Employability and Career Progression
for Full time, UK resident Masters Students

INTERIM REPORT for the
Higher Education Careers Service Unit

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1). Research Highlights

A fuller summary of the research findings follows, later in this report. Here, we highlight some of the more significant findings.

1) Entry into fulltime Masters programmes falls into three types:
   • staying on in the same department;
   • moving on to either a different department, or different university, or both;
   • returning to fulltime study, after a period of employment.

2) Most fulltime Masters students come from middle class backgrounds, with significant economic and cultural parental support.

3) The choice process is tightly constrained by prior dispositions and experiences. Only a limited number of courses/institutions are considered, and for some, the decision to continue studying is effectively a non-choice.

4) Motivations for further study involve a combination of intrinsic interest (in academic work and in aspects of a student lifestyle) and a hope that the course will lead to greater employability and a fulfilling job.

5) Choice of course and institution are often strongly influenced by social factors, including established friendship groups, or family connections – especially the needs and interests of partners.

6) For all students, the Masters course was a time of change and transition. This was partly unwanted and unforeseen and partly desired and deliberately worked upon, though often not in ways resembling conventional career management strategies.

7) Four types of transition were discovered:
   • confirmatory and socialising experiences that strongly reinforced previous career intentions;
   • confirmatory experiences that weren’t socialising, where wider interests and concerns balanced or even vied with the experiences of studying;
   • contradictory or evolving experiences, leading to moves into alternative career pathways to areas of interest;
   • dislocating experiences, leading to alienation from the course or original career hopes, in ways that had not been resolved at the time of our second interviews.

8) All students face a significant turning point in their careers at the end of the courses, because there are few if any options to further continue with fulltime
study (one student had been accepted to do a PhD). However, the extent to which students take control of this transition, or see it as forced upon them, varied significantly.

9) Current guidance provision for Masters students is problematic. Whilst careers services see them as part of the undergraduate labour market, Masters students see themselves as being different, with different needs. Also, the one-year structure of Masters is much fuller and more intense than undergraduate provision, planned over three or four years.

10) Many Masters students are reluctant to make use of careers services. Those who are unfocussed perceive the service as being for others who know what they want to do; those with clearer intentions assume that the service is for those who do not know what to do.

11) Two types of Masters student are particularly ill-served at present – those with unclear intentions and very poor career management skills, and those who become deflected from what they and others assumed was a fairly clear vocational pathway.

12) The Business Conversion course students face particular difficulties, and there must be a question mark about the career value of this type of programme, which has no direct employment links, and arguably leaves students worse off than others with more specialist business or business–related first degrees.

13) Current approaches to guidance for Masters students emphasise labour market entry and employer needs. Yet these students face other problems of personal development, for which a more person-centred, holistic guidance provision would have great potential value.
2). Introduction: rationale and aims

This research project was commissioned by the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU), from the Lifelong Learning Institute of the University of Leeds. The focus of the research is on the career progression and employability of UK resident fulltime Masters degree students. In the current UK situation there is a paradox around the place of Masters degrees within Higher Education (HE). There has been a progressive expansion of graduate numbers, with the explicit policy objective of 50% of the target age group entering HE by 2010. Such growth in graduate numbers sets a premium on those who can demonstrate something extra. At the same time, for workers classed as professional by the Labour Force Survey, there has been a dramatic % increase in those with higher degrees, from 14.4% (male), and 11.0% (female) in 1991, to 24.9% (male) and 28.3% (female) by 2001 (Lambert, 2004).

However, despite this growth, in some subject areas it is becoming increasingly difficult for universities to recruit full-time, UK-based, Masters degree students (British Academy, 2001). Moreover, very little is known about career decision making and progression for such students. In this study we are exploring UK students’ paths into full time Masters study including the role of University careers advice and guidance. The evidence generated will develop greater understanding of these students’ motivations and learner identities, and identify key factors impacting on their career decisions and transitions. This will help policy-makers and practitioners to provide appropriate career guidance and support for them.

