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**Title** It's who you know! The influence of developmental networks on the perceived career success of undergraduates  
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**Paper Title:** It's who you know! The influence of developmental networks on the perceived career success of undergraduates

### **Research context**

There is a body of evidence suggesting that students in transition from university to work do not know how to navigate the labour market, partly due to lack of appropriate networks (Behtoui 2016; Brown and Hesketh 2004; Tholen et al. 2013). The longitudinal study examined the relational nature of undergraduates' career management and career success. It is particularly driven by the increasing calls for career researchers to:

- 1) Adopt a more multidisciplinary approach to careers (Arnold and Cohen 2008; Inkson and King 2011; Khapova and Arthur 2011; Khapova et al. 2007);
- 2) Consider the social context of career management, in terms of examining the influences of extra-organisational and intra-organisational communities, on the career outcomes of individuals (Parker et al. 2009) and;
- 3) Examine the influence of an array of network relationships on individuals' career outcomes (e.g. Chandler et al. 2010; Chandler et al. 2011; Dobrow et al. 2012; Higgins 2000).

The examination of undergraduates' relational career management is especially relevant because of the importance of graduate employability outcomes within higher education institutions and the need for undergraduates to exercise career management behaviours (Bridgstock 2009; Jamerson et al. 2012). The study is timely since graduate labour market outcomes are progressively viewed as "an important proxy measure of universities' performance and ability to deliver a 'worthwhile product', which provides a return on the investment in Higher Education by individuals and society" (Scurry and Blenkinsopp 2011:1). Given that graduates' employment outcomes are at the forefront of the HE agenda, the research adopts a relational approach with a central belief that the foundations of networks are laid very early on in the undergraduates' transition process.

### **Developmental network literature**

The interest maintained in developmental networks is crucial in today's turbulent career environment, prompting individuals to engage in career and personal development particularly in terms of seeking developmental assistance both within and outside the

organisation to enhance their career success (Chandler et al. 2010; Murphy and Kram 2010). It is argued that mentoring alone does not 'do it all' but gaining resources from a 'constellation' of relationships (from the work and non-work environment) helps to create a 'richer tapestry' of career success for individuals (Murphy & Kram, 2010).

A particular review of developmental network by Dobrow et al (2012) has highlighted the distinctive attributes of an individual's developmental networks compared to other forms of networks. The authors proposed that developmental networks usually consist of multiple developers (i.e. an average of four to five individuals) rather than just the one mentor-protégé relationship. They also argued that a developmental network is a subset of a protégés larger social network where much emphasis is placed on its structural characteristics e.g. size, strength of the network relationship in terms of emotional intensity and frequency of interaction as well as the amount of career and psychosocial support provided to individuals by the network (see Dobrow et al, 2012).

However, within the developmental network literature, there is little attention given to early careers individuals. Furthermore, network studies tend to focus on existing network structures within employing organisations and their effects on career outcomes (Forret and Dougherty 2004). Hence, we do not have a sense of how networks are formed particularly within and outside the university setting. While some studies have focussed on the outcomes of developmental network structure and content, the work examining the antecedents of developmental network structure and content are largely conceptual. This echoes the view of Chandler et al (2011:543) who expressed:

*'the field is ripe for more empirical studies that explore antecedents and outcomes of developmental networks' .... 'What are the implications of the various types of networks - those with greater proportion of intra- versus extra-organizational developers, diverse versus dense – for a wide array of objective and subjective outcomes?'*

Amid the above research background the study proposed a longitudinal model on undergraduate's relational career management and career success. This is followed by a series of hypotheses proposing the impact of undergraduates' developmental network structure, in terms of size, strength of the relationship and the career and psycho-social support derived from these developers, on their perceived career success – (measured as perceived employability and clarity of professional identity).

## **Methods and data analysis**

An online survey was sent to all second-year undergraduate students from a pre and post- 1992 university (resulting in 793 responses) using a name generator approach. It was later followed up with the same students in the third year of their studies (resulting in 222 responses). Respondents were from a variety of sociodemographic background. Lastly, a series of multiple and logistic regression analyses were employed to examine undergraduates' relational influences and any impact on their subjective career success.

## **Results**

Hypotheses were partially supported. For instance, significant positive relationships were found between two of the DN size variables i.e. the number of formal developers within and outside the university. Significant associations were also found between the developmental network strength and subjective career success. DN emotional closeness was significantly positively related to subjective career success.

Longitudinal results also showed that formal developers play an important role in enhancing student perceived employability and professional identity. For example, those

students with low levels of perceived employability move towards seeking out additional support from their formal developers to increase employability levels in their final year. Additionally, students starting out with lower levels clarity of professional identity will have increased the number of their formal developers (outside university) overtime. This suggest that professional identity formation help shape students' decision to engage with formal developers.

## **Conclusion and policy implications**

In general, the results have shown relational influences matter for undergraduates' career success. Specifically, the study revealed that formal developmental relationships and the emotional intensity of these relationships shaped the perception of early career success for individuals in the transitory period of university to work. Study limitations, which could be a valuable direction for future research, include employing longitudinal designs within a longer time period. The study has important theoretical implications such as the consideration of formal and informal developmental network characteristics for early-career individuals. Practical implications for HEs' educational helpers and policy makers encompasses:

- 1) How undergraduates can prepare more effectively for graduate transition from university to work by cultivating and/or leveraging their formal developers within and outside the university.
- 2) How an innovative online diagnostic tools can be used to understand the level of engagement or disengagement of undergraduates' career management.

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