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One-to-one career conversations in UK higher education: practical approaches and professional challenges

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ABSTRACT

One-to-one work with students remains at the core of many higher education career services in the UK, but there is limited empirical evidence detailing the nature of these interactions. Drawing together existing strands of literature on the process and effectiveness of one-to-one career conversations, career decision-making difficulties, and career practice training, we report the findings of interviews with 22 career professionals in HE in the UK who were invited to reflect on their one-to-one practice with university students, describe their approaches and techniques and to identify any challenges they face. Through template analysis, we identified three key aspects to the career professionals' practice: the relationship, the structure of the conversation and specific techniques. The participants described aspects of their practice which diverge from the approaches they were taught during their initial professional training, notably the use of a flexible conversation structure and limited use of career development theories. We identified that the key challenge practitioners reported was feeling that they disappoint some of their clients. We highlight some theoretical implications and offer some recommendations for practitioner training.

Introduction

Throughout the political and structural changes in the university sector and the careers field over the last decades in the UK, one-to-one work has remained at the heart of career practice in universities (Thambar, Neary, and Zlatic 2020). Yet despite its centrality to services and professionals, little is known about the nature and content of one-to-one career conversations and whether the professional training and current practice in the field are fit for purpose in this changing context. This paper makes a start on addressing this gap in the literature by reporting the findings of a study that explored career professionals' experience of one-to-one career conversations with university students in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in the UK, covering their practice, their views of how well they feel that they meet the needs of their students, and the conversations with students they find most challenging.

Meta-analyses have examined the impact of career support, in a range of settings, defined broadly, to include group career education, computer assisted career guidance, written exercises and one-to-one work (Brown and Ryan Krane 2000; Oliver and Spokane 1988; Whiston, Rossier, and Barón 2016; Whiston et al. 2017). These studies have identified that career support overall has a positive effect on clients' career decidedness, self-efficacy, and readiness to make career decisions. Some have shown that one-to-one career conversations have a particularly positive impact (Whiston, Rossier, and Barón 2016). Everitt et al. (2018) reviewed the literature on one-to-one work focusing

primarily on schools and colleges, concluding that it has some degree of positive impact on personal effectiveness (self-awareness and self-esteem), career readiness (career planning and decision-making) and educational outcomes (improved attendance and attainment).

In terms of the ingredients of one-to-one work that may make the biggest contributions to a positive outcome, the literature is dominated by the idea of the 'working alliance'. A working alliance is described as a combination of a strong relationship, an agreed goal for a session, and agreement on the tasks – the process by which the goal will be achieved (Bordin 1979). There is considerable consensus in the literature that establishing an effective working alliance is the most important predictor of the overall effectiveness across a range of one-to-one therapeutic interventions, including careers work (Bimrose et al. 2004; Masdonati, Massoudi, and Rossier 2009; Masdonati et al. 2014; Milot-Lapointe, Savard, and Le Corff 2018; Whiston, Rossier, and Barón 2016), coaching (Dryden 2017; Graßmann, Schölmerich, and Schermuly 2020) and therapy (Barletta and Fuller 2002).

The working alliance, however, is not the only important factor. The amount of career support has also been shown to have an impact; Everitt et al. (2018) found that at least 30 minutes was needed for an effective session at school or college and Whiston et al. (2017) identified five sessions as optimal. In a major study that explored career conversations within HE institutions in the UK, Bimrose et al. (2004) identified a number of additional features of 'useful guidance': exploration of potential; identification of options and strategies; ending and follow-through. This analysis reflects the key elements of many traditional models for structuring one-to-one conversations which usually include a contract (an opportunity to establish the working alliance), a middle section which involves an exploration of options and strategies, and an action planning phase, in which next steps are identified (for example, Ali and Graham 2006; Whitmore 1992). Bimrose et al. add that one-to-one work is effective when it 'provides access to networks, information and knowledge' (2004, 51) indicating that sharing knowledge of relevant labour markets is also useful although Milosheva et al. (2021) note the paucity of literature which explores the use and value of using career information in career conversations.