The research began in August 2002 and is due to finish in July 2005. This Interim Report covers the first phase, which examined in detail the ways in which Masters students chose their courses, their experiences on those courses, and their developing perception and plans for the future. In the second phase, which is already underway, we will investigate their experiences after graduating, with a specific emphasis on employment and employability.

Aims
1) To generate empirical evidence about the career development of full-time Masters degree students in the UK.

2) To apply and test the theories of careership and learning careers in relation to Masters degree students.

3) To aid policy makers and providers in the provision of guidance and support for UK-based Masters students, into, through and beyond their HE-based studies.
Objectives

1. To develop a greater understanding of Masters students’ motivations and learner identities.

2. To identify significant factors which impact upon their learner identities, career decisions and transitions.

3. To identify linkages between Masters degree study and labour market destinations.

4. To propose recommendations for policy and practice, particularly in relation to the role of HE guidance provision for this group and their employers.
3). Methodology

This is a qualitative project, developing in-depth case studies of 24 students across 6 Masters courses in two universities (one post-1992 and one pre-1992) in the North of England. We are using semi-structured interviews with the students and with other people significantly involved in the students’ decisions to do postgraduate study, and to seek employment. These include partners, family members, university careers advisers, personal tutors and employers. In addition, we have interviewed one senior staff member from the careers service at each of the two universities.

The courses
The 6 Masters courses we are using are listed below. Graphic Art and Business are located in the post-1992 university, the rest in the pre-1992 university. Course names have been slightly changed to preserve confidentiality. The sample is predominantly a purposive one, reflecting an established typology of degree courses.

Vocational courses linked to or required for a specialised occupation:
- Interpreting – for skilled linguists to train them in interpreting. Funding is available from the AHRB through individual applications supported by the department. Fees approx. £4,800.
- Applied Sciences – strongly linked with industry. Has circa 7 student bursaries provided annually by NERC, distributed at the discretion of the course director. Fees £2,870.

Semi-vocational courses relating to a broad occupational area
- Graphic Art – aimed at those with an established, or those aspiring to establish a practice. Funded by AHRB through individual student applications supported by the department. Fees £2,700.
- Business – a conversion course for those who haven’t studied the subject before. Self-funding students can apply for a career development loan from banks. Fees £4,320.

Non-vocational courses
- Philosophy – mainly attracts students from the undergraduate degree programmes. Fees £2,870.
- Classics – mainly attracts undergraduates from the same university into a broad postgraduate programme. Fees £2,870.

The Students
We recruited 4 students from each Masters course following an initial interview with the course director. As well as seeking a broadly representative sample in terms of age, gender and ethnicity, we also deliberately targeted some atypical individuals. This gives us a total of 24 fulltime Masters students, 12 men and 12 women. All 24 were aged between 21 and 28 at the time of their first interview. One student is Indian UK and all the rest are white UK. None of the students is disabled.
Twenty of the students come from, and went to school in, the North of the UK. Eleven went to school in the state sector and the other 13 went to private, independent or Grammar schools. Eighteen of the students stayed on at their school sixth form. The other 6 went to sixth form, or Further Education, colleges. Only one student did not carry on with full time study at age 18.

In the first phase of the project, we completed two sweeps of interviews with these students, one early in their first term, and the second towards the end of the third and final term. Insights from the first sweep were used to prepare for the second, which helped generate a deeper understanding of the students, as well as providing evidence of any changes over the year. In all, we have conducted:

- 47 interviews with students (One student was interviewed once, between the two sweeps)
- 28 interviews with significant others
- 6 interviews with course directors
- 3 interviews with HE careers advisers
- 3 interviews with employers

This gives a total of 87 interviews, all of which have been tape recorded and transcribed.

