be seen from Table 2.3 (below), the sample included 6 accounting students, 23 business and management students and 5 computing students. The business and management students accounted for nearly 70 per cent of the sample because these were the students who were given the chance to attend all the sessions on career decision-making and planning. It was, however, useful to include students who had not been given this opportunity.
It is not possible to refer to the students receiving the intervention as an ‘experiment group’ and those who did not as a ‘control group’ because in order to do this they should be randomly allocated between the two groups (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). Indeed, the group receiving the input (which will be referred to as the ‘intervention group’) consisted of business and management students. In contrast, the other group (which will be referred to as the ‘comparison group’) was made up of students who did not engage in the sessions (either through choice or because it was not offered to them). This latter group consisted of students from all three degrees. Although these two groups of students are not strictly experiment and control groups, it was felt that it would be useful to compare their values and behaviour.

As can be seen from Table 2.3, 19 students attended all the sessions (although three of these students left the session run by the university’s careers service early). This is the ‘intervention group’. Fifteen students did not attend any, or only some, of the sessions. It should be emphasised that this included the 11 accounting and computer students who were of course not given the opportunity to attend these sessions. This is the ‘comparison group’.

The vast majority of the students (22 out of 34) were under the age of 20. There were, however, quite a few students in their twenties (11 out of 34). Just one student was in her forties. The sample was evenly split in terms of gender.

Students were classified as being working or middle class using the ‘Office of National Statistics Socio-economic Classification – User Manual’ as a guide (see ONS, 2005). Again there was a fairly even split with 18 students classified as working class and 16 as middle class. About one-third of the students had at least one parent who had a higher education qualification. Not surprisingly all but one of these students was middle class.

6 Students from lower socio-economic groups (NS-SEC 4, 5, 6 and 7) were classified as working class and those from higher socio-economic groups (NS-SEC 1, 2 and 3) as middle class (see Appendix IV for details of these socio-economic classifications). There is of course a degree of subjectivity involved in such classifications.
Table 2.3 Characteristics of the sample interviewed

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</table>

7 A= Accounting student, B = Business & Management student, C = Computing student. Students in italics attended all the sessions.
8 This refers to whether at least one of the student’s parents obtained a higher education qualification.
<p>| | | | | |</p>
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</table>
Interviews
The interviews lasted between half-an-hour and an hour and were recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. This enabled direct quotes to be used in the report. The following (derived from Maynard, 1999, pp. 486-487) were used to describe additional verbal and non-verbal information and help clarify what was said:

- Capitals to represent emphasis in terms of volume or pitch, e.g. ‘I didn’t do ANYTHING’.

- Curved parentheses to indicate characteristics of talk or non-verbal gestures, e.g. ‘I didn’t look at the internet (laughs) or anything like that’ or ‘I said (waves arm) go away’.

- There is also a difference between the spoken and written word and angled parentheses have been used to include non-spoken words that help clarify meaning, e.g. ‘I didn’t talk to him [the lecturer] at all’.

Data analysis
Once all the interviews were fully transcribed a systematic approach to data analysis was adopted. This involved the use of matrices, cognitive mapping and quantitative methods. This approach was seen as a way of reducing (but not of course eliminating) researcher bias. It was also an effective way of helping to make sense of a mass of very detailed and complex information.

A matrix is a table with different variables expressed in rows and columns. These were used to help identify possible relationships between variables and highlight key factors influencing the students’ attitudes towards career decision-making and planning (see Dey, 1993; Robson, 2002; Lee, 2008). Whilst matrices provide a useful starting point, they are not always able to represent the complex variety of factors influencing student attitudes. Therefore, cognitive mapping was also used to make sense of the data. Cognitive maps are diagrammatic representations of the inter-relationships that exist between the different factors influencing decision-making (see Easterby-Smith et al., 2008, pp. 202-204).

Although this research is primarily a qualitative study, the two questionnaires used Likert scales which means the starting point was often quantitative. There were also occasions when it was useful to count the number of times certain factors influenced the students. As Silverman (1993) states, ‘if you are trying to get some feel about the data as a whole ... it
may sometimes be useful to use certain quantitative measures, however crude they may be’ (p. 204). Therefore, where it was felt to be appropriate, simple quantitative measures such as frequencies and percentages were used to help make sense of the data. It is, however, accepted that quantifying the impact of interventions is problematic because it tends to oversimplify the complex range of inter-relating factors that influence the way students behave.

CONCLUSION

This chapter describes how this action research has developed over the first two cycles of the project. In the second cycle 34 in-depth interviews were conducted with first year students across the Business School. These interviews were carried out in conjunction with the questionnaires the students had completed at an earlier date. The data from the questionnaires and interviews, combined with input from the lecturers and careers advisers involved in this study, have provide a substantial amount of rich data. In the following chapters the results are analysed in detail.
CHAPTER 3

CAREER OBJECTIVES, ASPIRATIONS AND INITIATING THE CAREER DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the career objectives and general aspirations of the students. It then analyses how these - and factors such as poor motivation, indecisiveness and dysfunctional beliefs - act as barriers on the ability and willingness of students to engage in career decision-making and planning.

CAREER OBJECTIVES

In this study very few students had clear career objectives. When they were asked about their career intentions the students typically responded by saying they had ‘no idea’ what they ultimately wanted to do; or they were very vague saying, for example, that they wanted to do ‘something’ in a particular area of work such as accounting, marketing or human resource management. Quite a large proportion of students (about one-third of the interview sample), particularly those studying business and management, said they would eventually like to be self-employed. However, they were again vague, with the vast majority of students having no particular business idea in mind, just a notion that this was something they would like to do at some point in the future.

There were exceptions to the lack of career focus. For example, B5 had plans to set up in business as a wedding planner; B13’s ambition was to work in the Foreign Office; B19 planned to join the Army as an officer and then go into management; B15 wanted to be an

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9 A high proportion of students indicated a desire to be self-employed. A few students referred to television programmes such as Dragons’ Den as being influential. Research indicates that a lack of financial capital and relevant work experience are barriers to self-employment, which is why most people start-up in business from aged 30 onwards (Brooksbank, 2006). This was acknowledged by the students who talked about having to earn money and gain experience before they could set up their own business.
insurance underwriter; and B23 wanted to remain in her part-time job with a large retailer and hoped to move into management within this company.

The accounting students, unsurprisingly, indicated that they wanted to go into this profession. Yet they were uncertain about the type of accountancy they wished to enter. The students were not aware of the diverse range of accountancy jobs available; and all but one of them was unacquainted with the different professional bodies associated with the profession. Indeed, most of the students had chosen the accountancy degree on the basis of minimal research, with many of the students stating that they were attracted to accountancy because they liked, and were good with, numbers. For example, A3 talked about 'liking numbers' and said:

I did my Business Studies A-level and accounting was in that and I thought that seems quite interesting. And my mum said 'what about accounting?' So I thought why not?

A3 admitted that her decision was not based on research but a ‘feeling’ that this was the ‘right’ career to enter. She also admitted that she did not talk to a careers adviser or her teachers about going into accountancy.

In contrast to the accounting students, the computing students were less committed to entering a career related to the subject of their degree. Many of the students associated computers with their leisure time. As such, they regarded computing as interesting area of study, rather than something they had a strong predisposition to enter as a career. Many of the students also seemed to have studied computing or information systems at college and enjoyed it and regarded a computer-related degree as something to naturally progress on to. Despite being less focused on a career related to their degree than the accountants, most of the computer students accepted (or were resigned to the fact) that they were likely to go into a computer-related career. This was because all but one of the students felt that once they were on a computing degree this determined the career they would enter on graduation. As the Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study found many students are not aware that a large proportion of jobs do not specify a particular degree subject.

Similarly to the computing students, the business and management students often carried on with the subject at university because they enjoyed it at college. As B2 said, ‘I just enjoyed it [Business Studies] at A-level and thought I’d carry it on – as simple as that’. Similarly B12 justified her choice of a business and management degree on the following grounds:
It was because of enjoyment more than anything. I didn’t really think about the job side of it. I think in my mind the best thing to do, like how to choose what you want to do is what you enjoy because if you don’t enjoy it you’re not going to, you know, do well.

Nevertheless, many of the business and management students also seemed to have an eye on the job market in their choice of degree. They regarded the business and management degree as very flexible. This was seen as important because the vast majority of students did not know what they ultimately wanted to do in career terms. As B18 said of his business and management degree: ‘It’s very widespread isn’t it? It’s not like concentrating on one thing, so there’ll be lots of opportunities for doing different jobs, rather than concentrating on one’.

All the students thought their degrees would provide them with ideas about future careers. For example, C1 said he had no idea what he eventually wanted to do and was not even sure what aspects of the course he wanted to study: ‘I still have no idea ... because I don’t really know what they entail – I think I’ll learn through the degree what I want to do afterwards’. The degree was, therefore, seen as a way of ‘treading water’ whilst he decided what to do next. Similarly A1 commented, ‘My thought from college was just university. I didn’t actually put much thought into working after that. I just thought that’s the next three or four years sorted out’.

**ASPIRATIONS**

Given that the students had nebulous career objectives it came as no surprise to find that their aspirations were ambiguous. A typical example was B2 who said she wanted to be ‘a manager of some sort’. The Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study concluded that the students generally had realistic aspirations. In this study, however, the students tended to have quite low aspirations.10 B2 for instance said she did not want to be a ‘top manager that would be too much hassle’. Similarly, B20 declared that she would like to own her own shop but ‘I’m not like ridiculously ambitious in the sense that I’d want to have an empire. If I just had a little shop in like a nice area that would do me’.

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10 The students interviewed in the Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study was in their final year of study. In the research reported here the students are first years. The students will be re-interviewed in their final year of study so it will be interesting to see if their aspirations have changed.
Research suggests that a middle class habitus may inculcate higher aspirations than a working class habitus (Marshall et al., 1997; Roberts, 1999; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Maguire, 2005; Bergerson, 2007). Indeed, of the nine students in this study who exhibited high aspirations, six of them were from a middle class background. Yet this still leaves many middle class students in the sample who did not have very high aspiration levels – for example, B2 quoted above, had quite modest ambitions despite being from a middle class background. There were also students from working class backgrounds who are ambitious. For instance, A3’s experience of not having much money has influenced her desire to earn a high salary:

I do spend a lot of time thinking about the future because I have a real ambition to be quite rich. I really want to make a lot of money. I’ve always been like money orientated. I don’t know where it’s come from. I only live with my mum and it’s been a struggle kind of thing and I don’t want to be like that.

Also, B7 - who is from working class background - wants ‘to be high up in a business establishment’ and puts this ambition down to his father’s influence:

Basically he just said you’re not being a bricky [his father is a bricklayer]. Most winters when we were growing up he’d say to us: hours are long, its cold working outside, so just not nice. I don’t think he wants to see us doing that.

Personal experience and familial influence are obviously important factors, but individuals will reflect and respond in different ways to similar situations. Research carried out by Margaret Archer (2007, 2008), which has already been referred to in Chapter 2, illustrates how the way people reflect on their lives influences the decisions they make. She identified a four-fold taxonomy of how individuals make decisions (which she found was not related to social class, gender or age). In this taxonomy Archer (2007) refers to ‘autonomous reflexives’

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11 Whether aspirations are ‘high’ or not is based on the students comments during the interview. It is, however, accepted that this is based on a subjective assessment.

12 Archer (2008) provides a summary of the four modes of reflexivity: ‘Communicative reflexives’, whose internal conversations need completion and confirmation by others before leading to action; ‘Autonomous reflexives’, who complete their internal deliberations alone and act upon them; ‘Meta-reflexives’, who scrutinize and criticize their own inner dialogues, their chosen actions and their social contexts; ‘Fractured reflexives’, who are (temporarily) unable to conduct purposeful self-talk but, instead, augment their own distress and disorientation’ (p. 2).
reflexives’. Such people are independent, relying on their own opinion rather than the opinion of others. This can lead individuals to adopt behaviour patterns that do not conform to the expectations of those around them. For example, B15 who is from a working class background, but is very ambitious, talked about ‘making his own decisions’. Similarly, A3 who is again working class, and also very ambitious, admitted that ‘I would rather do things on my own rather than go and bother other people’. There were also middle class students such as C5 who said ‘I tend to make my own decisions’. He dropped out of his A-levels and became a chef for several years before deciding to go to university as a mature student. C5 talked about being ‘his own person’ and resisting the pressure exerted by his parents to be money orientated:

I don’t really speak to them about my career. I just sort of go with what I feel. My dad wasn’t very good at the encouragement thing. He always tried to encourage the things you really DIDN’T want to do and me being a slightly rebellious character would go against that.

Archer (2007) also identified ‘communicative reflexives’ who seek the confirmation of those they are familiar with (e.g. family and friends) when they are making decisions. According to Archer (2007) this can lead to conformity and lower aspirations. In this study the students whose comments indicated they corresponded to Archer’s communicative reflexives tended to be the ones who talked about not being ambitious and wanting to stay geographically close to family and friends. Lareau (1997) believes that the middle class are more autonomous and less conformist than the working class. However, Archer (2007) does not feel class is a factor determining a person’s mode of reflexivity. This conclusion is supported by this study, with students exhibiting the characteristics of communicative reflexives coming from both working class (e.g. B3, B8, B9, B20, B21 and B22) and middle class (e.g. B2, B10 and B16) backgrounds.

You would expect the students from a middle class habitus to be ambitious. Yet in the same way that the working class may not necessarily be un-aspirational, the middle class may not always value ambition. As a number of writers argue there exist significant within class differences (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Maguire, 2005; Reay et al., 2005; Croll, 2008) which means it can be misleading to generalise. As Gorard et al. (2006) argue there is a need to take account of the diversity that exists within different social groups. The danger is that studies may fail to take such differences into account because they work within over generalised frameworks that mean intra-class differences become indiscernible (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Johnston, 2003; Greenbank, 2010). Skeggs (2004) citing Bourdieu
(1992) argues that there is always a danger that ‘theory brings into effect that which it names’ (p. 17). Similarly, Johnston (2003) refers to the tendency for research on graduate employment to ‘ask questions and interpret data within oversimplified frameworks’ (p. 419).

There may also be little difference in the values of those from the ‘upper’ working class compared to the ‘lower’ middle class (see UCAS, 2002 for similar comments). This certainly seemed to be the case analysing the interview transcripts in this study, where the students overwhelmingly came from either skilled manual/technical occupations (defined as working class) or intermediate occupations, such as administrative officers, clerks, secretaries and nursing auxiliaries (defined as middle class).

There also appear to be other factors which may account for the lack of ambition (at least at this stage in their lives) amongst students from middle class backgrounds. For example, B10 has struggled academically and this, not surprisingly, has affected his confidence. B10 also admitted that when he was younger he resisted approaching his father (who is the managing director of a multinational company) for advice. In contrast, B2 said that her parents consciously tried not to influence her:

They don’t want to try and rule my life because that’s what they did with my brother and sister and they don’t like them for that. They think I should make my own mind up.

B2 also commented on how her father, who worked as a manager, was so busy it was difficult to talk to him. As a result, she tended to discuss educational and careers issues with her mother, who she described as ‘only having a bit of a job’.

We, therefore, have to be careful of the assumptions we make about the type of influences on students. The students can also be subject to very different influences within their family unit. This is especially the case amongst those students whose parents have separated or divorced and are now in new relationships. As Archer (2008) points out in these complex environments there are multiple and possibly conflicting influences where individuals have to decide who they want to listen to and who they want to ignore. Such factors probably help account for the complex and unpredictable relationship that exists between social class and the career aspirations of students.
INITIATING THE CAREER DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Gati and Asher’s (2001) PIC (pre-screening, In-depth exploration, choice) model of career decision-making assumes the starting point (i.e. the ‘pre-screening stage’) involves decision-makers generating a number of career options that are congruent with their values. The decision-maker is then expected to engage in an in-depth exploration of different career options before making a choice. It became clear from the interviews with the students in this study that the vast majority had, to date, not even engaged in the pre-screening stage when they were deciding which degree to study for. Even the minority of students who had a very specific career objective had tended to simply latch on to a particular career with very little, if any, consideration of the alternatives available to them. The work of Itamar Gati and his colleagues (see Gati et al., 1996; Gati and Saka, 2001) suggests that this situation could arise because of a lack of knowledge and understanding of what they need to know in order to engage effectively in the process of career decision-making. This will be considered in the next chapter.

