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Re(connecting) career progression initiatives with impact through the implementation of theories of change

Nathaniel Pickering¹

¹*Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, United Kingdom*

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Abstract: This paper presents a case study from the perspective of an “evaluative practitioner” who has been working with teams delivering career progression initiatives to develop their evaluative practices. The career initiatives being delivered aimed to address inequalities experienced by graduates in labour market. The first section of this paper explores how the career practitioners were supported to translate their experience and knowledge about what works into measurable outcomes. The second half of the paper will share how theories of change for each of the initiatives the career practitioners were delivering were developed. This case study provides valuable insight for evaluative practitioners aiming to develop evaluation practices and knowledge. It will also explore why there is a lack of evidence about what higher education providers can do to positively impact graduate outcomes, and how that deficit can be countered through the development of evaluation skills in career practitioners.

Paper: A student’s progress and success in the graduate labour market has been found to be influenced by their characteristics and background (HEFCE, 2018). A study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that family background, and specifically whether a student comes from a lower or higher income household, continue to influence graduates’ earnings long after graduation, even when they share the same higher education experience (Britton et al., 2016). The type and location of the higher education provider also plays a significant role in the outcomes a student will experience, such as annual incomes and access to certain roles (Savage, 2015), leading some to argue that higher education helps reproduce social inequality in the labour market (Triventi, 2013). Addressing these inequalities is becoming ever more crucial for Higher Education Providers as they are increasingly monitored, judged, and ranked by how successful their graduates are performing in the labour market (Hewitt, 2020). As the graduate labour market shrank because of Covid-19, there are growing concerns that existing inequalities in graduate outcomes will be exacerbated (Inman, 2020).

There is a minimal evidence base about what helps improve graduate outcomes (Moore, Tazzyman, Bowes & Birkin, 2020). What does exist indicates that effective career guidance and support can contribute significantly to realising more equal outcomes for all students, however, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are also less likely to participate in career development opportunities (Bridge Group, 2017). The complex and challenging problems raised by graduate outcomes are intensified for higher education providers that predominantly recruit students from

lower socio-economic backgrounds. As demand on university careers services from both students and senior management increases, demonstrating their positive impact on outcomes will become essential if they are going to help equip students with the tools needed to overcome structural barriers that have been magnified by Covid-19.

This paper presents a case study from the perspective of an “evaluative practitioner” who has been working with teams delivering career progression initiatives to develop their evaluative practices. The career initiatives being delivered aimed to address the issues outlined above. However, while the career practitioners had a wealth of experience and knowledge their focus was on the delivery of initiatives and there was little articulation about how interventions linked or caused changes in graduate outcomes.

The first section of this paper explores how the career practitioners were supported to translate their experience and knowledge about what works into measurable outcomes. Pawson and Tiley (1997) suggest practitioners have access to a unique type of knowledge that comes out of experience rather than academic literature and theories. They call this knowledge ‘folk wisdom’, and it can be pivotal in illuminating the circumstances needed to affect change. The workshop activities and peer support sessions used to extract this folk wisdom from the practitioners will be outlined along with how these activities helped create a collaborative environment that both empowered and developed ownership of the evaluation activities amongst the career practitioners. While this initial phase was time consuming it provided a strong foundation for future evaluative work that would be undertaken.

The second half of the paper will share how the foundation developed through the initial stage was used to inform the creation of theories of change for each of the initiatives the career practitioners were delivering. This stage was challenging as it required a conceptual shift in how the career practitioners approached their work. The career practitioners were predominately focused on ‘implementation theory’ that deals with translating objectives into ongoing service delivery and programme operation (Blamey and Mackenzie 2007). This meant that success was being measured by how many students attended a workshop or completed an internship. However, the intention was to shift the career practitioners thinking to ‘programme theory’ where the emphasis is on the ‘causal links between the mechanisms released by an intervention and their anticipated outcomes’ (Blamey and Mackenzie 2007, 445). This means the success of a programme will be measured by changes to graduate outcomes, whether that is in immediate changes in knowledge or behaviour in students or long-term changes in the graduate opportunities’ students are able to access.

The case study in this paper provides valuable insight for evaluative practitioners aiming to develop evaluation practices and knowledge in large and complex organisations. It will also provide insight into why there is a lack of evidence about what higher education providers can do to positively impact graduate outcomes, and how that deficit can be countered through the development of evaluation skills in career practitioners.

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