**Analysis**

This data was analysed at three levels. firstly, we worked to construct individual stories for each of the 24 students. For these stories, we drew on interviews with significant others, as well as those with the students. Secondly, we analysed each course, drawing upon the detailed stories of the four students, supplemented by tutor interviews, and by documentary evidence, such as course prospectuses, and student handbooks. Finally, we analysed the data as a whole, in order to focus on Masters students as a category. In both the second and third level of analysis, we concentrated on similarities and differences within and between individuals and groups. Early findings were shared with invited practitioners and researchers in two workshops, which helped further refine our thinking.

**Problems and their solution**

We have experienced very few problems with this research thus far, and work has proceeded broadly as originally planned. It took time to get access and permission at the post-1992 university, so interviews with students from these courses were conducted towards the end of each sweep. However, we have found it difficult to interview a ‘significant other’ for every student (28 instead of 36 as originally intended). Some parents and partners weren’t available, some interviewees were reluctant to agree to other people being interviewed and some of the course tutors in the post 1992 university have not responded to repeated requests for interviews. Taking the research as a whole, this reduced sample has not impaired our ability to meet the aims and objectives of the project.
4). Preliminary Findings

Our preliminary findings are divided into four parts: entry onto the Masters courses, experiences of the courses, relevance of the theories of careership and learning careers, and HE career guidance provision and use.

Entry onto the Masters courses

Our first interviews with the students focused on their decision-making before entry to the Masters course, in the context of their previous experiences and broader lives. We identified three types of career transition:

Staying on: 11 students, across all the courses except business conversion, are staying on at the same university to do a Masters course in the same subject as their first degree. These students are positively confirming previously established lifestyles and their desired identities. In doing the Masters they are seeking to continue these lifestyles, albeit with an increased focus on their academic studies. They felt no need to initiate a transition or turning point at the end of their first degree. Indeed some explicitly sought to avoid, or at least postpone, a major transition such as entry into the labour market.

This group have a sense of continuing their studies as a ‘logical progression’ and a ‘natural extension’ of their first degree. This is similar to the ‘non’ decision of going to University at 18 that several of them describe. Formal education has been a central facet of their existence from age 5.

Five of the students who were staying on felt that they had ‘unfinished business’ (of an intellectual or creative kind) from their first degree and needed another year to develop in their subject. All of them talked with passion about their interest in their subject area and their desire to take their studies further. Some felt a sense of loyalty to the course staff. Others were keen to carry on studying with people they knew, in an institution they knew, living amongst their friends. Tutors played an influential role in encouraging students to stay on.

Four of these students were hoping to move into work in a specific industry or area following their Masters. All students described the need to re-present themselves to others to justify doing the Masters course, often in terms of hoped for improved job prospects. Many of these students expressed some anxiety about their age and having to take the opportunities to study and travel now, before they start their careers. Their capacity to fund a full time course, often through parental support, afforded them the opportunity to do now what might later be impossible.

Moving on: 4 students have changed institution or subject, initiating a transition in a different career direction. A complex combination of social, cultural, economic and personal factors influenced their decisions. Two of these students appear to be being
pulled towards another option and evolving into a new set of circumstances. The other two students appear to be pushing away from their previous circumstances, which seem to have become contradictory in some way. The difference between being pulled and being pushed is one of emphasis.

All four of these students have initiated a change in their circumstances. Yet although the courses they are taking at Masters level might at first appear to be the central core of these changes social, cultural, economic and personal factors are also implicated in these ‘turning points’ as the students make sense of their horizons for action.

Coming back: 9 students have returned to HE to do a Masters after a period in employment. Their decisions were often driven by dissatisfaction with their experiences in the labour market, and a desire to find more fulfilling and/or high-status work. Those students who had gone into ‘graduate level’ work upon completion of their first degree described some frustration with their work experiences and the labour market circumstances which had forced them into considering the Masters. These students have experienced the broader structural influences of labour markets on their horizons for action. Some have experienced the ‘graduate’ labour market and found it wanting. These experiences distinguish the students who have come back to do their Masters from those who have stayed on or moved on.