Gati and Saka (2001) also refer to a ‘lack of readiness’ to engage in career decision-making and planning, which they argue can arise due to poor motivation, indecisiveness and dysfunctional beliefs. We will consider each of these factors in turn.

Poor motivation

Low aspiration levels may be a factor influencing levels of motivation to engage in the career decision-making process. Conversely, if students have high aspirations it seems logical to assume that they are more likely to be proactive. However, this was not always the case because many of the students, including those with high aspirations, are reliant on others to help them make decisions (they have what Tinsley et al. (2002) refer to as a ‘dependent style’ of decision-making). This is illustrated in the way many of the students hoped their classes would provide information that would help them to decide what they ultimately wanted to do. The students were also waiting for information from Edge Hill’s Careers Service. For example, B4 talked about wanting ‘somebody to come in and give me different options’. Similarly, A2 said, ‘There’s probably loads of jobs you can do with accounting ... It will be nice for them [careers] to tell you well there’s this which does this and that which does that’. These students felt overwhelmed by the options available to them and as a result they wanted guidance. As B4 said ‘I’d like to be given information on the different types of jobs, the different careers we can go into, which field to go into because there’s that many’.
Yet there were some students who were being more proactive. These tended to be students who adopted more rational approaches to decision-making.\(^{13}\) For example, at the time the interviews took place B11, B15, B17 and B19 had already started researching different jobs.\(^{14}\) B17 for example made the following comment: ‘I enjoy trying to find out what I will do in the future and researching different options’. B11 said he was already considering his future:

I’ve started NOW. I’ve looked at all the graduate recruiters. I got Prospects Directory and spoke to [names careers adviser] and in that book I’ve written on it all the things I find interesting, all the different companies. I sat there for six hours yesterday [he was snowed in at home]. It’s just something I’m constantly doing and re-evaluating.

**Indecisiveness**

The lack of clear career objectives also makes it difficult for students to engage in the career planning process. A number of students said they were unsure of the type of extra-curricular activities to engage in because they were undecided about the career they eventually wanted to go into. For example, B5 acknowledged that university was just a way of delaying having to make decisions about her future:

I think the biggest problem with people my age is indecisiveness and a lot of people come to university because they just don’t know what else to do. It like gives you another three years to think about what you want to do with your life. And it’s just kind of plod along – oh yes I’m at uni, I’m doing something with myself, but I’m not really.

There was also a feeling amongst many of the students that studying for a degree meant they were under no immediate pressure to consider careers issues because they did not have to make the transition into the labour market for some years. For example, B10 said, ‘I think I have quite a bit of time because it’s a four year degree [he wants to take a one year industrial placement] and I’ve still got three-and-a-half years left of it’. Other students did not

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\(^{13}\) This is supported by Spicer and Sadler-Smith (2005) who found that students who adopted more rational approaches were less likely to adopt avoidant styles of decision-making.

\(^{14}\) These were students who had attended all the sessions, although B19 had left the session run by the university’s careers service early. Three of the four students also had the characteristics of an autonomous reflexive.
feel under any pressure to consider careers. As students have asserted elsewhere (see Greenbank and Penketh, 2009) they need pressure to motivate them into action. Some students also felt that because they were only young they could afford to make and rectify any mistakes they make. They were, therefore, willing to take risks on the basis of limited information. C3, for example, said she did things without giving it much thought because ‘you soon find out whether it’s a good or bad decision and then you can change to something else’.

Dysfunctional beliefs

The other factor that seemed to restrict the extent to which these students engaged in the career decision-making and planning process is what Gati and Saka (2001) refer to as ‘dysfunctional beliefs’ (p. 332). Obviously there is a subjective element in determining which beliefs are ‘dysfunctional’. However, research suggests that students need more than just a good degree if they are going to compete in what is a very competitive graduate labour market (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). This means they should engage in the career decision-making and planning process at an early stage in their undergraduate life. Yet the students often held beliefs that militated against this. There was, for example, tendency for students to want to focus on issues other than career planning, especially in their first year at university. B18, for instance, was concerned with having ‘fun’. He said: ‘I obviously want to get a degree like but I’ve come for the experience so more good times than studies. At the minute I just want to have a laugh’.

B18 did, however, say he would work hard in his second year: ‘I’m definitely going to work next year. I just want the first year to be the first year, you know what I mean?’ The need to obtain a ‘good’ degree, or what Pitcher and Purcell (1998, p. 194) refer to as the ‘essential 2:1’, was seen as more important than engaging in the career decision-making and planning process for many of the students (for similar findings see Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008). For example, B14 said if she did not obtain a 2:1 she would feel she had ‘wasted her time’ and ‘was in debt for nothing’. A6 talked about wanting to concentrate on his academic work: ‘I need to focus, then look for a job once I’ve got my degree behind me’. This ‘need to focus’ may arise because students are struggling academically or are having difficulty with the

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15 This is not to underestimate the importance of obtaining a ‘good degree’. As Tomlinson (2008) points out, ‘Many UK graduate employers specify a 2.1 (or above) as a desirable, sometimes pre-requisite, entry requirement’ (p. 60). Also Mason et al. (2009) found in their study that ‘the probability of being employed is found to be positively related to holding a First Class or Upper Second degree’ (p. 16).
transition from college or work to university. For example, B10 said that because he had not performed very well in his examinations prior to coming to university his parents had asked him to concentrate on his studies and not obtain a term-time job.

For some students there was a feeling that once they were in university their immediate futures were sorted out and they could relax. As one student said, ‘When I made the change [from employment to study] I was thinking long-term, but now I’m not. I don’t spend that much time at the moment thinking about the future’. According to Fried et al. (2007) we live in a future orientated culture with people planning for the long-term and willing to make sacrifices in order to reap future benefits. It has, however, been argued that the working class do not value a future orientation and tend ‘live for today’ (see Willis, 1977; Bourdieu, 1979; Argyle, 1994; Robertson and Hillman, 1997; Marshall et al., 1997; Arulmani, 2003). For instance, Argyle (1994) discusses how working class values consist of ‘short-term goals, immediate gratification and fatalism’ (pp. 238-239). Yet in this study it was students from both middle class and working class backgrounds who failed to demonstrate a future orientation. As one middle class student (C3) said: ‘I just live for today. I think that’s the best way ... I don’t really think about what’s going to happen tomorrow’. Another middle class student said: ‘When you’ve just started uni and you’re in your first year you just want to get your work done, you don’t want to think too much about careers’.

Also, age and gender did not seem to be factors influencing the extent to which students were future orientated. Instead, it was the students who were ambitious, and adopted a rational approach to decision-making, who were the most likely to be thinking of the future (i.e. B11, B15, B17, B19).

SESSIONS

The sessions introduced by us did not result in a fundamental change that meant all the students were now engaged in Gati and Asher’s (2001) pre-screening stage. It is, however, important to take account of the fact that the interviews were conducted only a short time after the sessions concluded. There were, nevertheless, a small number of students who were now actively researching different career options. They indicated that the sessions had acted as a catalyst to make them start thinking more seriously about careers. As discussed previously, these tended to be the students who were generally more rational in their approach to decision-making.
There was little evidence that the sessions had raised the students' career aspirations. However, this was not a major focus of the interventions and it was only briefly mentioned in the lecture. Moreover, aspiration-raising (like approaches to decision-making) involves addressing core values, which according to Rokeach (1968) are not easily changed (cited by Kember, 2001).

The students did appear to pick up on particular issues. For example, some of the students became aware of the need to focus on more than just obtaining a good degree. As B17 commented when asked about the importance of the degree classification:

   It's very important, but you've got to have something alongside that as well. I don't think that alone will get you a decent job. You've maybe got to have extra-curricular activities or just show you've got a personality.

The extent to which students develop an understanding of what they need to do to prepare for a successful transition to the graduate labour market will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter.

CONCLUSION

The decisions students make about which subjects to study at school and college and then what degree to study at university appears to be an important factor determining which career they will eventually go into, especially for the computer and accountancy students. As Tomlinson (2008) argues, students (from both traditional and less traditional backgrounds) regard entering HE ‘as being the next step’ which follows ‘a natural progression in their own learning trajectories’ (p. 54). The problem with this is that the decisions they made whilst at school and college appear to have been based on very little research or thought. This means they were often not making very rational decisions based on long-term career objectives and detailed information and advice. The students then feel
committed to a particular career path and appear to follow this trajectory without subsequently questioning it. As Bazerman (2006) states many decisions result from a whole series of choices and this results in ‘a particular type of bias ... namely, a tendency to escalate commitment to our initial decision’ (p. 81)\(^\text{16}\) – in this case the student’s initial subject choices whilst at school or college. The students are also often uncertain about exactly what they want to do. According to Bridgstock (2009) this can affect student retention. Although this study only involves a small sample it will be interesting to which students have left their programmes when they are re-interviewed in their final year of study.

These conclusions contrast with the findings of a large scale study by Purcell \textit{et al.} (2007) which suggest that most students can link their choice of course to their career aspirations.\(^\text{17}\) Purcell \textit{et al.} (2007) conclude that students are increasingly instrumental in their approach, which they feel may reflect a growing awareness of the competitive nature of both the higher education sector and graduate labour market. Also, Moogan \textit{et al.} (1999) carried out an in-depth longitudinal study of 19 pupils from a sixth form college, supplemented with a questionnaire distributed to those attending a university open day. They found that potential HE students adopted a sequential process characteristic of a rational decision-making model. These students also appeared to be rigorous in what Moogan \textit{et al.} (1999) refer to as the ‘information search’ and ‘evaluation of alternatives’ stages of the decision-making process.

It may be that the ‘type’ of student that comes to Edge Hill (a ‘recruiting’ university which accepts students with relatively low UCAS points) may have a different (i.e. a less rational) approach than students who are more academically successful. However, research by Albion and Fogarty (2002) who used intelligence tests and Amir and Gati (2006) who utilised the Israeli equivalent of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) found very little correlation between such measures and ‘career decision-making difficulties’ as measured by the Career

\(^{16}\) Similarly, Janis and Mann (1977) state, ‘Important life decisions are sometimes incremental in nature, the end product of a series of small decisions that progressively commit the person to a particular course of action. A stepwise increase in commitment can end up locking the person into a career ... without his [sic.] ever having made a definite decision about it’ (p. 35).

\(^{17}\) Respondents were asked to complete a question where they were asked to rate on a Likert scale of 1 to 7 how clear their ideas were about careers prior to choosing their courses. This of course relies on students accurately self-assessing themselves.
Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ) developed by Gati et al. (1996). Whilst this is not strictly comparable to the process students go through when making decisions relating to university courses it does indicate that intelligence or academic performance may not be a key factor determining the efficacy of the students’ decision-making (at least in terms of CDDQ).

Once the students are at university they have the opportunity to be more pro-active in terms of their career choices. Yet many of the students appear (even after our interventions) to lack the willingness or motivation to engage in career decision-making and planning. The interviews were, however, conducted early on the students first year at university. It will be interesting to see whether or not their attitudes change as they progress through their degree.

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18 The CDDQ lists 44 potential career decision-making difficulties (see Gati et al., 1996, pp. 525-526). This is based on an underlying assumption that a rational approach to choice involving collecting information and evaluating different approaches optimises the effectiveness of career decision-making.
CHAPTER 4

SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND APPROACHES TO CAREER DECISION-MAKING

INTRODUCTION

Students obtain information about careers both formally, by deliberately collecting it, and informally, by absorbing it (often unconsciously) as they go about their lives. It is, therefore, essential to our understanding of the way in which students acquire information and knowledge that we conceptualise learning as a complex on-going process (Bowman et al., 2005; Hager and Hodkinson, 2009). The way in which students interpret the information they collect and absorb will be influenced by their experiences and the different habituses they have lived and worked in during their lives (Bourdieu, 1979, 1980). As McCaskey (1991) points out people create their own ‘conceptual maps’ (or schemata) so that they can make sense of the world. Their perspective from this internal world shifts in response to the influence of changes in the individual’s external world. According to Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) this means:

As new experiences are gained schemata are modified and as they change so does what is recognised in the surrounding world. In this dialectical way, the life history of the individual shapes and is shaped by his/her practice. (p. 34)

It is therefore important to try and discover what the students’ perceptions are - and how these have been influenced. This of course is not always easy because of the multiple sources of information involved and the fact that some information is unconsciously absorbed and is consequently tacit. As a result, it is often difficult for individuals to identify how the various pieces of information they have absorbed have influenced their decision-making.

This chapter will consider the different sources of information students intend to utilise in the career decision-making and planning process and the students’ rationale for using particular sources. In doing this, the chapter will consider the extent to which the interventions have
influenced their attitudes. The chapter will then examine the students' knowledge and understanding of career decision-making. Finally, the influence of social class on the way students make decisions will be examined.

DIFFERENT SOURCES OF INFORMATION

We will now consider the different sources of information that students intend to use; the factors influencing this; and the extent to which the students’ attitudes to these different sources has changed during their time at university.

Careers advisers

In this study the vast majority of students indicated that they had experienced what they perceived to be poor careers advice and education through the Connexions service whilst they were at school and college. The students typically described their experience as ‘bad’ or ‘rubbish’. For example, B19 said the careers advisers at school and college, ‘Did not treat you as individuals and only gave generic advice’. Similarly, B21 said: ‘Careers advisers just like, I don't know, they have like set facts they pass on’. Also, a number of students complained that they received very little practical help. B1 was particularly vociferous in his condemnation of the quality of the service offered by Connexions: ‘They are phenomenally useless. It’s infuriating how little they help you. They just shoo you away’.

The Connexions service was introduced in 2001 and aimed to provide a single advisory service through their ‘personal advisers’19 covering a range of issues that affect the lives of young people aged 16-19, including money, health, relationships, education and careers (Hughes, 2005; Artaraz, 2006). There have, however, been concerns about the quality of careers education and advice in schools and colleges. It is argued that the Connexions service is under-resourced and personal advisers are not always appropriately qualified (Watts, 2001a, 2001b; Hughes, 2005). This is supported by McNally (2008) who cites a National Audit Office (2004) report which found that two-thirds of school’s career guidance was provided by staff with no formal qualifications in careers.

Despite the students’ negative experience of Connexions, many of them still expected to receive a high quality service from Edge Hill’s Careers Service. In the first questionnaire,

19 Whilst they are officially called personal advisers the students often referred to them as ‘careers advisers’.
which was issued to students during their induction week, over two-thirds of them thought the quality of careers advice would be ‘good’ or ‘very good’ at Edge Hill. It seems that many of the students believed that the careers service at university would be much better than their experience of Connexions. However, some of the written comments on the questionnaire revealed a degree of hesitancy. For example, one student described her experience of careers in school as ‘bad’ but wrote: ‘I’m hoping they will be a lot different here to high school. Hopefully’ (italics my emphasis).

Bowman et al. (2005) found that a poor experience of careers guidance at school was enough to prevent the master’s degree students in their study from visiting the university careers service. Similarly, there were some students in this study who said they would not use Edge Hill’s Careers Service because of their previous encounters with ‘careers advisers’ (in other words personal advisers from Connexions). C1, for instance said, ‘The careers advice I received when I was younger put me off. I think they’ve got good intentions, but I think they can have the opposite effect’. He went on to say that because of this he was now more likely to speak to his lecturers than a careers adviser. On the basis of his experience with Connexions, B1 was also very critical of careers advisers. He said he was aware that his opinion ‘was coloured by my experience’, but when asked whether he would go to the Careers Service at Edge Hill he said ‘I would not go to them because they are likely to be useless’. Similarly, B19 admitted that he should not be influenced by his previous experience with Connexions, but admitted that ‘it does put you off’.

Of the nineteen students who attended all the sessions about one-third of them had increased their rating of the quality of advice available from Edge Hill’s Careers Service. The students indicated that they had been influenced by a variety of factors (the workshops, the lecture, careers input and the comments of their lecturers) - with no particular form of intervention appearing to be dominant in terms of its impact.