A discussion of effective career practice should not overlook the needs of clients. Some of the studies referenced above (for example Bimrose et al. 2004; Reid 2021) explicitly incorporate the views of clients in their data, but the extensive literature on career decision-making difficulties of clients (see Gati, Levin, and Landman-Tal 2019 for a review) have not as yet been incorporated into the research that explores career practice. In Yates and Hirsh (forthcoming) we identified three distinct but linked clusters of students' career difficulties that career practitioners commonly have to deal with in their one-to-one career conversations. They can be labelled as emotional, behavioural, and cognitive career issues. The emotional issues are most commonly low confidence and anxiety; the cognitive issues concern a lack of, or limited understanding of themselves, relevant labour markets, or the nature of career decisions and career support; and the behavioural issues show themselves in students who engage late with the process of making a career choice, or who are reluctant to take ownership of their own career development. Career practitioners should be fully equipped with strategies for dealing with each of these three sets of difficulties.

One-to-one practice

The research that explores what actually happens in a one-to-one career conversation in the UK is more limited. Two small scale qualitative studies, conducted at the same institution over 10 years apart, both emphasised practitioners' ability to build rapport, and highlighted the range of skills they used, including information giving, and a good range of 'guidance skills' – listening, probing, questioning, used to build confidence and raise self-awareness (Frigerio 2010; Reid 2021). In both of these studies, and in Bimrose et al. (2004), there was discussion of the structure of the conversation, with both Reid and Bimrose et al. reporting that practitioners made use of a four-stage process model, which covers setting a goal for the session, exploring the client's previous and current

thinking, generating possible courses of action, and action planning. Frigerio noted specifically some variation in approaches to contracting, with some participants negotiating clear contracts and others making no attempt to contract.

There is a wide range of career theories to help practitioners and their clients make sense of the complexities of career choice and development. Reflecting the complexity of the process itself, career theories draw on a range of academic disciplines. From differential psychology person-environment fit approaches match the skills and interests of individuals to the requirements of particular occupations (Holland 1997). Development psychologists focus on the different roles that matter to people at different times of their lives (Mainiero and Sullivan 2005). Sociological theories focus on the influence of the context in which individuals find themselves (Roberts 2009). More recently, an influential strand of research has focused on identity (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010) and empowering clients to design their own lives and careers (Savickas 2011). Particularly relevant to the Higher Education context are theories on employability (for example, Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth 2004) which have been on the political agenda in recent years.

Notwithstanding the number of useful theories available, the scarce research that touches on the use of career development theories in practice suggests that although practitioners can recognise and name a limited range of traditional theories, practitioners do not commonly incorporate these theories into their practice (Bimrose et al. 2004; Bimrose, Mulvey, and Brown 2016; Everitt et al. 2018; Kidd et al. 1994). A number of explanations for the limited use of theories in career practice have been offered. Kidd et al, in 1994, suggested that the problem was that career development theories were taught as stand-alone modules – in parallel rather than integrated with practical skills. Winter and Yates (2021) suggest that guidelines for using theories in practice may not always acknowledge the context in which practitioners work, highlighting that there is limited literature to guide those wanting to incorporate theories into short interviews, and they note the conflicting needs of academics who are under pressure to publish high-quality research and practitioners who need practical guidance. Bimrose et al. (2004) laid the blame in part at the lack of clear case study literature that can show practitioners exactly how to apply these theories in their practice.

Career professionals can enter career practice in the UK a number of different ways, but most commonly, they will do an undergraduate or post-graduate level qualification in career development. Each training provider will develop their own curriculum, but there are some widely used frameworks underpinning training. The Career Development Institute (CDI) has provided the Careers Blueprint, which outlines the competencies that must be taught on its accredited courses (Career Development Institute 2021). The Network for Innovation in Career Counselling in Europe (Schiersmann et al. 2012) offers a set of core competencies, which should be covered in career counselling training programmes, and the Association for Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS 2018) has devised its Professional Pathways, outlining the professional knowledge, identifying professional skills, professional attributes, and indicative professional qualifications and training that are expected from career professionals.

These guidelines have much in common. They all stress the importance of career development theories and process models (both knowledge and practical application). They identify a range of skills, including challenging, active listening, and supporting clients, and highlight some important professional attributes including reflexivity, managing boundaries, and authenticity. The AGCAS guidelines, particularly, stress the importance of researching and using relevant labour market information.

