

# 259 Graduating in a pandemic without safety nets: The role of career competencies for sustainable start to careers

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## Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

## Abstract

This research examines the role of career competencies (as crucial career resources relevant for career self-regulation) for sustainable (i.e., happy, healthy and productive) start to graduate careers. Of particular interest is the efficacy of career competencies for university leavers who may not have financial and psychological resources / safety nets at the height of the pandemic, in 2020. The analyses are informed by a longitudinal study of 2020 UK university leavers (N=181). Findings show (i) how self-regulation of careers operates differently depending on one's psychological and financial safety nets; (ii) career self-regulation may work best under 'average' psychological and financial conditions; and (iii) career competencies may be best understood in relation to psychological and financial costs. Building on a significant career shock that was the COVID-19 for most university leavers of 2020, the findings highlight the interplay between an individual's career resources and their psychological environment.

## Full paper

For young people transitioning from university to work in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was a traumatic career shock which impacted the course of life and career plans (Blustein et al., 2020). Groups with fewer financial and psychological safety nets were shown to be especially vulnerable in the pandemic context (Pierce, et al., 2021; Understanding Society, 2021). Such vulnerability patterns are likely to have exacerbated the uncertainty associated with university-to-work transitions. Within this context, this research examines the role of career competencies (as crucial career resources relevant for career self-regulation) for sustainable (i.e., happy, healthy and productive) start to graduate careers. Of particular interest is the efficacy of career competencies for university leavers who may not have financial and psychological resources / safety nets at the height of the pandemic, in 2020.

The study builds on the contemporary discussions on career self-management (e.g., Hirschi and Koen, 2021) as critical for career self-regulation in crisis situations, in this case the pandemic. This allows understanding of (i) which resources help a sustainable start to careers for university leavers (RQ1) and (ii) how financial and psychological resources differentially impact the efficacy of career resources on sustainable career outcomes (RQ2). We adopt the sustainable careers framework (De Vos, Van Der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2020) to examine sustainable start to one's career, focusing on resources relevant to happiness (perceived financial stress), healthiness (general mental health) and productivity (career competencies and career crafting).

## Method and analysis

Two waves of a longitudinal study of 2020 UK university leavers inform our analyses (Time 1 (T1), Sep-March 2020, N=502; Time 2 (T2), March-May 2022, N=181). We used T1 sustainable career resources of financial stress (Netemeyer et al. 2018), general mental health (GHQ12; Goldberg, 1992) and career competencies (Akkermans, Brenninkmeijer, Huibers, & Blonk, 2013) to predict T2 resources of financial stress, general mental health and career crafting (Tims & Akkermans, 2020).

Analysis involved structural regression models with multiple group analyses on AMOS. Three-way interactions between sustainable career resources were computed using PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022).

## Findings

Findings support the model where each sustainable career resource at T1 predicted the same resource at T2 but no others, e.g., T1 general mental health was positively related to T2 general mental health only.

Multi-group analyses examining the efficacy of T1 career competencies on T2 sustainable career resources showed that career competencies were positively related to career crafting for those graduates who experienced average levels of general mental health and financial distress in T1, but not for others. Career competencies had a positive effect on T2 career crafting of those who reported average T1 financial stress, regardless of T1 general mental health (and vice versa).

Three-way interaction predicting T2 career crafting was significant. Among those who reported poor T1 general mental health, career competencies were more instrumental for T2 career crafting of those who experienced low T1 financial stress and least instrumental for those who experienced high T1 financial stress. For those who experienced good general mental health in T1, career competencies were most instrumental for T2 career crafting of those who experienced high T1 financial stress and least so for those who experienced low T1 financial stress.

## Discussion

Findings show how self-regulation of careers operates differently depending on one's psychological and financial safety nets. More specifically, career competencies do not lead to 'gain spirals' in psychological and financial resources in T2. This suggests that sustainable career indicators (i.e., happiness, healthiness and productivity) may be related but distinct. Especially in key transition points, some indicators of sustainable careers may be experienced more strongly than others, depending on our personal and career resources, e.g., focusing on productivity at the expense of happiness.

Findings suggest that the career self-regulation may work best under 'average' psychological and financial conditions. For graduates experiencing insecurities in one area but not the other, we observe career competencies are instrumental in career crafting. However, the results do not show evidence for cumulative disadvantage - rather career competencies may have compensating effects for career crafting, i.e., building further career resources.

Overall, findings confirm the crucial role career competencies play for sustainable start to careers. Nevertheless, career competencies may be best understood in relation to psychological and financial costs. Building on a significant career shock that was the COVID-19 for most university leavers of 2020, the findings highlight the interplay between an individual's career resources and their psychological environment.

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