In contrast, there was very little change in perceptions of quality from those not attending the sessions. Only two of the fifteen students changed their opinion of the university careers service during the four months they had been at Edge Hill. The two students who did change were influenced by their lecturers. For example A4 said: ‘I’ve realised they’re here through [names lecturer] and they must be good because [names lecturer] says they are good and worth speaking to’. Similarly, A5 said two of her lecturers had told the class they should go and see a careers adviser because they are very good at Edge Hill. She said she takes advice from lecturers because she ‘trusts them’.
Therefore, many of the students were receptive to upgrading their opinion of the quality of advice available from careers advisers. As B6 commented, ‘From the work that we did and from what we were told it seemed that these [university careers advisers] were the best people to give you advice’. However, this did not always transfer into an intention to use the university careers service. A major factor (also identified by Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008) was that students preferred to talk to people they know and are comfortable with. For example, B8 increased her rating of the quality of advice from Edge Hill’s careers advisers but admitted that she was unlikely to go and see them because she did not know them. The students also talked about the fear of being humiliated (for similar comments see Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008). For example, B22 described the careers staff as ‘scary’ and said, ‘It makes you nervous going to them, like they may ask you loads of questions that you’ve not thought about before’. However, other students indicated that seeing the careers advisers in the sessions made it more likely that they would go and see them. B2 for instance said there was an increased likelihood that she would visit the careers staff because ‘they looked so friendly’; and B9 commented on the fact that she found them ‘very down to earth’. It is interesting to note that it was the female students who were more likely to bring up the issue of whether they would feel comfortable talking to careers advisers. This may indicate that it is a more significant factor for female students; or it may be that female students have a greater willingness to admit that this is a concern.

Another issue raised by a number of students was that they would be reluctant to go and see a university careers adviser because the person would not know anything about them as individuals. A number of students talked about the need to talk to people who knew them and were therefore aware of their values, personality and strengths/weaknesses. They argued that careers advisers were unable to do this. For example, although B8 increased her rating of careers advisers after the sessions, she admitted that because she did not know them she was unlikely to make an appointment to see them. She also felt that the advice they could give her was limited because ‘careers have got loads of people who they have to see. They’ll tell you what to do, but they don’t know you do they? Don’t know what you want’. Similarly, B7 commented:

I know a careers adviser has a lot more knowledge, but a careers adviser does not know ME. Talking to a careers adviser would be good, but they don’t know what’s best for ME.

The fact that careers advisers did not ‘know them’ was seen by many students as a major barrier to visiting a careers adviser for help.
Lecturers
The first questionnaire asked for the students’ opinions of university lecturers as a source of careers advice. In the first cycle of this study careers advisers scored marginally higher than the lecturers in terms of the students’ perceptions of their ability to provide quality advice on careers. However, in the second cycle of this study the students generally had a higher level of confidence in their lecturers’ ability to provide ‘good’ or ‘very good’ advice on careers than the university’s careers advisers. In the questionnaire nearly 90 per cent of the students rated the quality of advice they thought they would receive from lecturers as ‘good’ or ‘very good’ compared to about 70 per cent for careers advisers. It would seem (as discussed above) that the rating of careers advisers was adversely affected by the students’ experience of the Connexions service.

It has already been seen that there was a post-intervention improvement in the students’ perceptions of the value of advice available from the university careers service. In contrast, there was a decline in the students’ rating of the quality of advice available from lecturers. Nearly half the students (9 out of 19) attending all of the sessions downgraded their perception of the quality of advice available from lecturers. Eight students did not change their opinion and only two increased their opinion of the ability of lecturers to provide quality advice. In contrast, the students not attending the sessions demonstrated significantly lower changes of opinion, only one-third of the students altered their opinion with two downgrading their views and three upgrading their rating of quality.

Despite the students attending the sessions often downgrading the quality of the lecturers’ advice there was not a corresponding decline in the extent to which they would go to their lecturers for guidance. This again shows how important it is that students know, and are familiar with, the people they seek advice from. The lecturers are of course in continual contact with students and as a result students often feel confident about approaching them - but only if they are perceived to be both approachable and knowledgeable. For example, A1 said:


20 Apart from one student who had started a degree course at another university the previous year, the students had to base their opinions on their perceptions of university lecturers.
I didn’t know how friendly the lecturers would be. And I get along with all of them. And they know what it’s all about, you know, especially those who have lots of experience, experience of work and that.

This was not, however, the perception of all the students. As B7 commented (on both lecturers and careers advisers):

I just don’t know these people and I’m less likely to talk to people I don’t know. I know careers advisers and lecturers have knowledge in those areas but I don’t know them. I’m wary of how much to trust them (pause) not trust but to follow them really.

Amongst the students who did not attend the sessions changes resulted from their experience of lecturers (which could be positive or negative). For example, C2 felt the lecturers were very knowledgeable about careers: ‘They know their onions; they know what they’re talking about. I feel very confident talking to any of my lecturers, talking to them about what I wanted to do’. C2 also felt they were very approachable:

I didn’t know how they were going to be. I didn’t know what to expect. Like yourself they’re very chatty, very approachable. When I first started I didn’t know how approachable they would be, but I can go and talk to them about anything and they’re always helpful.

Sometimes the students’ opinions rested on one particular lecturer. For example, A3 said he would go to one lecturer because ‘he knows his stuff’.

Parents
In the Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study the sample was made up of working class students. The majority of students did not believe their parents could provide them with insights about graduate careers because of the type of jobs they were employed in. In this study the sample consists of both working class and middle class students. Not surprisingly the students from middle class backgrounds tended to rate the quality of their parents’ advice higher than the students from working class backgrounds. Therefore, B13 whose father was a manager said she would go to him for advice because, ‘Obviously he’s a manager himself, he’s used to like seeing CVs and stuff’. In contrast, C2, whose father (he did not refer to his mother) is a mechanic working for a bus company, said:
They don’t know anything about what I want to do so it would be POINTLESS, you know what I mean. It would be like my dad telling me how to fix a bus – I wouldn’t have a clue. He wouldn’t be able to give me any advice at all. It would be the standard: ‘do what you like’.

There were similar comments from other students:

My parents did help me when I was picking what course to do at university and what university to go to. But now I’m at university there’s not much more they can help me with. You know, I don’t want to have a go at them or anything, but they didn’t go to university themselves so there’s not much more they can help me with. (A1, whose father is a plumber and his mother works in a semi-routine job in the NHS).

I’m giving THEM information and not necessarily asking them what to do. They wouldn’t have a clue. (A5, her father is a window cleaner and her mother is a housewife)

Whilst the working class students felt that the quality of advice on graduate careers they would receive from their parents was low, the majority of students still indicated that they were ‘likely’ or ‘very likely’ to discuss careers with their parents. They referred to the fact that their parents provided an outlet for them to articulate what they intended to do and they also offered them emotional support (see Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008 for similar comments). As A5 commented, ‘It would be a case of saying I’m doing this, I’m doing that and that’s as far as it goes’. Likewise, B12 said:

I can talk to her [his mother] about what I want to do and stuff and she’ll say yes that’s great, that’s great, that’ll be good for you and all that. And like the same with my dad. But they don’t know much, they’re not really good at advice.

There was, therefore, a tendency for parents to offer support rather than advice. Yet some students (from both working class and middle class backgrounds) felt that because their parents knew them very well (in terms of their strengths and weaknesses, their personality, etc.) it was worth discussing careers issues with them. As B2 pointed out: ‘I find the best people to talk to will be your parents as they know you the best and can advise accordingly’.
In the first cycle of this research quite a few of the working class students downgraded their perception of the quality of advice available from their parents. This shift was invariably very small (usually one point on the five point Likert scale). Nevertheless, it suggests that the workshop had made these students more critical of the advice they could expect from these sources. In this second cycle, there was again some change with 7 out of the 19 students attending all the sessions changing their perception of the quality of advice from their parents, or the extent to which they would talk to them. Amongst the students who had not participated in any, or very many, of the sessions there was, however, even less change. This indicates that the sessions appear to be having some effect on making the students more critical of the different sources of advice they could utilise.

The students altering their views were made up of those from middle class backgrounds upgrading their opinion and those from working class backgrounds downgrading their opinion. For example, B10’s father had a senior management position in an international company and this student (surprisingly) admitted that before the workshops he had never really thought of his father as a valuable source of information. In contrast, B15, a working class student, made the following comment about his parents:

Since I’ve been in university and done the workshops and things I’ve thought it’s not a good idea to talk to them. Not in an offensive way, but they’ve not been to university. I mean you guys in the university know more than they do.

It was not expected that the interventions would elicit such an extreme response. Another student had a similar reaction to going to lecturers for advice. He stated that we said that the lecturers experience was out-of-date. It was suggested that the students should be critical of the advice they receive – for example, a lecturer’s experience might be dated - and the students should not take anybody’s word as infallible. We will discuss the different stages students are at in their intellectual development and how this affects the way they respond to interventions in Chapter 6.

Family and friends
As already discussed, the students - particularly those who were communicative reflexives - liked to talk to people they were familiar with and who knew them well. For this reason friends could play a significant role in their decision-making. For example, B13 emphasised how important her friends were to her:
My friends are incredibly important to me. I don’t have that many, but the ones that I do have are INCREDIBLY close. I’ve known all my friends for like YEARS so I’ve pretty much grown up with them so they know me REALLY well.

B20 who is in her early twenties said she would take account of the experience of her friends:

Quite a few of my friends have done this course and are near the end of it now so I’ve got them to talk to and see where they go. My best friend is very similar to me so if she goes into a job at the minute and hates it then it’ll probably be a good indicator that I’m not going to like it either.

However, many of the students admitted that they did not tend to have in-depth conversations with their friends about careers issues. As B6 said, he talked to friends, ‘but not in depth’. Likewise, B21 commented: ‘It’s not the sort of thing [careers] I’d talk to my friends about. If I’d gone for an interview I might mention it, but we wouldn’t discuss it in great detail sort of thing’. What the students in this study tended to do was use their friends as a ‘sounding board’ for ideas - and like their parents - as a source of emotional support. Amongst those students who were more inclined to be autonomous reflexives there was, however, a feeling that their values were beginning to diverge from some of their friends who had not gone to university. As A4 pointed out: ‘To be honest my mates are stuck in dead-end jobs’. B11 also said his friend were not as ambitious as him: ‘They’re not pushing to get in big companies. They’re happy in local jobs just doing their own thing’. There were, nevertheless, exceptions to this. For example, B17’s friends had already been to university. As such, he thought they were ‘a good source’ of information. Interestingly C2, a computing student, talks to friends, who have also been to university, but over the internet:

It’s people who have like degrees and that. And some are in that sort of business [computing] now. I’ve got a few friends who finished university last year and they’re doing software now and one of them is struggling to get work at the minute. So I talked to him a bit, we had a chat about things. The guy in Newcastle found a job pretty easy you know, but the guys down south, a few of them are struggling to get work. I probably speak to my friends over the internet like more than the friends that I see a couple of times a week. When I see them we’re always out and we don’t actually talk properly, but when I’m with them [on the internet] you’re just sat there talking.
Family members such as siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents were also seen by some students as important, particularly if they were graduates and/or in professional or managerial jobs. The Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study found that many students from working class backgrounds talked to family members who were in more middle class occupations. These interviews, however, revealed that there were factors restricting the extent to which they would do this. A number of students, for instance, recognised that they had relatives who were in ‘good jobs’ and were therefore worth speaking to, but as one student said, ‘They’re not the ones you speak to regularly, it’s just Christmas, it’s the only time you see them really’. Other students such as B16 said they simply did not see or speak to their relatives very much. This included A3, who despite studying for an accountancy degree, had never talked to her grandmother (who was an accountant) about careers issues. She said: ‘I don’t see her that often to be honest. It’s just Christmasses and birthdays, anything that’s going’. She also said that at these types of events it was difficult to have in-depth discussions. Other students also talked about how it was difficult to talk to family members about issues such as careers. For example, A2’s brother is an accountant but:

He’s not a man of many words, you know what I mean? I want him to tell me things, but I need to ask him the right questions. And I don’t know what sort of questions to ask him really.

Some students only valued careers information in subject specific terms. For example, B18 said he would not talk to his friends about careers issues because ‘they do different subjects to me’. Likewise, C5 said he would not talk to his relatives due to the fact that ‘they don’t know anything about IT [Information Technology] so they wouldn’t be able to gauge what I needed to do like’. C2 also commented on his reluctance to discuss careers with members of his family because, ‘Nobody in the family has anything to do with computers’.

In the first questionnaire the students were asked to rate the quality of advice available from family members other than their parents (i.e. siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc.) and also their friends. The students were positive about the quality of advice they could obtain from family members with half the students rating the advice as ‘very good’ or ‘good’ and over 40 per cent as ‘fair’. In respect of friends the students were also fairly positive with over half the students rating the quality of advice as ‘good’ and over one-third as ‘fair’.

More than half the students attending the sessions downgraded their perception of the quality of the advice available from their friends. A similar pattern emerged in respect of how they perceived the quality of advice from family members. They also reduced the likelihood
that they would access these sources of advice in the career decision-making process. A much lower proportion of students who did not attend the sessions (about one-third) altered their opinion of the quality of the advice from family and friends and the extent to which they would utilise such sources. This suggests that the sessions did impact upon the views of the students, making them more sceptical about utilising such sources.

In the first cycle of this action research project it was the working class students who had downgraded their perception of the quality of advice available from their friends (although the changes were very small: generally one point on a five point Likert scale). In this second cycle there were no patterns in relation to social class in respect of friends (or family). Interestingly, however, male students appeared much more likely to shift their opinions about family and friends than female students. Such gender differences did not, however, appear in relation to attitudes towards careers advisers, lecturers or parents.

Documents
In the Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study the students preferred to rely on their own experiences and a network of people they knew and respected (e.g. parents, friends, lecturers and careers advisers), rather than information from documentary sources such as careers leaflets, books, newspapers, television, radio and the internet. This study reinforces this view. In the first questionnaire the students generally scored documentary sources of information much lower than people-centred sources. The only exception to this was the internet which every student identified as something they would make extensive use of when making career decisions. This popularity emanated from the fact that the students were familiar with the internet and it was regarded as very easy to use. Typical comments were: ‘It’s just so easy’ (B3); ‘It’s just like at your finger tips’ (B22); and ‘I can find my way around it’ (B2). This positive attitude towards the internet was reinforced by the university’s careers service which ran a session where students used the Prospects website. As B2 commented:

The website was really useful. It came up with loads of jobs. We found out loads of information from that on what jobs we could do with our subject. We looked at what your degree could lead to and that was really good.

21 It is often assumed that documents refer to written texts but the term is more generic than this. As the Oxford English Dictionary states documents are ‘a piece of written, printed, or electronic matter that provides information ... in written, photographic or other form’ (OED, 2006, p. 421).
A comparison of the first and second questionnaire did reveal that half the students would increase their use of books, careers leaflets, newspapers and professional journals in the career decision-making process. There was not, however, significant differences between the intervention group and the comparison group of students. This appears to be because it was mainly their general experience of university life that shifted their perspective. The fact that the students were more likely to utilise books, newspapers and professional journals seemed to arise because the students were increasingly using such sources as part of their course. For example, B17 said he would use books because he now ‘knows the library system’; whilst A3 talked about how she had become aware of the importance of professional journals and felt she was ‘going to be using journals a lot more’.

Some of the students also indicated they were being encouraged to read newspapers on their courses and this made them consider this medium as a source of information about possible career opportunities. However, the students did not always read quality newspapers. For example, when A5 was asked which newspaper she was reading she said, ‘Just the normal one, *The Sun* one’. Also a number of students said they would restrict their reading to local newspapers because they were not interested in moving away from their local area for jobs. There are two issues here. First, local jobs will appear in national newspapers. Second, the students tended to see newspapers as a source of jobs rather than a place where general information about careers and the graduate labour market could be obtained. Similarly, students did not consider television and the radio as a source of information about careers. Interestingly, the students said that they would be unlikely to watch programmes relating to their courses or intended career. For example, an accounting student (A3) was asked whether she would watch a documentary on accountants and she said:

> I don’t know (laughs). I don’t think I would find it interesting. Maybe it’s because I’m not working as an accountant. Maybe when I’m actually there doing it I would. You know when I know what’s what.

**Courses**

Because many of the students are what Tinsley *et al.* (2002) refer to as ‘dependent’ decision-makers they are waiting for insights about possible careers to come from their courses rather than actively seeking information for themselves. A1 for instance stated that he would be ‘learning about possible jobs all of the way through my time at university’. Likewise, A2 made the following comment:
I’m probably going to wait and see what paths open up for me along the way. All I know is before I came to uni I was just on my own, on benefits with [names her child] and I know I want to go out there and earn good money to support her and everything. So having a degree helps and maybe along the way I’ll be able to find what I’m looking for.