The present study

The existing literature offers some insights into the practices and effectiveness of one-to-one careers work in HEIs in the UK, but gaps still remain. In particular, we do not have a comprehensive understanding of career professionals' perspectives on their own practice. This study aims to find out more about the nature and content of these one-to-one career conversations, exploring how

well-equipped career professionals feel they are to meet the needs of their clients and how well they feel their training prepared them for their day-to-day work. In doing so, it brings together several strands of existing literature, building on research into the practice of one-to-one career conversations, the guidelines for career practice training, and the career decision-making difficulties of university students. Insights gained will be used to offer practical recommendations for those training career professionals.

Method

Participants

An email was sent through a distribution list to career practitioners working in Higher Education in the UK, asking for volunteers who were qualified practitioners and who regularly worked with clients on a one-to-one basis. All those who responded were sent information sheets and consent forms. Twenty-two who fitted the criteria returned completed consent forms. The final sample consisted of 22 career professionals, eight from the Russell Group of universities, (a group of 24 leading universities in the UK with a focus on research and a reputation for academic excellence), and 12 from post-92 universities, (more modern institutions which may be less research-intensive, and offer a wider range of vocational courses) across England and Scotland. All participants were involved in one-to-one work, all qualified at post-graduate level, with all but one holding a qualification in career guidance. Most worked with students from all faculties within the central careers service but were also formally linked to one or two specific faculties, and a number specialised in working with a particular group of clients, including research students and students with disabilities. Fourteen participants were female and eight were male, and their tenure in their current roles ranged from 6 months to 27 years, with an average of 8.5 years, although some had additional prior experience in similar roles. Further details can be found in Table S1 in the supplementary file.

The number of participants needed in qualitative research can be difficult to determine and justify. As Levitt et al. (2017) stress, the issue is not so much about the sample size but the richness of the data. With 22 hours of data collected and more than 250,000 words to analyse, the data set for this study was substantial. Morrow (2007) emphasises the importance of a varied sample, and with participants working with students from a wide range of disciplines, in different types of institutions and tenure ranging from 6 months to 27 years, we felt the sample was sufficiently varied. Furthermore, the number of participants is within the recommended guidelines for template analysis (King 2012) and for qualitative studies within work-related research (Saunders and Townsend 2016).

Procedure

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom and took place in June and July 2020. Interviews lasted on average an hour each, and they were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants were given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity Questions were open and included prompts to elicit as much rich data as possible. Questions included *Tell me a bit about your one-to-one conversations? What role does career theory play in your conversations?* and *What kinds of conversations do you tend to find challenging?*

Data analysis

The data were analysed with a template analysis (King 2012), chosen as an effective approach for dealing with large amounts of qualitative data, and one whose theoretical flexibility meant that it could align with the critical realist epistemological position of the authors. Template analysis is an established approach for analysing qualitative data within critical realist research (e.g., Hu 2018) and has been widely used within Higher Education settings (e.g., Bordogna 2017; Jabbar et al. 2020;

Nicholson and Johnston 2021). An initial template of themes and sub-themes was created based on the first 10 interviews and the authors then worked through the rest of the data, line by line, looking for text, which could be relevant to each of the themes. In accordance with King's suggested process for template analysis (King and Brooks 2016), we examined words, phrases and ideas which could be helpful in understanding the career practitioners' experiences. Where they appeared to relate to the themes identified in our initial template, we coded them as such. We also looked for meaningful aspects in the data that did not relate to the initial themes and coded them separately. The codes were then grouped into meaningful clusters or themes and arranged within a hierarchy. Throughout this process, the template was refined. New codes were added, a priori codes deleted, labels were renamed, and hierarchical layers were inserted.

To ensure consensus, the two researchers coded the first 10 scripts independently, developed their own themes and discussed their findings until they agreed on the initial template. The authors then focused on different themes and both coded all the remaining scripts, looking for data to help to enrich these themes, focusing on exceptions and examples.

Further collection of data was not expected to yield new insights, and we concluded that data saturation had been reached (Suri 2011).

Findings

The participants were asked to talk about their one-to-one conversations and they focused on the relationship, the structure of the sessions and the specific techniques used to address the specific needs of the students. They reported that the situations they found challenging were those where they felt they could not meet their clients' needs or expectations.

1. Relationship building

Building a strong working relationship was clearly important to the career professionals. They often see their clients only once, and the conversations might be limited to just 15 minutes, so the relationship needs to be developed at speed: a skill clearly well rehearsed by the practitioners.

