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From Subject Interest to Career: How Students Develop a Line of Practice During Higher Education

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

To what extent do students draw on HE affordances to shape their own unique career paths? We use Renninger and Hidi's (2006) four-phase theory of interest and Azevedo's (2011, 2015) lines of practice approach to interpret survey data (n=235; F=189; M=43) and interviews (n=15; F=13; M=2) from second-year psychology students at an English university. Students rated the extent to which they experienced affordances of HE environments (e.g. teachers discuss careers, relevance taught, work experience, and talking with professionals), their exploration processes (proactive career research, 'opening' or 'closing' of interests, competence awareness changes), and their subject interest and career decidedness change. Students' use of affordances, exploration processes, and their interest and career decidedness were correlated. Interviews elucidated how some students used those affordances and processes to actively shape their career interests and plans. We discuss implications of conceptualising students' HE journeys as a process of refining interest-based lines of practice.

Full paper

Introduction

A major challenge students face during higher education (HE) is figuring out their next career step. With increasing pressure to ensure graduates' positive career outcomes, we must understand how students navigate this challenge. Yet we know little about students' journeys in honing their career interests and plans.

Students typically choose their HE programmes by weighing programme affordances against their interests (Vulperhorst, et al., 2020). In HE, students' subject interest then contributes to their career decidedness (Quinlan and Renninger, 2022) as they seek interesting careers (Gallup, 2019). Most students change their career interest and increase their career decidedness during HE as they gain greater knowledge and experience (Quinlan & Corbin,

2023). While previous studies have identified factors (affordances) influencing students' career interest development, we focus on students' intentionality in using those affordances.

Conceptual framework

Interest is a cognitive, affective, and motivational variable that develops in supportive environments (Renninger and Hidi, 2022). Interest is both a psychological state during meaningful engagement with content and the motivation to re-engage with that content. The Four-Phase Model of Interest describes interest as unfolding through four phases, starting with triggered situational interest and, under the right conditions, progressing to well-developed individual interest (Hidi and Renninger, 2006; Renninger and Hidi, 2022). New, often related, interests can still be triggered at more advanced phases of interest development.

Azevedo (2011; 2013) studied participation in interest-based hobbies and the ways in which the affordances and constraints of informal learning environments contributed to the birth and death of new sub-interests among hobbyists. He showed the processes by which individuals within a community of amateur astronomers pursued personally tailored practices such as a focus on aesthetics versus technologies. Although the constraints, affordances and consequences of HE differ from hobbies, we explore students' career interest development through this lens because centring students' evolving interest-based practice aligns well with a protean model of career self-management (Hall, 2004) and career learning as a process (Healey, 2023).

We ask: RQ1) How are affordances of HE (teaching about careers, teaching the relevance of content; work experience, talking with professionals) related to students' processes (proactive career research, opening and closing of interest, competence awareness) and interest development (subject interest and increased career decidedness)? RQ2) To what extent are students using these affordances to build their own line of practice? If so, how?

Methods

To answer RQ1, we drew on survey data from psychology undergraduates (n=235; F=189; M=43) in an English university. To answer RQ2, we drew on interviews (n=15; F=13; M=2) with second and third year psychology students.

Survey

Students rated (1=low to 5=high)

1) their experience of the following HE *affordances*, each with 3 item scales: Teachers discuss careers (α=.752), Relevance taught (α=.835), Work experience (α=.921), Talked with professionals (α=.745) and;

2) their *processes*: proactive career research (α=.906), Opening of new interests (α=.697), Closing of interests (α=.792), Increasing competence awareness (α=.785) and;

3) their *interest development*: subject interest (11 items; α=.824) and career decidedness (3 items; α=942). We ran correlation analyses.

Interviews

Interviewees drew a picture of interest as a metaphorical river that began with the first time they were interested in their subject and ended 3 years into the future. Then they explained their drawing, with the interviewer probing their interest development, trajectories, and influences, and relationships between subject and career interests. We used a narrative approach to analyse the interviews (McAlpine 2016) and selected illustrative case examples.

Results

Curricular affordances (Teachers discuss careers and Relevance taught) were correlated (>.4) with increased breadth and depth of student interest. Proactive career research was most strongly associated with talking with professionals and decidedness. Greater competence awareness was linked with closing of interests (Table 1).

Table 1 here

We focus on three case examples: a) Joanna's search for solutions to challenges encountered in work experiences; b) Phoebe's use of courses, extra-curricular activities, and career guidance tools to make a career plan that merged two distinct interests; and c) Helen's singular childhood passion driving a search for a career that addressed it.

Discussion

Correlations amongst study variables suggested students use various affordances, particularly curricular ones, and exploration processes, particularly proactive career research, to hone their interests and career plans. Interviews illustrated different ways students crafted their own lines of practice over time (Hidi and Renninger, 2006; Azevedo, 2011; 2013). Consistent with a protean career management model (Hall, 2004), this framing highlights that career learning during HE (Healey, 2023) is part of a longer journey of interest development characterised by constant navigation rather than a few major decision-making points.

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