Indeed, some of the students indicated that they were already learning about careers through their courses. For example, C5 said:

It’s kind of altered a bit now that I’ve started modules. I’ve started to see the opportunities that are available, it’s beginning to shift. For one example, the Business Systems Organisation module – I had no idea that line of work existed really, you know.

**KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF CAREER DECISION-MAKING**

According to Leach and Zepke (2005), ‘Poor information and knowledge seem to be recurrent factors in poor decision-making’ (p. 26). In Chapter 3 we have already identified how students can have ‘dysfunctional beliefs’ (Gati and Saka, 2001) or what Bowman et al. (2005) refer to as ‘problematic assumptions’ about careers issues. As we will see below the students can also exhibit gaps in their knowledge about career decision-making and the nature of the graduate labour market. The following examples provide an indication of the nature of these gaps and ‘problematic assumptions’:

1. As discussed above some students did not feel it was necessary to consult national newspapers if they were only going to apply for jobs in their local area. For example, A6 said he was going to use local newspapers rather than national newspapers because ‘the jobs are not usually from where I’m from’.

2. Again, as discussed above, some students felt it was only appropriate to talk to people who were familiar with the subject they were studying. They were not aware that generic information could be of any value to them. This extended to their view of careers advisers, with some students arguing that it was not worth visiting them because they would not have subject-specific knowledge.
3. Students had misconceptions about the nature of the university’s careers service, usually based on their previous experience at school and college. For example, B17 said, ‘Careers advisers push you in one direction’. A1 also had misconception about the role of the university careers service: ‘I don’t see careers helping me get a job. I see careers helping me make a decision about what I want to do’. In contrast, A2 thought that the university careers service would only be of help once you knew what you wanted to do: ‘I just assume that careers advisers are going to be for when you know what you want to do and they’ll then put you in touch with the right people to apply for a job’.

4. Students were not always aware of the range of career opportunities available to them. As Pool and Sewell (2007) citing Graduate Prospects point out two-thirds of graduate jobs do not specify a particular degree subject. Many students do not, however, appear to know this. For example, A1 felt that now that he was on an accountancy degree this was inevitably his career destination:

I do believe that once we have made a few decisions, the rest of it like has to follow-on unless you make a BIG change. So I’ve started on the road to accountancy sort of thing and I’ll see it through.

5. A number of students regarded the Job Centre rather than Prospects or Edge Hill’s Careers Centre as a good source of jobs and advice. This was because they, or members of their family, had used the Job Centre to obtain employment in the past.

As would be expected from first year students they all revealed gaps in their knowledge and misconceptions about careers issues. This was apparent across the sample, although it was more prevalent amongst those students who had not attended the sessions. For example, B4 who had only attended one of the workshops and had left the session run by the university’s careers service early, had not (unsurprising) heard of Prospects. A1 was aware of the need to obtain experience, but did not regard his job in a bar as being relevant to a career in accountancy. However, as well as developing skills such as communication and working in a team, the bar work involved tasks relevant to accounting such as balancing the cash till and carrying out stock checks. A1 erroneously assumed that he would have to work in an accountancy firm to develop his skills and obtain relevant experience.

Some of the students studying accountancy and computing were under the misapprehension that their degree subject would ensure they obtained a job on graduation.
For example, C4 regarded his computing systems and software degree as guaranteeing him a job. A3 also thought she would definitely obtain a job: ‘I think with accountancy you’re guaranteed a job at the end kind of thing’.

Even through the level of knowledge and understanding of issues relating to careers was generally lower amongst students who had not attended the sessions, they can obviously still pick up information from other sources. For example, A3 said she had found out about Prospects from a class exercise: ‘I didn’t know about it before to be honest, but in a presentation we had to do in class we had to actually use that website’. A1 had changed from intending to apply for jobs after graduation to his second year because of the influence of his PDP tutor; whilst B7 was aware from school and college that he could develop relevant skills and experience in his job at McDonalds. He said: ‘I’ve been told by one of my tutors at sixth form – because she worked at McDonalds – that the training is really good and it’s valued by organisations’.

**APPROACHES TO DECISION-MAKING**

The students in this study indicated that for career decision-making they would be heavily reliant on their gut instinct (i.e. their intuition). This belief in the efficacy of their intuition was identified in both the first and second cycles of this research. It has also been recognised in other research on student decision-making (e.g. Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008; Greenbank, 2008).

The use of intuition can of course be an effective way of making decisions (Gladwell, 2005). It can also be argued that there is an intuitive element to all decisions because ‘bounded rationality’\(^\text{22}\) means that we can never be completely rational in our decision-making. Yet the evidence suggests that where intuition is used biases relating to the effective recall of information and the influence of emotion can adversely influence the efficacy of decision-making (Bazerman and Moore, 2009). The evidence also suggests that intuition is most effectively applied by those drawing upon extensive experience (Henry, 2001). The students are, however, inexperienced decision-makers (at least in terms of careers).

\(^{22}\text{We are bounded by the fact that we can never collect all the information available, and even if we could, we would not have the cognitive capacity to effectively process all this information (see Simon, 1955, 1957, 1982).}\)
In the workshop and lecture both the advantages and disadvantages of intuition were discussed. However, given that in the first cycle of this project almost all the students continued to be over-confident in their ability to make effective decisions using their intuition, an emphasis was placed on the potential for biases adversely affecting decision-making. Also, research findings suggesting that experienced decision-makers are better placed to make use of their intuition than inexperienced decision-makers were emphasised. Despite this, the vast majority of students continued to have very positive attitudes towards the use of intuition. For example A3 said, ‘I can’t think of where I have used my intuition and it hasn’t worked’. Similarly, C5 made the following comment:

I really trust my gut instinct. I think intuition is very valuable and I think it’s very accurate as well a lot of the time. So I think it’s definitely worth paying attention to intuition.

A5 also thought intuition was very important: ‘I’ve always gone off instinct. I’m just that type of person. If I feel like I should do something I just DO it’. She said this was the main reason she chose to do an accountancy degree.

Indeed, many of the students believed that they were generally very effective decision-makers who did not need any help with improving the way they made decisions. This attitude will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter.

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CLASS

Miller and Miller (2005) contend that the collection of information is a key element in the decision-making process. The rigorous and systematic collection of information is central to a rational approach to decision-making (Law and Watts, 2003). There is, however, some (limited) evidence to suggest that people from working class backgrounds value intuitive decision-making based on the informal collection of ‘hot’ information from people they know, rather than rational forms of decision-making which make use of more formal ‘cold’ information from experts and documentary sources (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Skeggs, 2004; Greenbank, 2006). In my study of young people from working class backgrounds starting-up in business I suggest that they prefer ‘hot’ information because they are not used to working with ‘cold’ information, particularly in a written format (Greenbank, 2006). However, in this study the university students from working class backgrounds are obviously familiar with such forms of information, so there is no reason why they should differ from students from
middle class backgrounds. This is supported by the findings of this study where no obvious differences were identified between the approaches adopted by students from different social backgrounds. In fact very few students appear to adopt a comprehensive/rational approach when they are making decisions. As discussed above, the students generally tend to by-pass conscious analysis by adopting more intuitive forms of decision-making which rely on the unconscious synthesis and analysis of information (see Adair, 1985). The problem is that because the students do not have experience of the graduate labour market and have generally not acquired much information from other sources, their intuition tends to be based on limited knowledge and their instinct (which of course could be misleading).

Many of the students also adopt a dependent style of decision-making which means they are reliant on others to help them make decisions. The students live within a complex set of relationships made up of parents, relatives, friends and professionals (i.e. teachers, lecturers and careers advisers). These relationships or ‘networks’ represent forms of social capital that may be utilised in the career decision-making process. Ferlander (2004) contends that it is the quality of the ‘resources’ that networks provide access to that is important. In this respect, it is argued that working class students are likely to have ‘inferior’ levels of social capital (Blasko, 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Thomas and Jones, 2007). For example, Furlong and Cartmel (2005) contend that ‘those from poorer families may lack the contacts that can provide information about graduate job opportunities’ (p. 23).

Yet, as discussed in the previous chapter, there may be ambiguity in the students’ social class because separation, divorce and re-partnering amongst their parents may mean there are different class influences on students. Also, in this research a student’s social class was determined according to the occupation of the highest earning parent, step-parent or guardian. Therefore, whilst the highest earner may have an occupation that is categorised as working class, their partner could have a lower paid but higher status job. There is also the influence of other relatives and friends. In the Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study it was found that students were being influenced by siblings who were socially upwardly mobile and aunts, uncles, grandparents, family friends, etc., who were in more middle class jobs than their parents. Similar influences were in evidence in this study For example, C1 - who comes from a working class background - was able to obtain useful advice from his girlfriend’s father who is a retired head teacher.

As discussed above, the availability of high quality networks does not mean students will utilise them; or if they do, they will make effective use of the information they are provided with. Research I carried out into how foundation degree students had made their decision to
study for this particular qualification found that students who came from a family background which should have meant they had a very good understanding of the higher education system did not, in practice, demonstrate that this was the case (Greenbank, 2008, 2009). It cannot, therefore, be assumed that students from middle class backgrounds - or with access to high quality information through their networks - will always have superior knowledge, or will make better decisions. This was also the case in this study where there did not appear to be any relationship between how sophisticated the students were about careers issues and their social class.

In addition, all the students - regardless of their social background - have access to professional advice (although students may be more or less inclined to use these resources and this may be affected by their social background). There may also be chance encounters which prove to be serendipitous - again it can be argued that those from middle class backgrounds have a higher probability of encountering advantageous situations. However, A1 (from a working class background) described how his knowledge of the need to develop his employability came from the influence of two of his teachers (one at his high school and the other at the college he subsequently went to). He admitted that his views were heavily influenced by them:

My geography teacher in high school asked us: ‘what do you think employers are looking for?’ And we spent a couple of lessons talking about it. And the same again with my personal tutor in college for the two years was always saying you’re never going to get a job just because of your qualifications.

Even if students from middle class backgrounds have access to quality information it does not mean they will take notice of it. As the Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study found some students value their independence and do not want to consult their parents. Such students may be ‘autonomous reflexives’ (discussed in the previous chapter), which means they will tend to rely on their own internal deliberations rather than seek the advice of others when making decisions. In this study B18 exhibited many of the characteristics of an autonomous reflexive in that he did not look for the approval of his family and as such was more self-reliant and confident in what he wanted to do than many of the other students. He said he did not consult his parents or other people very much because:

They can sway you, you know what I mean, in anything. See like parents, they’re always over cautious, you know what I mean? Like I’m cautious, but I’m not THAT

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cautious. Sometimes you've got to think about yourself and like just do what you think's right.

The effectiveness of the autonomous reflexives decision-making will be dependent, not only upon the information they have at their disposal, but also their ability to process and critically evaluate information whilst taking into account their strengths, weakness and values. As Archer (2007) points out autonomous reflexives may not always make optimal decisions because they may lack knowledge and understanding of themselves and the environment they are operating within.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This chapter has identified the complex range (and combination) of sources of information utilised by students in their decision-making. It has also shown that many students, despite their lack of experience in career decision-making rely heavily on their intuition, and tend to approach people they know for advice rather than those who have expertise. Moreover, this study indicates that there is no simple relationship between social class and the approaches students' intend to adopt in their career decision-making and planning. There is, however, some indication that the sessions are making the students more critical of different sources of information. Nevertheless, there remains a reluctance to be more critical of their use of intuition.

This chapter has generally discussed what the students intend to do rather than what they have actually done. In the next stage of this research (when the students are in their final year of study) it will be interesting to see what sources of information they have actually used and whether they are still very reliant on intuitive forms of decision-making. This chapter has also shown that many of the students have significant gaps in their knowledge and misconceptions about the graduate labour market and career decision-making and planning. Again, it will be interesting to see whether or not these students have increased their knowledge and understanding of such issues by the time they reach their final year of study.
CHAPTER 5

CAREER PREPARATION

INTRODUCTION

According to Glover (2002) the main reason students go to university is to improve their employability. As such, students should be motivated to engage with issues relating to career preparation. In the sessions conducted with the students they were introduced (through exercises, case studies and lectures) to different ways of developing their employability. This chapter will look at the response of the students to two aspects of this: engaging in extra-curricular activities and utilising their term-time employment to develop knowledge and skills relevant to their future careers. First, however, the extent to which students are willing to operate as ‘players’ is considered.

PLAYERS OR PURISTS?

Brown and Hesketh (2004) identify two types of undergraduate: the ‘player’ and the ‘purist’. These can be conceptualised as extreme types along a continuum, with undergraduates generally leaning towards one or the other, rather than being able to be unequivocally classified as a player or a purist. Both players and purists recognise the competitive nature of the graduate labour market and are aware of the type of attributes and experience graduate employers are seeking in successful job applicants. Players will engage in extra-curricular and other activities in order to enhance their employability. In contrast, purists believe they should simply be themselves. According to Brown and Hesketh (2004) purists present the ‘authentic self’ to employers, whilst players present the ‘competent/packaged self’ to employers.

In the interviews the students were asked about the extent to which they were willing to operate as ‘players’. Only 9 out of 34 the students interviewed identified themselves as players. C4, for example, justified operating as a player on the basis that this ‘is the way of the world’. In contrast, nearly half the students (16 out of 34) were more inclined to be purists. However, these students were purists in the sense that they were morally opposed to packaging themselves in a way that was not authentic, rather than because they thought
this was the most effective way to present themselves to graduate employers. These students felt that operating as a player was unethical. For example, B5 believed that engaging in activities in order to enhance your CV ‘was like lying on your CV’. Similarly, B2 made the following comment: ‘I'd feel uncomfortable making myself look good for others. It’s like I would be putting someone else out of a job who really wants it and me TAKING it off them’.

There were also a further nine students who had a predisposition towards being players, but who were not prepared to engage in the type of activities required without reservations or some degree of compromise. Tomlinson (2007) also found that some students in their study were apprehensive about trying to obtain a positional advantage in the graduate labour market because they did not want to make a substantial ‘personal and emotional investment in the management of their employability’ (p. 299). Tomlinson (2007) argues that this is because many of them did not feel that they possessed ‘sufficient levels of social, cultural and personal capital ... to access, and succeed in, elite and tough-entry jobs’ (p. 299). Similar sentiments were expressed by some students in this study. However, they were more inclined to stress that they would not engage in something just to enhance their CV: it would have to be something they felt passionately about or would enjoy doing. A1, for instance, said he would engage in activities to enhance his CV but ‘I wouldn’t do anything I wouldn’t enjoy. If I wouldn’t enjoy it, then I wouldn’t do it’. Similarly, B10 would only participate in charity work he believed was worthwhile: ‘It would have to be something I felt about. I just couldn’t do it to put on my CV’.

Thomas and Jones (2007) argue that non-traditional students are more likely to have a purist orientation. However, analysing the characteristics of this sample in terms of their class background did not reveal any relationship between class and the students’ purist/player orientation. Neither did there appear to be any patterns in terms of gender or age. The students who tended to be more future-orientated, ambitious and rational did, however, demonstrate a greater propensity towards operating as players. There did, nevertheless, appear to be factors that were likely to act as barriers against them adopting this form of behaviour. These will be considered below in the discussion of how the students responded to the idea that they should consider engaging in extra-curricular activities and particular types of part-time employment to enhance their career prospects.
EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

The research suggests that student involvement in extra-curricular activities has a positive effect on employment outcomes (Blasko, 2002; Tchibozo, 2007; Adnett and Slack, 2007). According to Blasko (2002), ‘[E]ven a couple of hours weekly involvement in extra-curricular activities can result ceteris paribus in a significant increase of the quality of the job held 3-4 years after graduation’ (p. 49). Despite this, the Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study found that the majority of students made little attempt to improve their employability by engaging in relevant extra-curricular activities. Indeed, most of the students in the Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) research had not engaged in sporting and other non-remunerated activities since leaving school. This finding is supported by this study, with the vast majority of students admitting that they did not engage in extra-curricular activities.