Common Experiences: There are similarities shared by all the students. All are clearly engaged in an on-going process of identity formation, and choosing the Masters is one way of attempting to take some control of this process. Financial considerations are also important, but differ according to individual circumstances. Most students are ‘self’-funding, although in practice many parents contribute heavily. Taken as a whole, the students come from predominantly middle class backgrounds, with significant levels of cultural and economic capital. This influences both the ways in which they see the world, and their ability to follow a Masters education programme. They are continuing within, or returning to, a world where they know how to succeed. Despite some serious personal concerns about the future, most seem to believe that success in education will, or at least should, lead to a fulfilling, worthwhile career, of appropriate social status. For most, earning very large salaries is relatively unimportant.

All the students experienced time pressures in their final year of their first degree. Concentrating on finishing the degree and maintaining their standard of work meant that future concerns including job hunting and pursuing a career were postponed by most. It is also important to note that our students have done broadly non-vocational first degrees. This is unsurprising since students from narrowly vocationally orientated first degrees tend to go into work rather than go on to Masters level study. Nine of the students did go into work after graduation. Six had specific work experiences that contributed to their choice to carry on into the Masters and the other nine have had a variety of jobs unrelated to the field they want to go into.
Experiences of the Masters Courses

Students experienced the Masters year as a period of career transition. While most have seen the Masters as a way to position themselves with more distinction among the general graduate cohort, few have followed linear pathways. For most, their initial expectations on entry did not prefigure how they actually progressed or where they planned to move on at the end of the year. Moreover, their experience of the Masters course was closely bound up with other aspects of their broader lives. We adapted the typology of ‘routines’ (Hodkinson et al 1996) to these transitions, and our analysis suggests four groupings:

1. **Confirmatory and socialising transitions:** for 8 students (mostly on vocational and semi-vocational courses), the Masters year has reinforced their original decision. It has socialised them into the norms and expectations of the Masters course and the labour market they were targeting, including academia, for some. Generally these students had maintained the Masters as the central focus in their lives, either minimising distractions away from the course, or finding their other interests and commitments coherent with studying their subject area. These students were trying to use the end of their course as an opportunity to progress into occupations related to their course and three of these students had successfully found work.

2. **Confirmatory transitions:** 7 students (all on non-vocational or semi-vocational courses) shared their focus this year between the Masters course and other interests, though both had reinforced their identities. Wider interests and concerns in their lives seem to have greater influence on most of their post-Masters plans, which were generally tentative and short-term, including temporary or freelance work, or ‘gap years’ seeking ‘any old job’ to save money for a few months in order to travel. Postponement of longer-term career plans was an important feature of some of these students’ decisions once again. Some were forced to defer their plans through lack of money for longer-term goals, whereas some desired deferral to allow them to travel, hoping to get a clearer idea of what they wanted to do next. There is some potential for dislocation in these students’ interim plans.

3. **Contradictory/evolving transitions:** 5 students (across all types of courses) had experienced problems within the Masters course, giving them a sense of ‘not fitting in’ and causing them to reconsider their options. All completed their course but took steps to move into other areas, evolving beyond the Masters into new territory. While this had involved a period of unease during the year, these students had pulled their experiences round. They were using the Masters to move themselves on, often by moving away from what they had previously perceived to be a certain pathway, using their other interests as a guide.
4. **Dislocated transitions:** 4 students (across all types of course) had found the year to be a dislocating experience. One vocational student reacted against sexist discrimination she perceived on the course and in the related industry. Others have applied to high-profile graduate training schemes and been repeatedly rejected. Although they enjoyed their Masters courses, these students find themselves unable to reconcile traditional graduate opportunities with their own identities and vague desires for enjoyable and varied work. However, they lack career management skills and have so far been unable to resolve these contradictions by evolving in a new direction. All 4 remain unclear about their future plans.

Our initial analysis showed that a significant number of students entered their Masters course with clear vocational focus and/or expectations of relatively certain pathways beyond it. These expectations have been disrupted to a large extent, irrespective of the students’ vocational focus to begin with. This implies even greater differentiated needs for guidance in this group than our initial data suggested.

