Background

In order to provide efficient and effective career planning support to students in Higher Education, we need to start by asking where students are starting from in terms of their career planning, and what experience they have gained help them with their development. A student who has no idea what they want to do after university, needs different support to a student who knows what they want to do, and is ready to start applying. This is especially pertinent as recent research demonstrates the most important factors in determining if graduates were in professional or managerial roles or non-professional roles two years after graduation as:

1. knowing exactly what they wanted to do or having a good idea about types of jobs and careers upon completing university.

2. Having a very targeted approach to job applications

3. Having undertaken unpaid work experience
   (DfE 2017)

A consortium of 15 UK universities secured HEFCE funding for a 3-year Learning Gain research project to investigate the value of Careers Registration — introducing questions about career readiness and work experience into mandatory data collection at student enrolment — as a measure of learning gain in relation to career readiness. The approach was first developed by the University of Leeds in 2012, and the project is further developing the methodology in line with HEFCEs learning gain programme to explore career readiness 'learning gain', defined by HEFCE (2015) as the 'distance travelled' between two points e.g. initial enrolment onto degree programme to graduation.

Methodology

We are adding 2-4 careers focused questions to compulsory student registration to better understand work readiness learning gain –a student's preparedness for the process of obtaining work beyond graduation and successfully managing their career in the long term.

The two core careers registration (CR) questions focus on Career thinking self-efficacy (Career planning) and employability enhancing experience (EEE).

Career planning

Students are given 12 statements to choose from, ranging from 'I have no idea what I want to do, through to I have further study or employment confirmed'. We are applying a career planning framework 'decide-plan-compete-sorted' to demonstrate key phases of career planning, and we are applying this framework to our data analysis.

EEE

Students are given a list of employability activities and experiences and select as many as they have completed within the last 12 months, this includes placements and work experience, uptake of Careers service offerings (e.g., fairs, presentations, workshops, 1-1 appointments). We are further developing the tool to include a distinction between work experience and placements provided through HE institutions and those sourced directly by students themselves.

The most common additional questions focus on industry sectors of interest (and if students have experience in these sectors) and enterprise in terms of interest in, and experience of.

Primary research question:

- Does Careers Registration provide a viable method for obtaining data that provides an indication of learning gain related to work readiness? (Correlating CR data with existing measures of work related learning gain)

Secondary research questions:

- Can we use CR to highlight employability needs of different groups?

- Can we use CR to evaluate different employability activities?

Analysis

Analytical techniques that are being applied include:

- Cross sectional and partial longitudinal data analysis to determine typical/baseline' trends in patterns of career thinking/work readiness across subject areas/disciplines, and socio-demographic characteristics.

- Linking CR data with retention and outcomes, analysing data for correlations and patterns.

- Comparing CR data with other existing measures of career planning and work readiness:-DLHE-NSS-Employability health check-Online self-efficacy survey

- Tracking uses of CR data to inform targeted employability initiatives

- Statistical modelling of demographic characteristics with career thinking statements

Preliminary results

We are at the half way point of this three year project, we have implemented the data collection tool in years one and two , yielding 308,000 responses so far, and have completed institutional level cross sectional data analysis, as well as preliminary meta-analysis of 118,378 responses.

Initial findings demonstrate that 48% of all final year undergraduate students in the sample analysed (n=118,378) are still in the 'decide' phase of their career planning.

Biggest changes in work readiness learning gain between years 2 and 3 of a full time undergraduate programme, and there is more movement within career planning categories between years 1 and 2 of an undergraduate programme.

We are seeing clear differences in career planning stages across all years of study, between programmes in health sciences and Education subjects, 49% of health sciences subjects in decide phase compared to only 29% of Education students. Further analysis of patterns of career thinking will allow institutions to investigate the findings further and explore means of tailoring provision to different degree subjects.

Implications

This is the first data of this kind collected on such a large scale, and has implications for HE strategic planning, policy, and practice. The Education and Research bill 2017 requires metrics on student learning gain in the area of employability. The findings of this research will be used to explore the potential and limitations of careers registration for strategic planning, and how the method can support TEF submissions.

With the recent release of the Social Mobility Advisory Group's final report 'Working in partnership: enabling social mobility in higher education' (Oct 2016) headline findings show that 'compared to their peers, graduate outcomes are not as good for black and minority ethnic students, nor for disabled students'. Whilst students have better access to higher education, outcomes are still affected by students personal background and pre-existing social capital (Bourdieu, 1977). This research may help services change the way they target employability initiatives on the basis of the new data we are collecting and analysing in a social mobility framework.