It has been suggested that because working class students are busy combining their studies with term-time employment they have less opportunity to engage in non-paid extra-curricular activities (Pitcher and Purcell, 1998; Hatcher, 1998; CHERI, 2002; Brennan and Shah, 2002; Morey et al., 2003; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Humphrey, 2006). For example, Brennan and Shah (2002) found that students whose parents are in managerial/professional occupations were more likely to engage in extra-curricular activities, and for longer period of time, than students whose parents are in clerical/manual jobs. However, a closer examination of the statistics indicates that differences between these two groups of student are not substantial. Furthermore, in this study, there did not seem to be any relationship between social class and the extent to which students were engaged in extra-curricular activities.

When the students were interviewed three or four months into the course the majority of them articulated a desire to increase their engagement with extra-curricular activities. This was particularly the case amongst the students who had attended the sessions, with four-fifths of these students indicating on the questionnaire that they would ‘probably’ or ‘definitely’ engage in more extra-curricular activities compared with two-thirds who had not attended any or very many of the sessions. Surprisingly the ‘players’ did not demonstrate a greater inclination to engage in such activities. Furthermore, no patterns were identified in terms of gender, age or social class.

Of the students indicating they ‘probably’ or ‘definitely’ would engage in extra-curricular activities the vast majority (84 per cent) said they would ‘probably’ try to engage in more extra-curricular activities. Therefore, whilst the intention was there, most students indicated
that there were factors militating against putting this into practice, which meant they could not be certain that they would engage in extra-curricular activities. In the interviews a variety of factors were identified as important and these are discussed below.

**Time**
A number of students indicated that they would find it difficult to engage in extra-curricular activities because of the time they spent studying and working in their term-time jobs. A number of students claimed to lack the time to engage in extra-curricular activities because they were finding the transition into university life difficult and they needed all the time available to them to study. However, Blasko (2002) argues that the evidence suggests that just a couple of hours weekly involvement in extra-curricular activities can make a significant difference to the employability of students. It could, therefore, be argued that all students should be able to find some time to engage in such activities.

In Robotham’s (2009) study the students claimed that working part-time had a significant impact on their ability to engage in leisure activities. Again, it can be argued that all students should be able to find a couple of hours a week to engage in extra-curricular activities. Moreover, Greenbank *et al.* (2009) found that students sometimes use their term-time jobs as an excuse for failing to participate in activities they regard as time consuming or difficult to participate in because they have to travel from home to the university. The Greenbank *et al.* (2009) study refers to ‘takeaway students’ who like to obtain any information they need from the university and then ‘consume’ it at home. Takeaway students prefer to work from home and are reluctant to travel into university unless it is absolutely necessary. Approaches such as this will inevitably have a negative impact on the students’ propensity to engage in extra-curricular (and other) activities run through the university.

**Lack of knowledge**
The students said they lacked knowledge about the type of extra-curricular activities employers are looking for and how to go about engaging in such activities. The latter factor appeared to be the more significant issue for students. B1 for example said he had no idea where to look: ‘I mean I’ve looked around, I’ve looked on the internet, but it’s HARD to try and find them. I can’t find where they are. If there is a list I’ve no idea where it is’. Similarly, B3 said ‘I want to do stuff like the Duke of Edinburgh award, but I don’t know how to, stuff along those lines anyway. It’s just finding out what’s available’. B15 blamed his lack of knowledge on being a ‘travel-in’ student: ‘It’s alright saying the Student Union might organise this and that but if you don’t go to the Student Union, if you don’t live on campus and you’re not here all the time sometimes you miss out on things don’t you’. However,
other students seem to be aware of the opportunities advertised on the university careers website and on notice boards around the university, including travel-in students. It may therefore have more to do with a lack of motivation and initiative than a lack of information.

Confidence
A number of students admitted they lacked the confidence to approach people or organisations about engaging in extra-curricular activities. For example, B21 admitted she had received e-mails about such activities, but she found them 'too daunting' to respond to. She said: ‘I've thought about it, I don't know, it's just doing it’. In the Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study a similar issue emerged when some students admitted to being intimidated by the location and set-up of the university careers service and the fact that they were not familiar with the careers staff.

PART-TIME JOBS
At the time they were interviewed just over 60 per cent of the students (21 out of 34) had term-time jobs. This figure is broadly in line with figures from other studies, although the percentage of students in part-time work does appear to differ quite significantly between studies (see Robotham, 2009, Table 1, p. 326 for a review). The students in this study were in the initial few months of their first year and a number of them said that they were seeking term-time work. Therefore, the proportion of these students in term-time jobs should rise.

In this study the vast majority of students (from both working class and middle class backgrounds) indicated they had part-time jobs during term-time because of their need for money. However, they qualified this by saying that working enabled them to afford a particular lifestyle, e.g. owning a car, going out and being able to afford a holiday abroad each year (see Hakim, 1998; Neil et al., 2004; Sharpe, 2009; Robotham, 2009 for similar comments).

Research suggests that undergraduates tend to obtain part-time jobs in service sector occupations (Broadbridge and Swanson, 2006). This was the case in this study (and in the Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008 study) with students typically employed as shop assistants, bar workers and waiters/waitresses. The work, therefore, tends to be routine/semi-skilled in nature. However, like other studies (e.g. Blake et al., 2009; Winkler, 2009; Robotham, 2009), this research found that some students were aware they were developing generic skills that employers valued. Yet, as previously discussed, there were other students who were not
aware of the skills they were developing in their part-time jobs. It could also be argued that students are being socialised into the world of work. However, it is not the world of graduate employment they are being exposed to and the students could conceivably be socialised in ways that are not conducive to the type of jobs they ultimately aspire to. There is widespread support in the literature for the importance potential employers attach to sandwich placements (Mason et al., 2009), but further research into graduate employer perceptions of the value of term-time work would be useful.

In the first cycle of this action research project there was quite a positive response to the suggestion that they should try and obtain employment more appropriate (in terms of skills developed and relevant sector experience) to their career aspirations. Nearly half the students stated they would definitely attempt to do this. However, about one-third of the students said they were unsure whether they would try and find a more appropriate job and several students stated they definitely would not because they were earning ‘good money’ in their current employment. In the first cycle of this research it was the students from middle class backgrounds who indicated a greater willingness to try and obtain a part-time job that was more relevant to their future careers. However, this pattern was not repeated in the second cycle of this research. There were also no discernable patterns in terms of social class, age or gender. Moreover, the results indicated that these students were generally less positive about obtaining a part-time job relevant to their career than engaging in relevant extra-curricular activities. Significantly, there was also no difference between the intervention and comparison group’s desire to obtain part-time employment relevant to their career.

In the interviews a number of barriers to engaging in relevant part-time work were provided. These are discussed below.

**No career goals**
A lack of career goals provided a major barrier to students obtaining relevant part-time work. The tendency of many students equate relevancy with sector specific experience restricted the students’ ability to take advantage of opportunities. It also meant that some students were unaware that they were in jobs that were already developing their skills.

**Lack of knowledge**
A number of students (mainly those from the comparison group) also said they were unsure of the type of skills and attributes employers were looking for in graduates. As B13 said, ‘I’ve no idea, I’ve ABSOLUTELY no clue what jobs would help me’.
Time
Students made similar comments about the lack of time to engage in term-time work as they
did about extra-curricular activities. Some of the students were conscious of the difficulties
involved in making the transition from school/college/work to university. A minority of
students also had to make the transition from living at home to living on campus. For
example, B13 said ‘now was not the time to think about part-time jobs’ as she was ‘busy
trying to settle myself in’.

Other priorities
Some students wanted to work. However, it was often more important to find employment
that fitted around their studies, than a job that could develop their skills. As B20 said:

    I’m not looking at jobs in terms of my future prospects at the minute. I’m looking at
    them to see if they’re going to be flexible because of university and other things
    that I want to do. So really it’s just a little bit of extra money and flexibility that I’m
    looking at.

Some students also said they would not give up a well paid part-time job, or one that was
convenient (in terms of distance or the hours they had to work), in order to take one that
would enhance their long-term career prospects.

CONCLUSION
In the last chapter we saw that the interventions had some success in making the students
more critical of different sources of information in the career decision-making process. Yet
there remained a good deal of resistance to questioning the efficacy of using intuition in
career decision-making. Similarly, the results reported in this chapter indicate that more
should be done to inform students of what graduate employers are looking for and how they
can go about engaging in useful extra-curricular activities and term-time jobs. There is,
however, also a sense that much of this information is already available to students. This
means it may be more important to consider how this information can be better
communicated to students.

The students’ attitudes and values are also important influences on their approach to career
preparation. For example, short-termism and a lack of confidence can inhibit a student’s
participation in extra-curricular activities or part-time employment. It can also be argued that
misplaced moral values mean that some students are disadvantaged in the graduate labour market because they think it is wrong to operate as a 'player'.
CHAPTER 6

THE INFLUENCE OF INTERVENTIONS ON THE STUDENTS’ CAREER DECISION-MAKING AND PLANNING

INTRODUCTION

According to Watts (2006) careers education should be activity based and involve what he refers to as ‘interactive teaching and learning methods’ (p. 19). He also argues that the involvement of academic staff and a curriculum presence has a positive effect on the influence of careers education. This is supported by Brennan and Shah (2003) who report that there is a feeling in the universities amongst student services that there should be more involvement in careers education from academic departments. Finally, McCash (2008) argues that careers education should be as intellectually demanding as other subjects.

The sessions introduced as part of this study (i.e. the reflective exercise, workshops, lecture and careers input) met the criteria for effective careers education outlined above. Apart from the lecture, the sessions were all interactive and activity based; three of the four sessions were delivered by academic staff; and by drawing upon decision-making theory and empirical studies the sessions were intellectually demanding. It is, however, not possible to reach clear conclusions about the effectiveness of individual interventions because the students are involved in a variety of different but inter-relating sessions. The students are also operating in an ‘open system’ (Teale et al., 2003) which means they are affected by influences outside the sessions being evaluated for this study, such as other classes, the media and interactions with various people (in different settings, i.e. the university, home, work, etc.).

In the interviews the students often referred to the fact that they could not remember particular sessions. This should not be surprising because as Gardner (2008) states:

people are deluged with images, words, noise, and pleas for their attention, most of which is ignored. In that information maelstrom how do we get people to stop, hear, and think about what you have to say? (p. 177)
The first year students in this study were in an information intensive environment as they negotiated the initial stages of university life which involved absorbing details about the university, different modules and also meeting new people. On top this, the students continued with their lives outside the university - which often included maintaining relationships with family and friends, working part-time, etc. As such, the career decision-making interventions that were initiated formed just one small part of their lives and it is therefore not surprising that they could not readily recall all the detail of the sessions they participated in.

It should also be appreciated that it may take time for sessions to have an influence on students. The significance of what the students have absorbed (perhaps unconsciously) may not become apparent until it is combined with other experiences or pieces of information. It is therefore important to note that what the students know, or how they know something, may only be tacit (Cohen, 2008). As O’Connor et al. (2008) point out individuals often remember particular things without knowing the source of this knowledge. Similarly, Stuart-Hamilton (1999, p. 162) argues that people may be able to recollect facts without knowing how they recall them. They may also remember how to do something - what Stuart-Hamilton (1995, p. 165) refers to as ‘procedural memory’ - without knowing why they do something in a certain way. Sharps and Martin (2002) also point out that information in a student’s long-term memory may need some form of prompt for it to be activated for use in decision-making.

As the preceding discussion identifies there are difficulties associated with trying to evaluate the efficacy of the various interventions. For analytical purposes each intervention will be considered in turn. This approach is of course ‘reductionist’ and does not represent the inter-related nature of the different activities or the fact that the students’ learning takes place in an open system (Flood, 2006). However, it provides a useful starting point for analysis. A more holistic approach, which attempts to take into account the relationship different interventions have on students and the range of factors influencing the way students respond to different interventions, will start to be developed in this chapter and will be further developed in the concluding chapter. It is, however, accepted that these conclusions will lead to what Michael Bassey refers to as ‘fuzzy generalisations’ (Bassey, 1998, 1999). This means that the conclusions will not be presented as certainties, but will be represented in a language that reflects the qualified nature of the findings. As such, the findings will ‘indicate’ the level of success relating to different interventions and will ‘suggest’ appropriate modifications for the next cycle of this action research project and the fact that these findings ‘may’ have wider applicability. Bassey (1998, p.1) contends that fuzzy generalisations have credibility if they provide both the ‘context’ to a study (for example the nature of the institution
and the students participating in the research) and clearly (and I would add honestly) set out the evidence to justify the conclusions arrived at.

This chapter will examine how the students responded to the different interventions we initiated. It will consider the reflective exercise, the workshop in which the case studies were analysed, the lecture on career decision-making and the workshop activities run by the Edge Hill's Careers Service. As discussed in the research methodology chapter these sessions were run through PDP. Therefore, the first section of this chapter will examine the students’ attitudes towards PDP

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

As discussed in the methodology chapter the sessions on career decision-making and planning were incorporated into PDP. One of the problems that emerged from the interviews was that the students had a negative attitude towards PDP. The majority of the students did not perceive the PDP to be (to use their words) a ‘proper subject’ and they regarded the PDP as ‘separate from the degree’. These students felt that they could not learn anything from PDP because it covered topics they had already covered at school and college, or tried to developed skills they had been able to acquire elsewhere - for example at work, school or college. B14, for instance, thought the PDP was the ‘same as at school’; whilst B11, who had spent two years between college and university in employment, felt it had little relevance to his needs:

I don’t see it as an advantage to ME whatsoever. The only thing I’ve taken from PDP is referencing – the Harvard referencing system – because I mean group projects I see it as very mickey mouse and very much high school sort of stuff … I just see it as a waste of time.

It was interesting to note, however, that the high performing students\(^\text{23}\) generally had a more positive attitude towards PDP. They were aware that it might cover topics that they already know, but as B13 said:

\(^{23}\) This is based on the marks students obtained in their first year modules.
Even if you know it there is always going to be something you can pick up. I know a lot of people complain about it but you just can’t say I’m not going, I know it all. If I can pick up one or two things from something then it’s useful.

Similarly, B12 believed PDP was useful. She said, ‘I think it’s been really good, I’ve learnt a lot ... I think some areas have been more helpful than others. Like the careers side of it like – I’ve learnt so much’. Therefore, attitudes to PDP varied. What is important, however, is that the students’ perceptions of PDP seemed to affect their attendance at the sessions we ran on career decision-making and planning and it also influenced their preconceptions about the value of these sessions. Yet, as we will see, some of the negative perceptions did change once the students engaged in the sessions on career decision-making and planning.

INFLUENCE OF THE SESSIONS

In this section the response of the students to the different sessions will be discussed. Figure 6.1 summarises the students’ evaluation of the different interventions.

Figure 6.1 Percentage of students responding positively to the different interventions
As can be seen, the case studies were the most popular with 85 per cent of the students responding positively to the two workshops that involved the examining the career decision-making and planning behaviour of different students. The lecture and careers input both received a positive response rate of 75 per cent. The least popular session was the reflection exercise which was positively rated by 64 per cent of the students.

These figures are taken from the second questionnaire completed by the business and management students. Account must therefore be taken of the fact that the students completing the second questionnaire were the ones who stayed to the end of the last session (run by Edge Hill’s Careers Service). The students who dropped-out are not included. These students may of course have been more critical of the sessions.

Reflection
The first exercise required the students to critically reflect on the decisions they made as they finished compulsory education at the age of sixteen. As Bazerman and Moore (2009) argue one of the problems with decision-making is that people tend to believe they are good decision-makers. Therefore, this first task, referred to as an ‘unfreezing’ process (see Lewin, 1999), aimed to make the students aware of some of the drawbacks in the way they have made decisions in the past.

The majority of students interviewed for this research said they found the reflection useful. However, from observation of the students’ participation in this exercise and from analysing the questionnaires and interview transcripts, it was clear that the reflection was the least successful of the sessions. We used the students’ decision-making at the age of sixteen, rather than their decision to come to Edge Hill University, because we did not want to generate doubts amongst the students about the decision they had just taken. However, this exercise did not have the unfreezing impact desired. This was because, for some students, it meant going back several years. There were, therefore, problems of recollection. A number of students also felt that their decision-making had developed substantially since that age. For example, some of students believed they were now far less dependent on their parents.

24 Edge Hill University is concerned about retention and we were mindful of doing something that might have an adverse effect on this.
Other criticisms of the exercise were arguably less valid. For example, B11 (an autonomous reflexive) felt the exercise was not useful to him because he reflects anyway:

I go into my own world and think back on what’s been said and what’s gone on and what’s done. And just speaking to people, sharing stories that’s I suppose subconscious reflection ... And you think I forgot about that or you think I should have done something this way ... It’s sort of a constant thing, it’s hard to switch off.