The end of the Masters course is a **structural** turning point for all these students. Moving on is inevitable, and for some this means moving on from the world of education for the first time. For some this is also likely to mean moving on from financial dependence on parents. However, turning points may also be viewed as **self-initiated** or as **enforced** by the actions of others or the conditions of the field.

- A number of students in (1) and all of those in (3) interpreted their turning points as **self-initiated**. They were aware of desirable opportunities for positive progression, deployed effective career management skills in pursuing them, and have largely been successful.
- Others in (1) and all of those in (2) are attempting to progress in directions they would like to pursue, but the lack of opportunities in their field and/or their lack of economic, social and/or cultural capital reinforce the sense of their turning points as **structural**.
- Those in (4) perceive their turning point as **enforced**, and they have little sense of control over it. They are perhaps the most active job searchers, but without any clear focus, they adopt a ‘scattergun’ and, sometimes desultory, approach. Consequently their efforts are poorly implemented and ineffective.

All of the students still hoped to distinguish themselves in the labour market through the Masters credential. In particular, those targeting mainstream graduate jobs attempt to construct themselves as ‘pickers and choosers’ in the labour market. They hope to join ‘selector’ companies with glamorous products, and to avoid becoming the objects of ‘recruiter’ companies they perceive as ‘dull’. Most of the students in (1) and (3) were trying to use the end of the course as an opportunity for further self-realisation. Nearly two thirds of our sample viewed their careership predominantly in terms of alternative lifestyles inconsistent with employment-led goals and the mainstream graduate labour market. However, many of the students are restricted through lack of economic, social and/or cultural capital. Moreover, where we perceived actual and potential contradiction and dislocation in their careership, these were often linked to issues of class, race and gender.
One way of understanding these experiences, is that most if not all students are actively working to move beyond a past student life and towards / into the labour market. Thus, even for those who saw studying as the central part of their life, there is a conscious distancing from what they perceive to be the more trivial aspects of undergraduate life (excessive drinking, partying, etc.). The students feel different from undergraduates, and very different from freshers. In parallel, there is a sense of becoming fuller adults, moving past a time of relative self-indulgence and instant gratification. From this perspective, the post-university world is seen as necessary to complete this process. It is inevitable, partly welcomed, but also feared, by some.

For most of the students, movement into the labour market appears pragmatic and partial. Even where the Masters courses seem quite tightly focused on a particular vocation, when compared with apprenticeships (for example) it is clear that employers are relatively loosely involved, bearing none of the responsibility or risk for student achievement and progression. There does appear to be a particular labour market for Masters students, but it is limited and segmented in technical and specialised areas, both in industry and academia.

**The Relevance of the theories of Careership and Learning Careers**

Work on our theoretical analysis is at a very early stage. However, we have found elements of both these theoretical approaches that makes sense in relation to our data. These include:

- Decisions about entry onto the Masters courses, and thinking about possible career destinations afterwards, show all the key characteristics of what Hodkinson et al (1996) termed ‘pragmatic rationality’.
- Such decisions can best be understood as enabled and constrained by ‘horizons for action’. For a significant number of our sample, these horizons are surprisingly narrow – often because of their own limited perceptions of themselves and of their future identities, but also because of the positions from which they view their possible options.
- Issues of class and gender (and, more tentatively because of our sample, ethnicity) are central to constructing students dispositions, horizons for action, and actions. Social, cultural and economic capital are key and unevenly distributed resources for advancing their education and careers.
- Often other players are highly significant – course tutors, employers, and key relations, friends and acquaintances.
- Dispositions towards education and career change, in partly unpredictable ways, but elements of continuity can also be identified in many of the stories.

Beyond this broad confirmation, we are now beginning to use the data to rework key parts of the theorising.

- The published versions of both theories underplay the significance of social capital (networking links, who you know, who can support/sponsor
This research, like that of Ball (2003) confirms the significance of this aspect of career development.