For many, the starting point for building a good relationship was to develop a collaborative partnership. Carolyn said that she tells students '*we'll work on this together*' and Rob stressed the equality of the relationship saying '*I don't see career consultants as the sort of guru*'.

Many mentioned the importance of trying '*to create that rapport*', including Martin who spoke about his aim to '*build a bit of rapport*'. A number of career professionals linked rapport explicitly with trust: Lucy spoke about '*trust and rapport*' and Charlie about his starting point for any intervention '*you've got to build that rapport, that trust*'.

Some career professionals talked about the value of being present and paying attention to the client and what they are saying, as Gary explained: '*One thing I try to do is give them my undivided attention*'. Other participants spoke about the value of showing an authentic interest in the students. Siobhan stressed the importance of being sincerely '*interested in them*' and Vicky explained '*they know that I'm really genuine and I really care about them*'.

The career professionals talked about their efforts to understand the students. Charlie described his approach as one in which '*I'm always wondering and curious*' and Vicky explained, '*I try to figure out what's going on in their head*'. Empathy was raised a number of times, with career professionals speaking about the importance of showing, as Charlie put it '*empathy with what many students might be going through*' and being, in Mark's words, '*able to get into somebody's head and see it from their point of view*'.

2. Structuring the conversation

Most of the participants spoke about the importance of having some sort of '*a structure*' to their conversations, usually with a clear beginning, middle and end. A few recalled the specific models of guidance that they had learnt during their initial training but explained that they

generally did not stick to a rigid format, preferring a loose, instinctive structure, as Mark said: '*not to be mechanical about it*', tailoring the approach to the student. Tania explained that she had a model in the back of her mind but that '*I adapt my style depending on who is in front of me*'. A number suggested that they had developed their own models, based on, as Tim said, '*an amalgamation of all sorts of models*'.

Many of the career professionals mentioned contracting, as the first stage of their conversations and a '*watertight contract*' as Carolyn describes it, was considered important to many. A primary aim of the contract is, as Siobhan said, to '*manage expectations*' which included Elizabeth's goal to '*make it clear, I'm not going to tell you what to do*' and was also described as something that is, as Carole explained, '*really important*' to address unrealistic expectations that students might have.

Yet although the contract was considered by most to be important, a number of the career professionals did not always manage to negotiate a contract, often citing lack of time: Carmen explained that she often omits the contract because with only '*45 minutes sometimes to explore so many aspects, we try to start engaging straight away*'. Jane too said '*I have to admit it's something I forget*', and Mary reflected '*I think sometimes I myself need to be more assertive and maybe explain a bit more at the beginning of interviews about what I can and can't provide*'.

Many of the career professionals also noted the importance of action planning at the end of the conversation. Carmen said '*I always make sure we leave with a very clear action plan*'; Andrea shared the words she uses at the end of each conversation: '*What are you going to go on to do next? What's your action plan?*'. Adam always includes '*Some conclusion at the end*' and Edward described his approach as '*very focused on action planning*'.

A number spoke about a subsequent phase of the intervention, after the session itself. Carmen, Siobhan and Vicky follow-up with notes for the students but some go further and advocate on behalf of the students. Mary said that she would often '*make a phone call on their behalf*' although revealed that she wasn't entirely sure that this is always the right choice explaining '*I go further than I should [. . .] I will go off and do more research on behalf of a student than I really should*'. This concern about how far to do follow-up work was shared by others, including Elizabeth who commented '*I am very aware that my boundary stretches maybe beyond careers advising*'.

3. Content of the conversation

The career professionals gave examples of how they managed to support students with their most common needs.

Boosting confidence and providing reassurance

To help allay anxiety, career professionals provided a lot of reassurance. Carolyn stresses that the jobs the students choose '*aren't forever*' and Elizabeth invites them to think about '*what do you want to do right now?*' rather than focusing on their long-term career options. The career professionals also described strategies for '*normalising*' how the students are feeling – Lucy tells them '*It's ok if you don't know, that's fine*'.