Archer (2007) refers to autonomous reflexives engaging in ‘lone inner dialogue’. However, Archer is not saying that autonomous reflexives never talk to others only that in the end they rely on themselves and their own ‘internal conversations’ to make decisions (Archer, 2007). As she points out, ‘[T]he autonomous subject considers nobody to be more authoritative than he himself [sic.] in matters relating to his [sic.] own life’ (Archer, 2007, p. 286). This does not, of course, mean that autonomous reflexives will not find reflective exercises useful because it can help them to be more reflective and they can learn from other people. In this latter respect, the reflection exercise involved group work which meant the students were exposed to the ideas of others – something that may be particularly useful to those students who rely very much on their own internal conversations. B19 was an autonomous reflexive in orientation like B11, but unlike him he found the reflective exercise useful because of the type of reasons outlined above:

For me I probably look back on decisions anyway because I’m always one for thinking did I make the right decision there kind of like? And a lot of time, I’m not pessimistic, but I always tend to think I could have done something better. So I think it was good to look back because it brings to the surface things I might have done differently and that might change how I do things now. And it was good to see how different people, like, did things and how others in the group saw things.

Similarly, B12 (also an autonomous reflexive) found the exercise useful: ‘It made you wonder what made you choose this, it makes you think sort of thing. It was good’.

There were students who resisted the idea of reflecting. For example, B21 did not think there was any value in reflecting on the past:

It doesn’t matter, it depends where you are now doesn’t it? That’s really important. It’s the future you’re not like thinking about what you’ve done – it doesn’t really affect it now.
Other students felt there was no value in reflecting on past decisions because they believed they were effective decision-makers. For example, B16 felt he could make ‘good’ decisions; B17 did not feel she needed help with decision-making; and B11 said:

It’s not something I would want to get from the university personally ... I think I’m quite capable of making decisions to be honest because of the past and working out why I made decisions and why they went wrong and constantly evaluating things.

Similarly, B19 felt that she could learn more from experience. She said, ‘Stuff like that tends to come with life experience’. She said that she had learnt from her mistakes. However, earlier in the interview she admitted that she did not reflect on her decisions, which would obviously limit the extent to which she would be able to learn from her experience.

However, other students, who were not necessarily predisposed to being reflective, appeared to value the exercise and the notion of examining the process of decision-making. For example, B15 said, ‘I can’t say I reflect on past decisions, but obviously when you’re forced to you do, so it works in that respect’. Similarly, B22 said, ‘It makes you think how you ACTUALLY did it so that you don’t make the same mistakes again’. B22 admitted that the reflection and case study exercises (along with the lecture) had changed her attitude:

At the beginning when we started I was like I know decision-making, but it’s useful to go over because I mean I didn’t know about some of the stuff later on like I didn’t know about imitative behaviour [i.e. the idea that students may unreflectively follow the example of their peers or people they know] and how that affected it. I didn’t know about that.

There were, therefore, a variety of responses to the reflective exercise. There did not, however, appear to be any patterns in terms of age, gender or social class to explain the response of students to the reflective exercise.

**Case studies**

Following their reflection, the students analysed (using the principle of analogical encoding), a number of case studies illustrating how other students had approached career decision-making and planning (see Appendix II). There was a much more positive response to the
case studies than the reflection exercise. A number of students said they found it useful to see how other students had engaged in careers decision-making and planning. For example, B12 made the following comment:

It shows how many different ways there are of going about things like this. The whole thing like, it just shows how many different things can influence you like whether it's your friends or role models or your parents. I don't know, it just makes you think there's a lot of things I could do that these people have done like speak to more people and so on.

Similar comments were made by other students:

They make me think a lot more about MY position. They make me think where I'm up to in decision-making and how I should go about it. It's like there's some good advice in some of them. (B19)

I think it's good to learn from what people have done before you. If you can look at other people's mistakes it stops you from having to go through it yourself. (B20)

It does actually help. It shows you what actually works, which research methods work and what you should actually look into before you start jobs and doing things. If somebody doesn't get a job because they didn't research it, it makes you want to research it because you don't like not want to get jobs. (B22)

They're useful because you can say okay looking at the decision they made and what type of person they are I'm going to do it that way because I'm like that. Or you can say yes okay that's the way NOT to do things. You're asking questions. You can ask questions yourself about what YOU should be doing. (B5)

The evidence suggests that the process of analogical encoding, which involves a deep analysis of a number of cases, should facilitate recall (Gentner et al., 2003). Similarly, Stuart-Hamilton (1999) argues that analysing something intensely for its deeper meaning should increase the likelihood that it is remembered. As Gardner (2008, p. 59) states:

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25 The process of reflection may of course have made the students more inclined to consider different approaches to decision-making. This may in turn have contributed to a positive attitude towards the case studies.
If you see something – anything – and don’t give it a second thought, there’s a good chance it will never encode in memory and will vanish from your consciousness as if it had never happened. But if you stop and think about it, you make the memory a little stronger, a little more lasting.

It was, however, evident from the interviews that the students were only able to recall one or two cases (even when they were prompted) and some could not remember any. As B3 said, ‘Certain ones stick in your memory’.

As discussed above, people only remember a small proportion of the information they come across in their daily lives. This is because our brains are cognitively limited which means we can only collect and process a certain amount of information. Scheiter et al. (2004) suggests that the use of multiple case studies may actually be detrimental to learning if students are unable to process all the information from the cases properly. Yet it should be appreciated that students may unconsciously absorb information which they may be able to use at a later date to help them make more effective decisions (see Schön, 1991; Henry, 2001; Gladwell, 2005 for examples of how people use unconsciously stored information to make decisions).

The students tended to remember cases they could relate to. As Gardner (2008) states, people focus on ‘[w]hatever confirms ... [their] existing thoughts and feelings’ (p. 143) Bazerman (2006, p. 40) refers to this as the ‘confirmation trap’ and argues that, ‘Individuals tend to seek confirmatory information for what they think is true and fail to search for disconfirmatory evidence’. This might be a reason why B17 only remembered the case study in which the student with a First Class Honours Degree failed to obtain a job (see ‘David’, in Appendix II). B17 said:

The one that got a First and didn’t get a job because he did nothing else stuck in my mind. I think that one did because I think that’s true. You can’t just go in with a First, I think you need something else. I think people should realise that early on really.

B15 could remember the same case study; and also the one where a student called Imran indicated he was going to become a fire-fighter on the basis of one person’s account of what it was like (see Appendix II). B15 said he could remember these cases because he felt he could easily replicate the behaviour they described:
I think it’s things I could potentially end up doing to be honest. If I wasn’t careful I could end up doing a career because someone said it was good. And then it would be quite easy to think yes a first class degree would get you where you need to be, but it’s not always the way is it?

Recall will also be helped if the students reflect upon the case studies. As Stuart-Hamilton (1999) points out if person thinks about their experience and the information they have acquired it is more likely to be stored in their long-term memory. For example, B2 said she had spent time thinking about the case studies: ‘I think about them. I think about what I want to do by putting myself in their shoes now. What do I want to do in year three, how far along in careers am I going to be in year three’. The problem is that most students do not seem to reflect on the cases once the sessions are over. As B17 states: ‘They do tend to be put to one side a bit because with everything else you do, you do them on the day and then you don’t really think about them after’.

Other students indicated a resistance to using the experience of others to shape their decision-making. For example B1 said he thought the case studies were interesting but, ‘the idea of doing something because somebody else is doing it is not something I would do’. Similarly, B21 said: ‘I don’t find it of use to be honest. Its other people’s lives really’. B21 also wanted more precise direction. She wanted the sessions to be:

more direct, more straightforward – I don’t know - what we ACTUALLY need to do
... We should be doing what we need to know – writing CVs, application forms.
Things that are actually needed in our lives to get a job.

This desire for more direction was evident amongst other students and as we will see also influences student responses to the lecture and careers input (see below).

Other students did not like reading case studies. For example, B8 said, ‘I don’t like reading and picking stuff out’. B6 did not feel the case studies would make him change his mind. He did not, for example, think that his more positive attitude towards careers advisers resulted from the case studies:

They wouldn’t make me go to see a careers adviser, I don’t think. I think the way it’s written down – it’s hard to explain – it’s not something that would motivate you to do it, you know, looking at what somebody else has done. It doesn’t really give any motivation to do that.
Other students said they found difficulty relating to written case studies. B6 for instance said he would find it easier if they were in a video format and B11 said he would prefer people to come and to talk to them. However, other students had no problem relating to the written case studies. For example, B3 said:

I like reading case studies, it's like an EXAMPLE, you know, of how someone's done it and how it's turned out for them. It puts like pictures to words for me so you can remember them.

Once again the response of students to the case studies varied tremendously and for a variety of reasons. Again, it was not possible to identify any patterns in terms of age, gender or social class.

**Lecture on career decision-making and planning**

A lecture was delivered to the students on the process of career decision-making covering topics such as decision-making traits, barriers to effective decision-making and the factors restricting effective career preparation. The lecture included a discussion of the results of a number of studies on graduate employment (e.g. Pitcher and Purcell, 1998; Blasko, 2002; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Purcell et al., 2007; Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008) and an examination of different theories related to decision-making such as rationality, imitative behaviour, intuition and the influence of judgemental biases (e.g. insensitivity to sample size, the confirmation trap and overconfidence).\(^{26}\)

The lecture was generally more popular amongst the students than the reflective exercise, but not as popular as the case studies. Some students found the lecture over-theoretical and not practical enough. Typical comments were.

I prefer practical stuff. I prefer just to get on with it rather than doing the theoretical stuff. (B10)

I'm not good with theory, I prefer the more practical. All this like quoting stuff and that like goes over my head. (B8)

\(^{26}\) For a review see Bazerman (2006, Table 2.2, pp. 39-40).
Theory is useful but we should do more practically based work. The theory is good, it does help you, but the more practical side is more helpful. So you know EXACTLY what to do. What to like find out, what not to find out and stuff. If it [PDP] was practical I think a lot more people would come as well. A lot of people say I’m not going, it’s boring. If it was more practical people would find it more interesting and it would help them out more. (B22)

This last student is indicating that she is looking for clear direction. She is also saying she wants more input on how to make decisions, but it is practical advice on where to look for information rather than a discussion of the factors influencing the process of decision-making that she wants. Again this reflects the desire for practical advice and direction and the dependent nature of some of the students.

Some students also commented on how they could not relate to empirical studies. For example, B8 said she was not interested in the fact that the studies were based on large samples: ‘That's what's important to them, not me’. B10 said he could not relate to empirical studies because, ‘I don’t know the studies’. He said he preferred to rely on what his lecturers told him: ‘If they say it you believe it. At least until somebody says something different. If they say something in the lecture you then kind of believe it’.

In contrast to B10, B13 said she liked the fact that evidence was provided. She said, ‘I don’t like people saying this is how it is because I say so’. Other students were less unequivocal. For example, B3 thought that both theory and practice were important, although he admitted to preferring seminars to lectures because they ‘give me something to engage in’. Similarly B6 appeared to be critical of the lecture with his comment that it, ‘Did not really give practical advice about what jobs are out there’. He also said, ‘A lot of this stuff was about decisions and how to make them and I think more like on how to actually DO stuff would be better’. However, B6 did not completely discount the topics covered in the lecture:

I think it is good because when you do make a decision it makes you think have you weighed up, have you looked at everything? But I think there was a bit too much of an over-emphasis on it.

Nevertheless, Figure 6.1 illustrates that three-quarters of the students responded positively to the lecture. As B17 said: ‘I think theory is useful because it gives you the background knowledge – a bit of theory is useful’. Like the response of students to the case studies, students were able to identify with certain theories or specific aspects of theory, particularly
when it helped them to understand their own behaviour. This is illustrated by B5 who made the following comment:

I found it quite useful because you talked about students making decisions and not actually carrying them out. And I was thinking I’m a little bit like that – I’ve done quite a lot of research but I’ve not actually done anything about it. It’s got me to analyse the way I make decisions and how I actually put them into practice.

Overall, there was, therefore, a positive response to the lecture. Again, no clear distinctions in terms of gender, age or social class seemed to emerge.

**Input from university careers service**

Not surprisingly, the students who indicated a preference for more practical approaches said they found the input from Edge Hill’s Careers Service useful. For example B10 said the session with the careers staff was ‘helpful’. Similarly, B18 said the session was ‘useful’: ‘It just makes you think. I wouldn’t have walked away from that lesson and thought oh my god that’s really opened my eyes, you know what I mean. But it was useful’. Positive comments were made by B22, but she had to leave the careers session early because of her part-time job. This demonstrates how outside pressure can impinge on the students, especially when they are expected to participate in sessions that fall outside ‘normal’ timetabled hours (this session extended beyond their normal class time by two hours).

Other issues arising from the sessions were:

1. A number of students found the session, which last four hours, overly long. However, it did involved four different components: a brief lecture on the need to engage in career planning and how the university careers service can help; a decision-making activity; a self-assessment exercise which aimed to find out what students wanted from work; and an exercise introducing students to the Prospects website.

2. A minority of students found the content uninspiring. Surprisingly, B8 who said she liked practical activities was negative about the input from the university’s careers service. She left early and in the interview she stated that this was because she found the session ‘boring’. However, it seems that peer pressure might have had an influence here because she said, ‘All my mates were going so I wasn’t going to stay on my own’. Tellingly she also commented: ‘I think I’ll be different when I grow up’. This lack of maturity was also evident in B21’s response. She did not find the self-assessment exercise useful and as a result she
took the opportunity to leave when a room change was involved and did not participate in the remainder of the session.

3. A number of students found the whole idea of planning for the future daunting. As B8 said, 'It's all planning for the future isn't it. It's scary isn't it?'. This was a slightly different perspective on the lack of future orientation discussed earlier in this report. Instead of students simply not considering the future because they were 'living for today', this student is indicating a fear of having to look to the future and therefore a desire to actively avoid such an orientation.

There were, therefore, different responses to the careers session. Overall, however, there was positive feedback from three-quarters of the students involved in this session, with students emphasising that they liked the practical nature of this session, particularly the component that dealt with the Prospects website. However, account must be taken of the fact that nearly half the students failed to either attend, or fully complete, this session (see Table 2.2). Account should also be taken of the fact that the students responded in various ways to different aspects of the session. For example, B13 knew what she wanted to do career wise and therefore did not find the self-assessment exercise useful. Also, because she knew about Prospects she did not find the exercise involving this useful. Yet the majority of students found the self-assessment and Prospects exercises very useful.

CONCLUSION

There are difficulties in evaluating the effectiveness of the sessions we introduced because their individual impact cannot be isolated. The students may also only be tacitly aware of their influence. Moreover, the influence of these sessions may take effect once they are combined with other experiences – which may be at some future date, possibly some years into the future. Nevertheless, this chapter demonstrates that the interventions have had some impact in changing student attitudes to career decision-making; and the use of multiple case studies in conjunction with the principle of analogical encoding seems to be particularly well received by students. It is, however, clear that there is significant diversity amongst the students in terms of how they react to the different interventions. Moreover, there do not appear to be any patterns, in terms of age, gender and social class, to the way students respond to the different interventions. Individual preferences, and where students are situated in terms of their intellectual development, appear to be more important factors. This will be considered in more depth in the concluding chapter.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

In recent years policy makers in higher education have emphasised the need for universities to pay attention to the ability of graduates to make an effective transition from education to work. This is reflected in concerns about the extent to which graduates are developing skills and attributes that employers require (Green et al., 2009). For example, employers have commented on what they perceive to be deficiencies in skills such as team working, communication, self-management and decision-making (Bennet, 2002; DBIS, 2009). There has also been unease about the disadvantages non-traditional students face in the labour market, with HEFCE highlighting the need to support these students in the transition from higher education to employment (HEFCE, 2003). More recently, however, policy makers have demonstrated more generalised concerns about the transition from university to employment that extend beyond the widening participation and skills agendas. Whilst the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS) still refers to the need for graduates to develop skills that are demanded by employers, they also state that students should be able to make ‘well-informed choices about what modules to study, how to enhance their employability, and how best to use the myriad opportunities that the modern university experience affords’ (DBIS, 2009, p. 73).