- The early careership theory dealt with change through a rather rigid pattern of routines and turning points. Though this has proved useful up to a point, we are working on a more subtle and sophisticated view of change through transitioning, in relation to this data.

The Place of HE Guidance

Here we draw together the perceptions and experiences of guidance from the students, with views of some guidance providers, and an analysis of the nature and type of HE guidance provision.

Guidance needs, as perceived by careers staff. Careers advisers were emphatic in their views that most Masters students do not have fundamentally different guidance needs from undergraduates. They argue that most will be entering the same sectors of the graduate labour market as those holding first degrees, and therefore the same provision and approach in careers guidance is appropriate for both client groups. The Prospects website also carries numerous references to this issue, advising students that a Masters qualification in itself may not carry any advantage in the eyes of employers (although it also contradicts this advice on occasion).

With the exception of the ‘highly technical’ courses, careers advisers do not believe that a Masters degree gives students the advantage they hope for in the labour market. They are aware that Masters students see themselves as distinct from undergraduates. But they believe that, like any other graduate, Masters students will have to articulate clearly the benefits of any academic or extra-curricular experience to employers, and demonstrate that it has developed their employability.

A ‘gap’ year after the first degree might be equally useful, and a poorly-presented Masters year might actually be a disadvantage. They are concerned that they are reaching only those students who already have the focus and career management skills to know they need help, and that those who are unfocused – and in greatest need of guidance – are not being attracted to use the available provision.

Guidance needs, as revealed by student interviews

- Some students remain vocationally unfocused, have poor career management skills and have made little or no progress in developing their career plans. The career idea by ‘osmosis’ that some hoped for has not happened. Others had failed to do adequate careers research before committing themselves to a vocational course. Some have gradually lowered their sights to more typical graduate
‘starter’ jobs, including ‘underemployment’. Others have more whimsical ideas about their future options, although these are not necessarily unrealistic, particularly for those from privileged backgrounds with significant capital. Their career hopes are often that ‘something will turn up’, but most are not well equipped either to generate such serendipity or to take advantage of its occurrence. They have poor career management skills, and some are still in denial of the transition they must make.

- Some students had clear vocational focus to begin with. The vocational Masters they chose had been especially attractive because of their strong links with an associated industry. However, during the year students discovered just how few openings were available to them. Although the Masters might have been necessary, it was by no means sufficient to gain entry to desired positions, resulting in considerable disillusionment for some. These students were ill-prepared to re-orient themselves to alternative opportunities. Equal opportunities issues arose for one student, but she had no idea that she might seek help with this.

- Those who had been successful in gaining their first-choice positions had either pursued an originally clear vocational focus, or refocused as their transitions evolved. They made good use of previous work or educational experience and the social capital this had generated. They displayed well-developed career management skills to pursue these opportunities and to generate and respond to happenstance if need be.

- A small number of students had found themselves growing comfortable in the academic community. Some saw academia as a safer, more meritocratic environment than the labour market outside education. These students found it difficult to get impartial information about how to apply for funding and where to study for their PhD, during the Masters course.

**Guidance provision – perceptions and use**

- There has been no careers education input into any of the courses. The two vocational courses (both at the pre-1992 university) have brought prestigious employers into the university and provided opportunities for students to network with them and apply for jobs. The semi-vocational Graphic Art course at the post-1992 university has provided some opportunities for students to showcase their work and network within the industry. The Business conversion course has provided no support for students’ career progression. Academic courses at the pre-1992 have provided teaching experience and PhD study opportunities for a few.

- Applied Sciences is the only Masters course in our sample that provides detailed destinations information for its students. They found this very helpful.

- Careers services have mainly been accessed by some of the students at the pre-1992 university and by one student only at the post-1992 university. They have used it primarily to refine their jobsearch skills – especially writing CVs. The students who used this type of support viewed it positively. Peer example and recommendation were key in take-up of this service.

- Some students used the careers centre to obtain information about employers, but were less satisfied with this aspect of service provision. Students on vocational
courses felt the careers service could not provide the detailed ‘insider’ information their tutors possessed. Students with less focus felt overwhelmed by the volume of information available.