Participants had a range of techniques for boosting confidence. Many focused on clients' successes and breaking the students' goals down to achievable steps. Some used strategies for making the task ahead more '*do-able*' (Vicky) and Lucy said that she explains to the students that the process is like '*eating the elephant – you don't have to do it in one bite*'. Martin described '*the baby steps*' which help students feel their task is manageable, and Rob explained that he aims '*to get them to take things in small steps [. . .] increasing confidence by being able to achieve things*'.

Another approach to addressing emotional needs focused on giving permission. Carolyn explained that a one-to-one conversation '*almost gives them permission to say "Yes, I'm studying engineering, but I don't want to be an engineer"*'.

Raising self- awareness

The participants offered techniques for helping students to become more self-aware – both identifying what they have to offer an employer and what they want from a job. Charlie, Elizabeth, Tim and Martin all used future-orientated visualisation techniques, Tania found scaling to be particularly useful for building confidence and Siobhan focused on powerful language to help with both self-awareness and confidence. Carmen and Rob mentioned personality tests such as the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey and Bates 1984) and the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (Kennedy and Kennedy 2004). Andrea found a SWOT analysis to be useful and Martin and Tess both used strengths exercises (Seligman et al. 2005).

The career professionals spoke frequently about uncovering values. Mark asks the students '*why are you doing this thing?*', Tim focuses on '*values, motivations, strengths, energies*', Carole asks '*what would get you out of bed in the morning*', Jean addresses '*values and motivations*' and Elizabeth gets students thinking about '*What's important to you?*'.

One of the most widely reported techniques to help the clients to understand themselves better was simply to encourage them to talk and express their thoughts and feelings. Lucy emphasised the importance of '*someone who makes them think and talk*', Siobhan spoke about the value of just giving students '*that opportunity to talk about themselves*'. Adam explained that talking helped students to clarify their own thinking and Carolyn emphasised the importance of '*trying to understand*' the students' or, in Tim's words, '*trying to tease out actually what they're really thinking*'. Martin spoke about the value of becoming '*comfortable asking difficult questions*' and Mark mentioned '*those big questions that often they don't get asked*'.

Participants also often spoke about the importance to the students of feeling heard as Carolyn said '*it's actually someone is listening*' and the value of reflecting, with Carole describing '*feeding back what they are saying*' and Tess explaining how she holds '*up a mirror to show them how they are making their decisions*'.

Information giving

In terms of giving information, the career professionals' practices ranged from Carmen, who would '*always end up giving also some kind of information*' through Adam, who explained '*often there is a kind of information component to that, sometimes there isn't*', to Charlie who said: '*I'm not big on information*'. For some of the career professionals who give information, the choice to do so is uncomplicated, as Mark explained '*it's easier and more humane [. . .] if I know, why wouldn't I tell you?*'. For others who give information, it is more of a moot point: Mary often shares information but she fears that she is '*inclined to maybe go a bit too far*', feeling that she is not doing what she '*should*'. Martin too explained that coming across as knowledgeable can be '*dangerous*' suggesting that students really should '*do their own research*', and Tania was not sure that this was the right approach, saying '*I maybe do go a bit into kind of information giving, which isn't always necessarily the right way to do things*'.

4. Career development theories

There were few unsolicited references to career development theory (by which we mean theories about 'career' as distinct from theories about how to manage the conversation) within the participants' narratives, but when asked explicitly about the literature that underpinned their practice, most practitioners were able to recall the names of one or two prominent theories or theorists. Few, however, described using them in practice. Lucy gave one of the very few examples of using theories explicitly with clients, saying '*I very, very rarely actually talk about it in terms of, "There's this theory" but sometimes I will name a theory, because I think it's going to allow me to get them to think about a concept that will be reassuring*'.

Some participants drew from literature beyond the career development arena. Mark drew heavily on the ancient philosophers, explaining '*philosophy is about asking good questions and thinking clearly*'. Gary spoke passionately about Linda Gratton's work (Gratton and Scott 2016), saying that her book '*should be handed out to every student on day one of every guidance course*'.

But for the most part, the practice reported was broadly atheoretical. There was also a widely shared sense of a need for more training on theories, both during initial training and as CPD, and specifically, as Carmen mentioned a '*stronger link between theory and practice*'.

5. Challenges

The participants spoke about the kinds of career conversations they found challenging and almost all reported finding it hard when they disappointed the students cut to the heart of the job, as Harriet explained: '*all of us have got that desire to fix it*', a sentiment echoed by Carole who said: '*I'm in this job because I want to help people*'.