DBIS are emphasising the need to improve the information, advice and guidance that students receive. Whilst these are important, this study is placing more importance on helping students develop the attributes and dispositions that will enable them to engage effectively in career decision-making and planning.27 As such, this action research project is aiming to promote autonomy and proactivity in students, in terms of their career development. It is also

27 Green et al. (2009) argue that there is a lack of ‘conceptual clarity’ in the terms used to describe graduate attributes. In this report skills and attributes are used interchangeably. However, the word ‘disposition’ is Bourdieuan in its use and describes how a person’s underlying (and often tacitly known) values determine the way they behave (Bourdieu, 1979).
aiming to develop the students’ skills in critical thinking, decision-making and planning. These are the type of skills and dispositions that employers are often demanding (see Bennett, 2002; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; DBIS, 2009) and which also help the labour market operate more efficiently by facilitating the matching of supply and demand (OECD, 2004). In addition, the ability of graduates to be autonomous, proactive, critical, make effective decisions and plan will not only help them to make the transition from education to employment, but will also benefit them in others aspects of their lives.

This final chapter will begin by discussing the factors influencing the way students approach career decision-making and planning. It will then consider the implications for future stages in this action research project.

FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENT APPROACHES TO CAREER DECISION-MAKING

This research has shown that the way students approach career decision-making and planning derives from the complex interplay between a person’s values (which may be tacit) and the habituses they live and work within. These values relate to a person’s objectives, their moral standards and how they believe it is best to operate – what Rokeach (1973) refers to as their instrumental, ethical and competency values (for a summary see Greenbank, 2003). These values have developed over time and have been influenced by the various habituses (i.e. family, neighbourhood, educational, employment, etc.) that the students have occupied during their lifetimes. The study has identified how values such as aspiration levels; the extent to which a person is future orientated; approaches to decision-making (in terms of rationality, critical thinking and modes of reflexivity); and the willingness of individuals to operate as ‘players’, influences the way the students in this study approach career decision-making and planning. These differing values, combined with a student’s unique biography, leads to very different outcomes in terms of the way individuals approach career decision-making. This is reflected in the way that no clear relationship was found

2 All these are inter-related. As Moon (2008) argues the processes and ‘way of thinking’ associated with critical thinking are very similar to those of rational decision-making. She states that, ‘The central activity of critical thinking is the assessment of what might be called evidence, in order to make a judgement’ (p. 33). Similarly, Brownlee et al. (2009) contend that, ‘Critical thinking requires individuals to identify and evaluate multiple perspectives in an effort to make informed decisions in their personal and professional lives’ (p. 600). Rational decision-making/critical thinking also forms the basis for a planning orientation. As Spicer-Sadler Smith (2005) found students who adopt a rational decision-making approach are more likely to be proactive and focused in tackling issues that need dealing with.
between the interventions we introduced and variables such as age, gender and social class. As Croll (2008) citing the work of Beck (2002) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) argues we seem to be moving away from structural explanations of behaviour to more individualistic responses where ‘life patterns [can be seen] as an individual project [with] individualisation ... the key feature of modern society’ (p. 243-244). Likewise, Archer (2007) argues that we cannot expect people to respond similarly to situations they face, even when they appear to be ‘similarly situated in relation to them’ because how people respond ‘involves a dialectical interplay between their ‘concerns’ – as they reflexively define them – and their ‘contexts’ – as they reflexively respond to them’ (pp. 19-20).

This study was therefore unable to establish what Croll (2008) refers to as ‘grand’ structural theories to explain the behaviour of students. The study was, nevertheless, able to identify a number of important issues that appear to be influential to the way individual students reacted to the interventions we introduced. These will be discussed in terms of how they responded to the form the interventions took and the content of these interventions.

**Forms of intervention**

A major problem with the interventions (i.e. the reflection exercise, case studies, lecture and careers input) was that they were contained within the PDP module. Many of the students had a negative attitude towards PDP, mainly because of what they perceived to be a poor experience of similar initiatives in school and college; and also because they often felt that they did not need to develop their skills. This attitude was not, however, universal and interestingly it was the students who scored the lowest marks in their assignments and examinations who tended to be the severest critics of PDP. The students at an earlier stage in their intellectual development\(^\text{29}\) tended to viewed PDP in absolutist terms, which meant that because they felt they had covered the topics before there was no need to revisit them. In contrast, the students operating at a more advanced level of intellectual development felt that even if they had covered a subject matter before, there was always something new to learn. As B13 (already quoted in Chapter 6) stated ‘... there is always going to be something you can pick up... If I can pick up one or two things from something then it’s useful’.

\(^{29}\) This is based on the fact that they were obtaining higher marks. This of course could be criticised as a blunt (and possibly unreliable) measure of a student’s stage of intellectual development. Nevertheless, an examination of the assessment criteria used by lecturers for first year students in the Business School, followed by discussions with lecturers about how they marked, indicates that higher grades are often awarded if a student demonstrates the ability to explore different perspectives and adopt more analytical and critical approaches.
As discussed in Chapter 6, there are difficulties involved in evaluating the influence of the reflection exercise, case studies, lecture and careers input. It was nevertheless clear that there were significant variations in the response of students to the different types of intervention (for similar comments see Sadlo and Richardson, 2003). This arose because students had a predilection for particular approaches, which in turn seemed to be related to factors such as their preferred learning style and where they were in terms of their intellectual development. For example, students with a more theoretical orientation placed a higher value on the lecture input than those who preferred practical activities. Also, students who had not yet developed more sophisticated notions of knowledge acquisition involving the exploration of multiple realities, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (see Light and Cox, 2001; Palmer and Marra, 2004) struggled with the sessions involving reflection and the analysis of case studies because they were required to utilise several sources of information to arrive at their own conclusions. Students who are in the early stages of intellectual development often want answers and depend upon those in authority, such as their lecturers, to provide them with these. These students often have difficulty when they are asked to construct their own theories of how to act on the basis of different (and often conflicting) information. A2 for example was frustrated by what he regarded as advice that is contradictory:

I was always told qualifications were the thing. Now I’m told qualifications don’t mean a squit. As you go through school, high school what have you, you just get told different things.

This student was not of course told that qualifications have no worth, but when he was faced with different perspectives on the relative value of the various attributes employers are looking for in graduates he attempted to simplify it by looking for one particular quality he could focus upon in order to be successful in the graduate labour market. As Jenny Moon (2005) argues when learners encounter a situation where multiple realities exist (or seem to exist) they may regress to dualistic forms of thinking. Yet as we will see below, many students were beginning to develop more sophisticated models of knowledge which meant they accepted the complexity of situations and the existence of multiple realities. They were also beginning to adopt more critical perspectives on the different sources of information they encountered, which meant they were evaluating its reliability before making use of it. This, in part, reflects the positive response obtained from students in respect of the interventions, particularly the use of analogical encoding in conjunction with the case studies.
Content of the interventions

The study indicates that the students who engaged with the sessions often changed their attitude to career decision-making and planning. The extent to which changes took place differed (often quite significantly) and the nature of these changes also varied. This, however, is not surprising given that the students’ values, and therefore their perspectives, are often very different and act as a mediator between any interventions - and the output or learning - that results from these inputs (Román et al., 2008). The study did, nevertheless, demonstrate some patterns. For example, many of the students indicated that following the sessions they were now more likely to engage in extra-curricular activities. But there was also a sense that their intention may not transfer into action because they lacked initiative and a disposition towards proactivity. A number of students also said they would try and obtain part-time jobs that were relevant to their career aspirations. However, the students indicated less desire to engage in appropriate part-time work than extra-curricular activities. This tended to arise because the students were prioritising concerns about earning money and the convenience of having a job that they were able to fit around their studies rather than their future career prospects.

One area of intervention where there appeared to be a significant level of change was in the way many of the students started to critically evaluate different sources of information. There was, therefore, some indication that students engaging with the sessions were developing more sophisticated views of knowledge that recognised the existence of multiple perspectives and the desirability of critically evaluating the quality of different sources of information. As Brownlee et al. (2009) argue, ‘It appears that the first year can be a valuable time for promoting changes in thinking, particularly in relation to beliefs about learning and knowing (Chai et al. 2006; Harvey et al. 2006)’ (p. 600). From their study Brownlee et al., (2009) concluded that ‘knowledge and knowing need to be problematised earlier and continuously in courses’ (p. 611). This is what happened in this action research project and it meant that the students tended to downgrade their view of the quality of advice available from lecturers; in the case of family members their evaluation increased or decreased depending upon the sort of experience that individual members of their family possessed; but the biggest reassessment occurred with careers advisers, with many students increasing the value they placed on the information and advice they could obtain from Edge Hill's careers advisers.

It is not clear whether the changes in epistemological beliefs witnessed in relation to sources of information in career decision-making will transfer into other areas of the students’ lives.
This might be the case if Bailin et al. (1999), Saltmarsh and Saltmarsh (2008) and Moon (2008) are correct in assuming that critical thinking is an orientation or disposition that will be applied to the different situations that students face. It was, however, evident that the students were not (at least at this stage in their studies) always willing to transfer the conclusions they had reached into intentions. Whilst the students acknowledged that some sources of information were superior to others, this did not mean they would necessarily make use of these sources. The students maintained a preference for ‘hot’ sources of information from people they knew, even if better quality information was obtainable from elsewhere. This attitude was manifested very clearly in relation to the students’ willingness to make use of Edge Hill’s careers service. Despite acknowledging the quality of advice available from the university’s careers advisers many of the students said they would still not visit them because they preferred to talk to people they knew.

The sessions did not directly promote the idea that the students should have higher aspirations, be more future orientated, act rationally or operate as ‘players’. However, the sessions did provide examples of how students operating in these ways have been able to obtain graduate employment. Despite this, many of the students had quite low aspirations and were not very future orientated. The students also maintained a very positive view of the efficacy of more intuitive forms of decision-making. Moreover, a high proportion of the students indicated a desire to operate as ‘purists’ rather than ‘players’, which meant presenting their ‘authentic self’ to graduate employers, rather than behaving in a way that maximises their chance of success in the recruitment and selection process (Brown and Hesketh, 2004).

It can be argued that the reluctance of students to be more ambitious, future orientated, rational and operate as ‘players’ means they are disadvantaging themselves in the graduate labour market. As Tomlinson (2007) argues such students may not be able to ‘cash-in’ on their investment in higher education. Indeed, the students in Tomlinson’s study - which is based on an elite university - appeared to be far more instrumental in their approach to career decision-making and planning than the students in this study. Tomlinson (2007) found evidence in his research ‘of an attempt on the part of students to enhance their credentials in order to achieve a positional advantage in the labour market’ (p. 291). He goes on to conclude that the students in his study ‘viewed the *Curriculum Vitae* as an important tool for projecting narratives of individual competence, skills and potential’ (Tomlinson, 2007, p. 292).
FURTHER STAGES IN THIS RESEARCH

The analysis above indicates that there may be a case for encouraging the students at Edge Hill to be more aspirational, future orientated and proactive in their approach to careers. There also appears to be strong arguments for promoting rationality and the idea that the students should operate more like ‘players’ if they are going to compete effectively in the graduate labour market. Yet the approach adopted in this action research project has been to encourage the students to decide for themselves how to make career decisions, which means we cannot really object if they choose to rely on intuition and ‘hot’ sources of information and behave as purists. As Boud (2004) argues all we can do is provide students ‘with the personal resources to enable them to pursue their own goals’ (p. 62). However, through our interventions we inevitably influence the students and we have to make decisions about the extent to which we wish to influence (some would say manipulate) them. For example, when we were discussing the case studies I encouraged the students to consider the disadvantages with intuition and identified potential biases with this form of decision-making. Yet because I wanted the students to draw their own conclusions I did not present (at least very forcibly) my view that intuitive forms of decision-making were not particularly effective for inexperienced decision-makers (see Chapter 4). Kogan (2000), however, argues that we have a moral responsibility to utilise our knowledge and experience to influence our students. In the end, the students may not respond in the way we personally want them to - it may be, for example, that the students have ‘priorities other than work and employment’ (Kahn, 2009, p. 269), but as lecturers (and careers advisers) we should respect their views and also remain open to their ideas. In this respect, Barnett (1997) contends that our own understandings and values ‘have to continually be in the dock’ (p. 174).

In the next cycle of this research the case studies and lecture will therefore be updated to further encourage higher aspirations, a future orientation, proactivity, rationality and a ‘player’ orientation. Moreover, these ideas will be advanced by those facilitating these sessions, but within a learning environment that promotes the notion of multiple realities and an acceptance of the fact that people have different values.

The unfreezing exercise was the least successful session and this will be modified so that the students reflect on more recent decisions they have made and how the process they

30 It is worth making the point that I am not against intuitive forms of decision-making. In my research on small business owner-mangers I have promoted the use of intuition (see for example Greenbank, 2000).
engaged in might be flawed. Bazerman (2006) refers to the ‘insider-outsider’ distinction and suggests that decision-makers should be asked to consider how they have made decisions by imagining what somebody else (an outsider) would say about the process they have engaged in. This approach will be adopted in the next cycle of this research. It will also be useful to consider in more detail the consequences of making poor career decisions.

It is important that sufficient time is given to the process of unfreezing because the students need to be convinced that there are benefits to be gained from reflecting on their decision-making (Bazerman, 2006). Similarly, Gentner et al. (2004) contend that considerable time should be allocated to the process of analogical encoding if it is to be effective. There are, however, difficulties finding the space to carry out such activities, in what Mayes (2009, p. 15) refers to as a ‘content-laden curriculum’ - and it remains to be seen whether the Business School will continue to provide sufficient time for the students to engage in the activities that have been initiated in this research. As Brennan and Shah (2003) argue academic staff may not be supportive of such initiatives because they are seen as representing ‘government and managerial agendas, and not the concerns of students and staff’ (p. 38).

The students interviewed for this study will be re-interviewed in their final year (from February 2011 onwards). As Johnston (2003) states you cannot infer action from what people say they will do. Moreover, changes in the students’ values are likely to have taken place. It will, therefore, be interesting to see how the student’s values have altered and what the students have actually done in terms of preparing for the transition from education to work since they were last interviewed.

In the longer term the ideas developed in this study will be introduced to other departments within Edge Hill University. This will be achieved by delivering the type of sessions described in this study. The ideas presented in this report will also be disseminated through Edge Hill’s Careers Service and staff development activities for academic staff. It will be particularly interesting to see how the activities utilised in this action research project transfer into less vocationally orientated subject areas.

Finally, this study indicates that the students at Edge Hill appear to be entering higher education on the basis of very little research, particularly in relation to the longer-term career implications of the decisions they are making. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) would argue that careers evolve over time as people learn from different situations and circumstances and take advantage of the opportunities that are presented to them. However, students also
lock themselves into particular career trajectories due to the decisions they take at school and college and because they subsequently feel committed to these decisions. As Giddens (1991) argues people can make ‘fateful decisions’ which have a major influence on the future direction their lives take. It may therefore be worth considering implementing some of the ideas from this research into school and colleges so that students make better informed educational/career decisions.
# APPENDICES

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<td>National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC)</td>
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</tr>
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</table>
Appendix I

Questionnaire on attitudes to career decision-making

Could you please complete the following questionnaire as honestly as possible. If there are any questions you do not wish to answer, just leave them blank.

1. Name ...............................................................................................................

2. Sex (Please ring)      Male      Female

3. Date of birth ..............................................................

4. Degree programme .................................................................................

Part-time work

5. Do you currently have a part-time job?

   Yes  ☐  Go to Question’s 6(a) & (b)

   No    ☐  Go to Question 7
6. If yes,

(a) What type of work do you do? (Please provide as much detail as possible)
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(b) Give your reasons for working.
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Now go to Question 8
7. If no, give your reasons for not working

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**Extra-curricular activities**

8. List any extra-curricular activities (e.g. charity work, hobbies, sporting activities, etc.) you are currently involved in and the reasons for engaging in them.

If you are not engaged in any extra-curricular activities just write ‘none’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Reasons for engaging in this</th>
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</tbody>
</table>
Career decision-making and planning

9. Do you have any idea what you would like to be doing for a living in five years time?

Yes  □

No   □

If yes, could you indicate what you would like to be doing (you can be as general or as specific as you like).

