

‘I’D RATHER TALK TO SOMEONE / KNOW THAN SOMEBODY WHO KNOWS’ – THE ROLE OF NETWORKS IN UNDERGRADUATE CAREER DECISION-MAKING

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Introduction

Students operate within a complex set of relationships made up of parents, relatives, friends, professionals (i.e. lecturers and careers advisers) and other people they come into contact with in their term-time jobs, leisure activities, etc. These relationships or ‘networks’ represent forms of ‘social capital’ (Bourdieu, 1997) that may be utilised in the career decision-making process. It is the quality of the information (or capital) that these networks provide access to that is important (Portes, 1998; Ferlander, 2004; Pichler and Wallace, 2009).

This paper is based on an action research project that involved working with undergraduates to improve the way they engage in the process of career decision-making. The paper focuses on the role networks play in career decision-making. It analyses the students’ rationale for utilising particular forms of social capital and examines how they have responded to interventions aimed at influencing their attitude to different sources of advice.

Research methodology

This study was undertaken with full-time first year undergraduates in the Business School at a new university. It involved an action research project which used the following key interventions to influence the career decision-making behaviour of students:

Unfreezing: Students were asked to critically evaluate the way they had made educational and other decisions in the past. As Schein (1987, p. 94) argues the ‘pain’ or ‘disequilibria’ arising from this process can motivate people to ‘unfreeze’ established ways of making decisions and encourage them to change their decision-making behaviour (cited by Teale *et al.*, 2003).

Case studies: The students analysed the career decision-making behaviour of students through a series of cases studies. The students used the principle of analogical encoding which involves identifying commonalities and differences between the cases. The evidence suggests that analogical encoding promotes a more active approach to learning (Kurtz *et al.*, 2001); promotes deep learning (Schwartz and Bransford, 1998); and helps students to develop and utilise models of decision-making that can be applied to the various situations they may subsequently face (Loewenstein *et al.*, 2003; Gentner *et al.*, 2003; Gentner *et al.*, 2004).

This paper draws upon evidence (in the form of questionnaires, interviews and observations) collected over three cycles of the action research project. Data was collected from over a hundred students using questionnaires in a pre- and post intervention design. In-depth interviews with a sub-sample of 34 students were also carried out after the second cycle of the project.

Research findings and implications

The evaluation stages of this action research project suggest that the sessions have had an influence in making the students adopt a more critical stance towards different sources of information. Yet a reluctance to deal with people they are unfamiliar with, and tendency for students to lack proactivity - i.e. courage, initiative and an action-orientation (Kirby and Kirby, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2006; Randler, 2009) - means that many students will not consult career advisers. Therefore, despite rating the advice available from careers advisers more highly than other sources (especially after the interventions), many of the students remained more likely to go to their parents and lecturers for support and advice than the university's careers service.

This research suggests that the key to encouraging students to make better use of university careers advisers is to ensure that they get to know them better and feel comfortable about approaching them for advice. Therefore, careers advisers ought to be working with students on a regular basis in small group situations.

This research also indicates that there is a need to encourage students to be more proactive in terms of utilising their networks. Research suggests that proactivity can be increased through training (Kirby *et al.*, 2002) and support (Dijkers *et al.*, 2010). However, the evidence to support the effectiveness of such interventions is limited; and where it does exist, the effects are not substantial. For example, the Kirby *et al.* (2002) study involved a

substantial intervention over one semester involving training in the 'art of strategic thinking' with a strong emphasis on thinking proactively. This study only resulted in a four per cent increase in the students' level of proactivity using Bateman and Crant's shortened Proactive Personality Scale. Therefore, whilst it is worth addressing the issue of proactivity in the sessions, the effect of such interventions is likely to be only marginal.

This research has already identified the substantial influence lecturers have on students. As such, more success may be achieved if lecturers - through the personal tutor system - encourage their tutees to make better use of careers advisers. In the next cycle of this action research project a number of personal tutors have agreed to do this and the effectiveness of this approach will be evaluated with the tutors.

The difficulty with asking tutors to adopt a more interventionalist role is that the personal tutor system is already under severe pressure because of high student-staff ratios and the demands made upon staff because of initiatives to widen participation and recruit overseas students (Grant, 2006). Similarly, if students are encouraged to visit the university careers service, and as suggested above, careers advisers expand their activities in academic departments, this will put a strain on resources. However, the main reason students go to university is to enhance their careers prospects (Glover, 2002; Watts, 2006). As Simpson (2006) argues, students increasingly see themselves as investors looking for a return on their educational investment. It can be argued that universities have an obligation to respond to this. Moreover, the government has placed an increasing emphasis on the education to work transition reflected in the further development of indicators to measure labour market outcomes by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) (BIS, 2009). Therefore, even if universities do not feel that they want to devote time and resources to developing the type of career management skills discussed in this paper it appears that there will be increasing government pressure to address such issues.

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