Disappointing students who have unrealistic expectations of their future

Participants spoke about the challenges of working with students who are '*over-ambitious*' (Rob), who have '*unrealistic expectations*' (Lucy) or '*unrealistic hopes*' (Carole) of their own future something a number of them noted particularly with international students. The career professionals found it difficult to balance being realistic without crushing students' dreams. Gary described the tension of '*trying to guide them without raining on their parade*' and found these situations difficult emotionally because '*I don't want to be the bearer of bad news*' and Harriet explained '*although you know it's the right news, it's still uncomfortable having to deliver that*'.

Not able to help students whose problems are complex or deep-seated

The participants often met students who had complex needs and reported feeling frustrated when they felt that they simple were not able to help – when, for example there is, in the words of Charlie a '*web of things that you're trying to disentangle*', when, as Tim said '*everything seems to be going against the person*', when '*there's barriers in the way*' (Carole) or when the students '*bring a lot of other issues*' (Tania).

Particular examples include students with poor mental health (Martin and Jean) and students whose issues are too complex to be helped in the time given (Adam, Tess and Tania), and so as Adam said '*boxes get left unpacked*'.

Disappointing students who have unrealistic expectations of career guidance

The career professionals also spoke about how difficult it was when the students appeared to have an unrealistic expectation about the role of the career professional and how difficult it feels when, as Lucy put it: '*you can't give them what they want*'. For some, the challenge was when students expected their problem to be sorted '*right now*' or as Lucy said, '*The expectation is that it will be a very short journey from nothing at all to job*'. Others felt that the students sometimes expected them to be more directive. Lucy found it difficult when students assumed '*you are going to tell me what I'm going to do*', and Mary spoke about the challenge '*when a student is pressing me for advice I can't really give*'. Some career professionals also spoke about the very specific and impossible questions that students can ask including Tess's example: '*What companies in America are hiring people who did my degree?*'.

Discussion

This study has explored the practices and perspectives of career professionals working in one-to-one contexts in HE in the UK. The findings showed the skilled approaches that participants use to develop strong relationships with their students, and uncovered a range of tools and techniques practitioners

use to build confidence, allay anxieties and enhance self-awareness in their clients. These themes were found across all participants, align with the existing literature and curriculum guidance for training career practitioners and address some of the most common career difficulties that students face. Secondly, we identified a number of issues on which there was less alignment between the practices reported and the training provided, and less consensus among our participants, namely the structure of the conversation, and the use of theories and information. Finally, we identified a number of constraints on practice imposed by the context in which the practitioners operate.

Areas of consensus

The study has shown the value practitioners place on developing the working relationship, and highlights the lengths that practitioners go to in order to create a trusting relationship with their clients, establishing collaborative, student-centred partnerships, empathising and listening. This emphasis on relationship-building has been identified in previous research into career practice (Frigerio 2010; Reid 2021) and it aligns with the dominant approaches to career guidance, taught in career guidance courses and promoted in textbooks (Egan 2014; Rogers 1954). It is encouraging to see that practitioners are skilled at this aspect of their practice and choose to make it a priority in their work.

The participants' narratives also revealed a range of skills, approaches and techniques used to help their clients to manage their emotional difficulties and to develop students' self-awareness. Approaches such as these are included in the guidelines for career training and are covered on initial training courses (Career Development Institute 2021; Schiersmann et al. 2012) and they clearly address the emotional needs of low-confidence and anxiety, and the cognitive issue of low self-awareness identified by Yates and Hirsh (forthcoming) as aspects of career difficulties that students often struggle with. The findings of this study thus suggest that practitioners are well equipped to support their clients with many of the challenges they face.

Areas of divergence

More surprisingly, perhaps, our findings have identified some aspects of participants' practice that differ from the approaches to one-to-one career conversations they were taught during their initial professional training. We note this in particular with reference to the contract, application of theory to practice and the use of labour market information.