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10. I intend to start researching jobs (i.e. reading up about different jobs, talking to people about career opportunities, etc.):

Please tick relevant box

- During my first year
- During my second year
- Summer period between 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} year
- During my third year
- After I have graduated
- I am not going to research jobs

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:

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11. Rate the extent to which you are likely to use the following sources of information to find out about careers:

*Circle relevant number*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Definitely will not</th>
<th>Unlikely</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
<th>Likely</th>
<th>Definitely will</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Other, please specify ........................................
and rate 1 2 3 4 5 ..................................................

and rate 1 2 3 4 5 ..................................................

Add more if you need to:

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:
12. Rate the extent to which you are likely to discuss careers with the following:

**Circle relevant number**

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Definitely will not</th>
<th>Unlikely</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lecturers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Careers advisers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Other, please specify ........................................

and rate 1 2 3 4 5

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and rate 1 2 3 4 5

Add more if you need to:

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:
13. Rate the quality of advice available from:

Circle relevant number

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very poor</th>
<th>Poor</th>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
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If you want to add a comment, please do so below:

14. I intend to start applying for jobs:

Please tick relevant box

- During my first year
- During my second year
- Summer period between 2nd and 3rd year
- During my third year
- After I have graduated
- I am not intending to apply for a job

Please specify the reason:

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:
15. Where do you intend to look for jobs?

*Tick all those sources that you intend to use:*

- Local newspapers
- National newspapers
- Prospects directory
- On-line
- Job Centre
- University Careers Centre
- Other Please specify:

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:

16. If you failed to get job interviews who would you go to (if anybody) for advice?

17. If you kept failing at the interview or selection test stage who would you go to (if anybody) for advice?
18. List (in order of importance) what you think graduate employers are looking for.

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**Intuition**
Intuition refers to your 'gut instinct' - i.e. how you feel instinctively about something.

19. How important do you think your intuition is in determining the type of jobs you will apply for?

*Please tick relevant box*

- Very important
- Important
- Not very important
- Not important at all

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:

---

20. If you went for a job interview and were offered a job how important would intuition be in determining whether you accepted the job or not?

*Please tick relevant box*

- Very important
- Important
- Not very important
- Not important at all

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:
21. Does one or more of your parents/step-parents/guardians have a degree?

*Please tick*

Yes  ☐
No   ☐
Don’t know  ☐

If you wish to comment please do so:

22. If you are **under 25** please give the occupation of your parent, step-parent or guardian who earns the most. If she or he is retired or unemployed, give their most recent occupation.

If you are **25 or over**, please give your last full-time occupation prior to coming to Edge Hill.

Please provide as much information as you can (i.e. job title, nature of job, employer).

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*Thank-you for completing this questionnaire, your help is much appreciated.*
Appendix II

Workshop activities
Below is a brief summary of the content of the workshops. This is not meant to be comprehensive, but aims to provide an indication of what was covered in these sessions.

1. Reflecting on past decisions

Introduction
Introduce students to rational decision-making models and the need to reflect on the way we make decisions.

Activity (carried out as an individual)
What did you decide to do on leaving school? Consider how you made your decision:

- The extent to which you adopted a rational approach [in terms of objective setting, collecting information and generating different options].
- Were particular people influential?
- Any influences that were especially important?

Activity (carried out in a small group of 4-5 students)
Identify similarities and differences within your group in how you made your decisions about what to do next on leaving school.

- List the similarities
- Identify some key differences

Activity (as a class)
Critique the process of decision-making adopted by people.
2. Case studies on career decision-making and planning

*Introduction*

We are going to use multiple case studies (a process referred to as 'analogical encoding').

**Rationale:**

- Improves knowledge acquisition and recall
- Facilitates 'deep' learning
- Helps to develop different (context dependent) decision-making models

*Activity (carried out as an individual)*

Read the case studies and identify what you feel are key features of each student's approach to career decision-making.

*Activity (working in groups of 4/5 students)*

1. Identify common features that exist in at least four of the five cases
2. Identify what differences exist between the cases

*Activity (as a class)*

Critique the process of career decision-making adopted by these students.
Case Studies in Career Decision-making

Imran
Imran was in his final year and still had no idea what he wanted to do after he graduated. He was considering studying for a master’s degree so that he could delay the decision for another year. Imran also felt that gaining another qualification would give him an advantage in the graduate labour market. At a family get-together during the Easter vacation he met up with his cousin Sam, who is a fire-fighter. Sam did not go to university after his A-levels but instead went to work on the production line in a factory. However, since Imran had last seen him he had joined the fire service and had just completed his training. Sam told Imran stories about his training and took him for a drive in his new car. Imran also went to Sam's passing out parade and was very impressed by the ceremony:

They marched past with the band playing. It just looked like the Army with the band playing and everybody marching in step. They looked really good, really smart – I was very impressed. I could see it was the sort of thing I’d like to do.

After this, Imran decided that he also wanted to apply for the fire-service. He thought being a fire-fighter would be prestigious and something his friends would be impressed by. He also thought that the job would be far more exciting than working in an office. Imran said:

There was something about being a fire-fighter that just appealed to me. Call it gut instinct or whatever – it just FELT that this was the job for me.

Susan
From childhood Susan had always wanted to be teacher. In order to fulfil this ambition she had made a conscious attempt to work with children. This had involved coaching youngsters at her local athletics club and helping out at a youth club. She had also worked with a local amateur theatre, becoming the production manager. She felt this would demonstrate she had leadership, communication and organisational skills – the type of skills she was told would be useful for a career in teaching.

In the second year of her degree she was given the opportunity of a work placement in a local secondary school. She would be working in the office, but she felt it would give her some useful insights into the working environment of a school. Susan had been to a very small school and college and she found the noise and hustle and bustle of this very large school quite disorientating. Also, some of the children (especially the boys) looked very aggressive and quite intimidating. She had to admit she found it very scary. However, Susan felt that she would get used to it. When she told one of the teachers that her ambition was to become a teacher he told her to forget it:

There are better careers than trying to control the type of kids we’ve got here. Take my advice get a nice little job in a bank or a building society – keep as far away from kids as you can.

Susan took no notice of him - as she told her mother that night, ‘He’s just a disillusioned old man’. Her mother said why not talk to other teachers about their experience of teaching? Susan said:
There’s no need to I KNOW what I want to do. If I talk to other people it’s just their experience. Everybody’s different and because one person likes teaching or dislikes teaching doesn’t mean it has any relevance to me.

David
David was a keen sportsman and had lots of other outside interests, e.g. working with children with disabilities, playing bass guitar in a band and helping out at the local youth theatre. However, when he went to university he decided he wanted to obtain a First Class Honours degree like his older brother. He therefore gave up all of his interests so that he could concentrate on his studies. David’s brother now has a fairly senior position in a bank and David hoped to follow a similar career path. He did, however, continue to go out with his friends on a Friday and Saturday night and to pay for this he worked in a warehouse at weekends. When David entered his final year he gave this job up so that he could concentrate on his studies. This meant he could not afford to go out but he thought it would be worth the sacrifice.

David did obtain a First Class Honours degree. Everybody told him he would have no problem obtaining a job because of this. He had, however, missed many of the deadlines for applying for graduate jobs in the banking sector. When he started to apply for jobs he was also surprised to find he was not getting interviews. Moreover, the two interviews he did get did not result in him being offered a job. He said:

I couldn’t understand why I wasn’t getting job interviews. I mean I have a First Class Honours degree – you can’t do better than that. And when I went on the job interviews the questions were really aggressive – they were like asking me what I had learnt on my degree and what skills had I developed. Well to me it’s pretty obvious that I have learnt a lot and had the skills.

David spent a frustrating six months without a job. He eventually talked to one of his friends from university on the telephone. She had obtained a position as a management trainee at Argos. She said she had received advice on completing application forms from a careers adviser her mother knew. She had then gone back to her for advice on how to approach the selection process (interviews, selection tests, etc.). David did not, however, know any careers advisers. He did, however, go to his brother and one of his lecturers for advice.

Kim
Kim talked to one of her lecturers (her personal tutor) about careers. However, he said he was not really qualified to give her advice and suggested that she visit the university careers service. She did not know any of the careers advisers and was also intimidated by the way the careers centre looked – she felt it looked imposing. Also, when she was at school Kim found the careers adviser was not much help, which had put her off talking to them ever since. In addition, none of her friends had been to see a careers adviser so she decided it was not something that was important to do.

Kim looked at the local paper for jobs, especially on a Thursday when there were a lot of jobs advertised. One night there was a small advert asking for a young person with ambition to join a high growth company as a trainee management accountant. No experience was necessary as training would be given. It did, however, ask for A-levels or a degree.

Kim applied for the job. It was a small firm (with just ten employees) involved in import and export. She had always wanted to work in a small business since studying small business
modules on her Business and Management degree. Kim had also been on a work placement in a large retailer. This had put her off working in a large organisation because the employees were not very friendly and the managers seemed very authoritarian and distant.

Kim was asked to attend a job interview. She was interviewed by the owner-manager who was only in his early-thirties. He outlined his plans to grow the business and told Kim there were tremendous opportunities in a small firm such as this because a major expansion was planned. She also met the staff. Many were not much older than her and they were all very friendly. Kim had positive feelings about this business as soon as she went into the building. This was reinforced by the interview and meeting the staff. When she was offered the job she had no hesitation in accepting it. It was only when Kim got home she realised she had no idea what her conditions of employment were!

Kim rang the owner-manager the following day and he told her she would start on £13,000 a year and work a 39 hour week. She was disappointed at the salary but believed the job would lead to much better things. Indeed, she remembered a case study from her small business module where a person had started as a trainee accountant and as the company grew they were promoted into a managerial position - they eventually became a director. Kim was also told by her new boss that her degree classification did not really matter. She intended to continue to try and obtain good grades on her degree but she found she now lacked the motivation to study. Kim was looking forward to starting her new job and doing assignments and revising for exams seemed to be irrelevant.

Hannah

At the end of her second year Hannah did not really know what she wanted to do. She talked to her parents but they knew nothing about graduate employment. She therefore decided to visit her university’s careers centre. After talking to a careers adviser she decided she would like to go into management. There were a lot of management jobs in the retail sector so Hannah worked in a retail outlet over the summer because she thought this would give her some useful experience.

Hannah had worked closely with a careers adviser when applying for two management trainee jobs (one she saw in the Guardian newspaper, the other in the Prospects directory). Hannah had not put anything on her application form about her Duke of Edinburgh Gold award and the fact that she had played netball for Lancashire – thinking such information was irrelevant. However, the careers adviser said it was very relevant, because it showed she was an ‘achiever’. Hannah was also the captain of her school and college netball teams which again the careers adviser said were important to put on her application form because it demonstrated she had leadership skills and was able to take on responsibility.

Hannah was successful at the application stage for both jobs. She went back to the careers adviser for advice on the selection process she was likely to face. Hannah was particularly concerned about being interviewed – but the careers adviser was able to give her some very useful tips. In both interviews they actually asked her about netball and how she responded to being the captain of a team. This was one of the questions the careers adviser had said might be asked and Hannah was able to provide a good answer about the need to lead by example and motivate different people in different ways.

Hannah had applied for two positions: one as management trainee with a large retailer; the other as a management trainee in the National Health Service (NHS) - and she was offered both jobs! This meant she had to decide which one to take. Hannah had a number of friends and family who worked in the NHS and they all said it was a great place to work. However,
when she went for her interview at the retailer she had a good feeling about the place. As she said, ‘It just felt right’. In contrast the hospital she visited for her interview with the NHS just ‘felt depressing’. She talked to the careers adviser at her university about her predicament. As it happened the careers adviser knew several students from the university who had joined the NHS. Hannah was able to talk to two of them over the telephone and visited one where she worked. They were all very enthusiastic about their jobs. However, Hannah decided to go with her gut instinct and accepted the job with the large retailer.
Appendix III

Questionnaire on attitudes to career decision-making (Second Stage)

Could you please complete the following questionnaire as honestly as possible. If there are any questions you do not wish to answer, just leave them blank.

Name ………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

I intend to find a part-time job that is relevant, or more relevant, to my career intentions in the future:

Please tick the most appropriate box

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<tr>
<td>Definitely will not</td>
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If you want to add a comment, please do so below:
I intend to engage in non-paid extra-curricular activities (e.g. volunteering, cultural, art and sporting activities) during my time at university in order to improve my employability:

*Please tick the most appropriate box*

- Definitely will
- Probably will
- Not sure
- Probably won’t
- Definitely will not

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:

---

I intend to start researching jobs (i.e. reading up about different jobs, talking to people about career opportunities, etc.):

*Please tick relevant box*

- During my first year
- During my second year
- Summer period between 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} year
- During my final year
- After I have graduated
- Not going to research jobs

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:
Rate the extent to which you are likely to utilise the following sources of information to find out about careers:

*Circle relevant number*

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Other, please specify ...................................

and rate 1 2 3 4 5

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and rate 1 2 3 4 5

Add more if you need to:

If you want to add a comment please do so below:
Rate the extent to which you are likely to discuss careers with the following:

*Circle relevant number*

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</table>

Other, please specify ...........................................

and rate 1 2 3 4 5

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and rate 1 2 3 4 5

Add more if you need to:

If you want to add a comment please do so below:
Rate the quality of advice available from:

*Circle relevant number*

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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:

---

I intend to start **applying** for jobs:

*Please tick relevant box*

- [ ] During my first year
- [ ] During my second year
- [ ] Summer period between 2nd and 3rd year
- [ ] During my third year
- [ ] After I have graduated
- [ ] I am not intending to apply for a job

Please specify the reason:

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:
Where do you intend to look for jobs?

*Tick all those sources that you intend to use:*

- Local newspapers
- National newspapers
- Prospects directory
- On-line
- Job Centre
- University Careers Centre
- Other  Please specify:

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:

If you failed to get job interviews who would you go to (if anybody) for advice?

If you kept failing at the interview or selection test stage who would you go to (if anybody) for advice?
List (in order of importance) what you think graduate employers are looking for.

...
Intuition
Intuition refers to your 'gut instinct' - i.e. how you feel instinctively about something.

How important do you think your intuition is in determining the type of jobs you will apply for?

Please tick relevant box

Very important □
Important □
Not very important □
Not important at all □

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:

If you went for a job interview and were offered a job how important would intuition be in determining whether you accepted the job or not?

Please tick relevant box

Very important □
Important □
Not very important □
Not important at all □

If you want to add a comment, please do so below:
What do you feel you have learnt (if anything) from the sessions on career decision-making and planning?

*If you did not attend any of the sessions please make this clear*

General comments:

Any specific comments on:

- Reflecting on your own decision-making

- Case studies

- Lecture on career decision-making
- Input from careers advisers

Have you any ideas for improving careers education and advice?
Would you be willing to be interviewed about your career decision-making? This interview should take about half-an-hour. Those selected will be offered a payment of £25 to cover expenses.

(Please tick)
Yes □
No □

If yes, could you please let us know the following:

Name ………………………………………………………………………………………………
Student number………………………………………………………………………………..
Home telephone number  ……………… ………………………………..
Mobile number ………………………………………………………………………………
E-mail address ………………………………………………………………………………

What is the best way to contact you?
……………………………………………………………………………………………………

What is the most convenient time to contact you?
……………………………………………………………………………………………………
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Thank-you for completing this questionnaire, your help is much appreciated.
Appendix IV

National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC)

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<td>Lower managerial and professional occupations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Intermediate occupations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Small employers and own account workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lower supervisory and technical occupations</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Semi-routine occupations</td>
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<td>Routine occupations</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Never worked and long-term unemployed</td>
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</table>

*Source: ONS (2005) Table 1, p. 3.*
REFERENCES


Gentner, D., Loewenstein, J. & Thompson, L. (2003), ‘Learning and transfer: a general role for analogical encoding’, Journal of Educational Psychology, Vol. 95, No. 2, pp. 393-408.


is funded by HECSU to:
create a forum for practitioners and researchers to collaborate on the development and dissemination of practice in careers education and guidance (CEG) in HE in the UK

With the following objectives...
- to assist practitioners to consider how research informs practice
- to assist researchers to develop questions and themes relevant to practice to develop innovative approaches to practice issues to coordinate with other relevant initiatives to disseminate activities openly to contribute to policy formulation...

and outcomes:
- networked learning community focused on provision of CEG in HE
- range of CEG materials available electronically short, accessible publications