- Others had made no contact with the careers service, and several still did not know where it was or how to access it. Career guidance is still perceived as irrelevant by many of these students. Those who are unfocused continue to see it as a service only for those who have focused on a clear occupational choice. Those who are focused rely on their courses, tutors and social networks as more useful. Some who have changed direction will not use the careers service because it is too closely associated with the institution. For some, one negative experience of statutory guidance provision at school has been enough to deter them from using the formal careers service for good.
- Prospects and other websites were used to access job vacancies, but had not proved useful.
- Careers fairs were seen as offering too limited a range of opportunities to be relevant.
- Internet search engines, newspaper vacancy pages, professional associations, e-mail vacancy notification systems and industry-specific mailing lists were used, but as yet with no results.
- Family members and friends provided information, advice and contacts, but seemed to have less influence on exit from the Masters than on entry to it.
- The demands of course work and exams often clashed with career management activity. The students found it difficult to gear up for the recruitment cycle in November when their courses had only just started.

**Employers’ perspectives**

- There is a distinction between the recruitment of Masters students on courses in specifically specialised and technical areas and those who have studied more general subjects.
- Employers are often looking for specific identity traits and characteristics, which fit with the ethos of their particular company. Possession of these traits and characteristics is heavily reliant on having appropriate social and cultural capital rather than skills that can be learned, or qualifications achieved.
- Contributions made by employers, both through the course and via the careers service, act as unofficial recruitment filtering processes. Students are not necessarily prepared for, or aware of, this aspect of the process.
5). Implications for Guidance Provision

In this section, we have moved from description and explanation, to recommendations and suggestions for improving provision. These suggestions are grounded in the research data, but also entail interpretation on our part. The purpose of this part of the Report is to provoke further thought by guidance providers and practitioners, not to externally prescribe precise courses of action, a task for which we are not qualified.

Changing the Guidance Approach
The perceptions by providers of Masters students needs, combined with the limited provision made for them, centre on the point of transition into employment, reflecting a somewhat instrumental, economic notion of the purpose of career guidance which has come to dominate UK government policies on both HE and guidance. It is an approach which views guidance as a ‘market-maker’, facilitating interactions between the supply and demand sides of the labour market. However, the ethical base of career guidance since the 1970s has been a more socially oriented, person-centred approach, embracing much looser purposes of assisting clients to pursue self-actualisation in their own terms. One careers adviser at the pre-1992 university, where ‘pure academic’ courses are predominantly located, described how this creates a dilemma between satisfying employment led goals and responding to clients’ needs.

In this context, the issues of prolonged study and avoidance of immediate labour market entry needs careful and non-judgemental consideration. Instrumental pressures on guidance practice can lead to the assumption that such procrastination is bad and clear occupational goals are good. The vocationally unfocused students seem to be engaging in unplanned procrastination, and as a result, they experience fear and low self-esteem, and this becomes a further barrier to seeking effective guidance. By offering guidance with the possibility that procrastination can have a positive outcome – if suitably planned – students might at least be more willing to seek guidance in the future. At best, they might acquire more career management skills and be moved forward in their ability to meet the challenge of their enforced transition from full-time education when it arrives.

Resourcing Guidance
We have clear evidence that full-time, UK-based Masters students are a specific client group which is not fully recognised or resourced in HE guidance policy – despite the fact that the majority of our sample have various unmet guidance needs. There is no specific funding for work with this group, as there is for work with research students and contract researchers. Nor are there any academic drivers for careers education and guidance within Masters degree programmes, as there are for undergraduates. At the pre-1992 university, the careers service has developed in-puts for three of the many Masters degrees on offer, mainly funded by departments top-slicing student fees in order to buy in provision from the careers service. This points, however, to a further issue, which is the disparity between pre-1992 and post-1992
universities in funding for careers services, compounded by further inequalities in access to prestigious employers who favour pre-1992 institutions.