The contract

Formal models of guidance generally begin with a contract, negotiated between the client and the practitioner which usually covers issues of confidentiality, boundaries, setting expectations and a goal for the session (Ali and Graham 2006; Egan 2014). This is an important opportunity to establish the three elements of the working alliance: the relationship, clear goals for the conversation and an agreed process (Bordin 1979). Echoing the findings of Frigerio (2010), however, the participants in our study reported that they do not always contract with their clients at the start of a session. They acknowledged that there was value in the contract, and highlighted a mismatch of expectations of the session between the client and practitioner (which a contract should resolve) as one of the key challenges they faced in their work. Yet still they did not always start with a contract. Some said that they '*forget*' to contract, and others mentioned timings, suggesting that their short guidance sessions (sometimes only 15 minutes) precluded a contacting stage. Our practitioners clearly prioritise developing good relationships with their clients, but without a clear contract they may not have the chance to agree the goal and tasks for the session, thus missing out on the chance to develop a strong working alliance. This could have a significant, detrimental impact on outcomes.

Career development theories

There is a significant focus on teaching career development theories within career practice (Career Development Institute 2021; Schiersmann et al. 2012). In practice, however, and echoing the findings of previous literature (Bimrose, Mulvey, and Brown 2016; Everitt et al. 2018) our data suggest that these theories are not well used. The practitioners themselves indicated that they felt this was something of an omission and a source of regret, with some seeming almost embarrassed that they did not use theories more in their practice, and others explicitly stating that they would value more training in theories and how to apply them. This then leaves us with something of a paradox: career theories are considered important, both by trainers and professionals, but their use in practice seems to be limited.

One explanation could lie in the way theories are taught. Kidd, in 1994, highlighted that theories and practice then were generally taught in parallel, rather than integrated, suggesting that we should not therefore be surprised to find that the application of theories in practice is limited. Lenz (2008) wonders about the experiences and areas of expertise of those who teach theories, suggesting that the people who most often write and speak about the application of theory to practice actually do not know much about career practice, and argues that those who talk about theories are perhaps not always best placed to train career professionals to use them in practice. Theory and practice may have become more integrated in recent years (Winter and Yates 2021) but perhaps the gap is still too wide.

An alternative explanation could lie in the nature of theories that are covered. Perhaps, the theories that are taught are not those which are most relevant to practice? Matthews (2017) notes that career development theory seems to be more useful for understanding what has happened in the past, than for helping to make the future easier. Perhaps, the dominance of theories that highlight the influences on people's career choices (such as Roberts 2009 which highlights sociological factors) or delineate career paths (such as Mainiero and Sullivan 2005 which focuses on the lifelong career paths of women) may not be the most directly useful theories for practitioners working with young adults who making their first career choices. There also seemed to be one notable theoretical gap, namely, theories which support option-generation. The challenge of option-generation has been identified as one of the key career-decision making difficulties that students in higher education face (Yates & Hirsh, forthcoming) but is not mentioned in the guidelines for career practice training and the participants in this study made scant mention of strategies to help students generate career ideas.

A mismatch between theories that could be useful and the theories which are taught could account for the examples of two of our practitioners who drew heavily on theories in their practice, but chose theories which are beyond the usual scope of career development.

Information

A final area of heterogeneity in our findings can be seen in the approaches to information-giving as part of one-to-one practice. The divergence in the professionals' views is notable and may suggest that a sector-wide conversation about the role and position of information within the profession may be timely. Bimrose et al. (2004) identified that sharing knowledge about contacts and labour markets contributed to the usefulness of guidance, and the Agcas Professional Pathways highlights the importance of using information in career practice, so sharing relevant labour market intelligence is clearly considered valuable. A lack of information about relevant labour markets was also identified in our previous study (Yates & Hirsh, forthcoming), as one of the most common aspects of career difficulty that career professionals observed in their student clients, adding further support for the proposition that sharing labour market intelligence with students can be useful. In a recent report of the views of career professionals in Higher Education, Thambar, Neary, and Zlatic (2020) found that knowledge about labour markets is a core pillar of professional identity, and indeed there was no suggestion in our participants' narratives that their knowledge was limited.

More contentious, more varied and more guilt-inducing, were the issues raised by our participants about what to do with this knowledge – most often, how much to impart to the students. Practitioners need to be able to use their own professional judgement to make the best choices for each individual student but it could lead to confusion or dissatisfaction, if a student is directly given information by one career professional and denied it by another. The findings of this study add weight to Milosheva et al.'s (2021) call for more research into the use of information in career work, and we suggest that it could be useful for training programmes and perhaps the profession as a whole to have explicit and open debates about the role of information, to ensure that career professionals' choices are well informed.

The challenges of the context

The practitioners were asked about one-to-one conversations they found challenging, and many reported that they found it difficult when they could not give the students the support they wanted. Many of these disappointments were the result of students' lack of understanding, either about the nature of one-to-one careers support, or the career possibilities open to them. The reduction in careers support in schools over the last decade has left many university students without any prior experience of careers support (Hutchinson 2018). Their meeting with the career professional at university may be their first career support of any sort, so it is no surprise they are not sure what to expect.

Reid (2021) reported that her participants had to ignore some of their client's questions because the timing did not allow for all the student's issues to be addressed. The challenge of timing was noted by the participants narratives of our study too who sometimes had no longer than 15 minutes with a student and would often see a client just once. A number spoke about the challenges associated with negotiating complex issues with students in such restricted sessions. Participants' practice was shaped by this context, and they explained that the sessions were sometimes too short to include a contract, and too short for a non-directive approach. This could suggest that there is a mismatch between the assumptions underpinning career practitioner training, and the nature of current career practice. Perhaps, the approaches practitioners are taught are not all suitable for the time pressured nature of services in the UK? There is some support for this explanation in the literature. Reid and West (2011) trained career professionals in the UK to deliver Savickas's Career Style Interview (Savickas 1989), and reported that whilst their participants found the approach led to insightful conversations, concluded that it was too time-consuming to manage within their work schedules. There may be other practice models that practitioners could draw on for more time-limited interactions, although literature offers limited guidance on this (Osborn et al. 2016). Everitt et al. (2018) also call for more research examining short interviews.

More broadly, we saw that practitioners seemed to feel caught between conducting their one-to-ones in the way they have been trained to do, and adapting their practice to what seems expedient at the time. Practice that aligns with training would include a contract, would draw on theories and would not include direct information-giving. Practitioners might choose this kind of practice as a result of the nature of their own training and CPD, professional confidence, conclusions from their reflective practice, or the context in which they are working. A more pragmatic approach to practice might involve a curtailed contract and more information-giving. Practitioners operating in this more pragmatic way may be under more pressure to achieve more in less time or to be encouraged to address student wants rather than student needs.

Limitations and directions for further study

Participants for this study were self-selected and are likely to have been a non-representative sample of practitioners. They all work in HEIs in the UK so further studies would need to be conducted to see whether the findings are applicable to other professional contexts and the data were collected through self-reports, adding an additional layer of subjectivity onto the data. A follow up

quantitative study could add further empirical rigour to the topic. Future research could focus on student clients themselves, exploring their own experiences of the one-to-one conversations. The application of career theory to practice warrants further investigation, and studies conducted with initial training providers who teach career theory, and with practitioners who do use career development theories in their practice, could offer further insights.

Recommendations for training

First, we suggest that there should be more focus within training on adapting practice to the context. Career professionals emerging from initial training programmes should be equipped to conduct short interventions, to work with students who are ill-informed about the nature of guidance and to support students who have unrealistic expectations of their own futures, and training should offer explicit advice and preparation for these common scenarios.

Of particular concern to us is the inconsistency around contracting at the start of career conversations. The importance of this should be impressed upon trainee career practitioners and guidance for how to negotiate a full contract within a short 'quick query' should be provided.

The issue of the use of career development theories in practice is a complex one that perhaps needs to be addressed both through changes in the way theories are taught and the way theories are developed and written about. Training programmes could ensure a stronger emphasis on the integration of theory and practice. Further guidance on how to apply theories in the context in which these professionals practice would be useful. It may also be useful to consider whether the theories taught on our initial training courses are the most useful for practitioners.

Conclusions

This study explored the experiences of one-to-one work of career professionals in Higher Education in the UK. The narratives of the practitioners show the focus on the importance of the relationship, a range of techniques which address the aspects of career difficulties that career practitioners see in their clients, and a strong student-centred ethos. We also saw some examples of practice that the career practitioners felt diverge from the guidance given during initial training, including the use of a more flexible structure for career conversations, contract-negotiation and limited integration of theory with practice. It seems that the approaches taught in initial training are not always fit for the time-limited context in which practitioners work, and further exploration of the choice of career development theories and the way they are taught could be a useful next step.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

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Data availability statement

Data is available at the authors' discretion

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