**Developing appropriate provision for Masters students**

The careers adviser who has developed work with Masters programmes in the pre-1992 university has suggested that even quite small interventions by the careers service during students’ induction can make a significant impact on their use of guidance provision and their ability to develop career management skills. His experience indicates that Masters students respond positively when guidance is presented initially in terms of an academic, theoretical framework of career theory, which appeals to their self-image as scholars. One focus of that provision is to help students to identify the additional generic skills they develop through Masters study, over and above those developed in their first degrees. For many, this may be the first time they have considered their graduate skills, depending on their previous experience. Careers services might also benefit from the apparently strong peer effect we have noted, by encouraging former Masters students to contribute to their input.

The second-round data in particular suggest that the more impartial and client-centred nature of guidance provided by the careers service may be of great importance. Embedding careers education and guidance in the Masters curriculum alone may not help students who decide to pursue directions not related to their subject of study, or who feel excluded from or marginalised within that course or occupational area. Liaison between careers services and course tutors should help to develop provision in appropriate ways, and it would be helpful for tutors to understand triggers for referring students to guidance services.

Appropriate use of ICT – needs-based websites and confidential e-mail guidance – may also be useful for this group. E-guidance may be particularly useful for those who have concerns about the careers service being influenced by its location within their own university, or who are reluctant for any reason to engage in face-to-face guidance.

A significant number of students in our sample are seeking alternative careers and lifestyles outside the mainstream graduate labour market, and these students have some of the greatest apparent needs for guidance. Holistic approaches to guidance, and greater expertise on the pursuit of less standard career routes, would equip careers services to help this group more effectively.

However, the experience of our sample also points to a lack of pre-entry guidance. Students’ ideas about the work to which their Masters course leads, for those entering vocational degrees, were only subjected to challenge as they encountered its realities during the course. More could be done in the marketing of Masters courses themselves to encourage prospective students to seek guidance, and a wider range of issues in choosing postgraduate study could be addressed in existing paper- and ICT-based guidance resources.
Marketing careers services, understanding the market for Masters students

This in turn raises the need for careers services to consider marketing themselves specifically to full-time Masters students, and branding some of their provision for this group. The view that Masters students are the same as undergraduates is overly focused on the labour market destinations of students, rather than considering student needs. Though there is no generally distinct labour market for masters students, our research also indicates that, in some sectors, a distinct labour market does exist, and there is a need for further research to identify these more clearly. It also suggests that Masters courses should collate and disseminate more accurate and complete destinations information than many do at present, and that this information should be made available to prospective students as well as during the course.

Equal opportunities issues

HE careers services should have clear policies for promoting equal opportunities, and ensure that students know what help the careers service can offer or facilitate in this regard. They should make clear their role as advocates for equal opportunities, and as providers of individualised support and advice for students who encounter discrimination. The data from the Applied Sciences course suggests evidence of institutional sexism, and the perception of the two women students was that they were not being treated fairly.
6). Dissemination and Outputs

During phase 1 of this research, the following dissemination activities have been undertaken.

Conferences and workshops
April 2003     Paper presented in the NICEC/CRAC ‘Cutting Edge II ’ Conference, Coventry.
May 2003       1st invitational workshop, Leeds.

Publications

Website
Many of these publications can be accessed directly from the Lifelong Learning Institute website, which is at www.leeds.ac.uk/lli/.
7). Future Plans

As we complete this Interim Report on Phase 1, fieldwork on Phase 2 is already underway. We have begun the next round of interviews with our now ex-students, linked to their employers, where relevant and possible. We are also carrying out significant other interviews to fill the only gap in our phase 1 work.

Parallel with the phase 2 research, analysis of Phase 1 data will continue, and our theoretical thinking will be further developed.

Dissemination will continue, with a major event towards the end of March 2004, organised by CSU, further invitational workshops, conference presentations, Briefing and Working papers, and a series of articles in professional and academic journals. Two of the latter are already well underway.

9). References


10). Contact Details

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