Careers Guidance and International Students in Irish Higher Education: Practitioner Perspectives

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Abstract.

This article examines four key themes identified in the literature as being central to the provision of effective career services for international students. The key themes are as follows: 1) Understanding international students' capacity for cultural adaptation and integration, 2) Determining English language proficiency amongst international students, 3) The collectivist versus individualist orientation of students, 4) The skill of reflection and personal development planning. To explore these themes, interviews were conducted with six staff members in careers services at Irish universities. Our findings supported the literature in that all six participants of this study agreed that the themes were significant when working with international students. The respondents also identified one further issue which did not appear in the literature, relating to international students' expectations of the role of a careers service in helping them secure employment.

Keywords: career counselling, cultural adaptation, international students, third level.

1. Introduction.

The internationalisation of education is growing (Wang and O'Connell, 2020). Every year, third level institutions in Ireland host an increasing number of international students, and while COVID-19 will likely negatively impact this steady increase in international student numbers to Ireland, it is likely numbers will continue to grow as circumstances improve. According to an article in The Irish Times (McGee and O'Brien, 2021), the Irish government is engaging in a 3-year strategy to grow international student numbers in Ireland which accounted for €2.5 billion

in revenue in 2019. Recent estimates put the number of international students in Ireland at over 20,000 (Higher Education Authority, 2018). A report on National Strategy for Higher Education up to 2030 highlights that "*while higher education in Ireland is already characterised by flows of students and staff to and from other countries, it is essential that this be broadened and deepened*" (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). In general terms, little is known about the internationalisation of education in Ireland (Clarke, Yang, and Harmon, 2018). Moran, Green and Warren (2021,1) state "*International students are generally understudied and marginalised as metaphorical 'others' within global education policies, often being reduced to mere recruitment and financial targets and units of analysis*." Furthermore, Wang and O'Connell (2020) state that there is little research on rates of return by international students to their respective home countries post-graduation from Irish universities. With the rapid growth in international students in Ireland and a lack of existing literature on this phenomenon, we argue that it is necessary to study how Irish universities can adapt to support this section of the student body.

Specifically, this paper will examine how Irish career services manage the provision of services to international students. To date, studies exploring the concerns of a culturally diverse student population identified a growing need for the provision of culturally sensitive career supports that foster students' employability (Chiang 2014; Campbell 2010; Reynolds and Constantine, 2007; Chircov, Vanseenskiste, Tao and Lynch, 2007; Yang, Noels, and Saumure, 2005; Shen and Herr 2004). Furthermore, this body of literature indicated four key themes as being relevant to providing effective career services to international students as follows:

1. Understanding of international students' capacity for cultural adaptation and integration

2. Determining English language proficiency amongst international students

3. The collectivist versus individualist orientation of students

4. The skill of reflection and personal development planning.

To further explore the four themes detailed above, primary research was conducted in the form of interviews with staff from university career services across Ireland. However, to begin, this paper will explore the four issues above in greater detail via a literature review. This will

be followed by a summary of the interviews conducted with staff from university career services in Ireland. We will then present a discussion on the findings and provide recommendations for future research. This study is timely as it is of great importance that the Irish education sector understands the needs of culturally diverse students, so as to improve how they are supported as they make the transition from students to employees in the Irish employment sector.

2.   The research question.

The objective of this paper is to attempt to understand if staff in career services at Irish universities see the four themes above as being central issues relating to working with international students, or will they identify other issues that have greater significance.

3.   Literature review.

3.1 International Students' Cultural Adaptation and Integration.

Kim (2001, p. 31) describes cultural adaptation as the attempt "*to establish (or re-establish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal and functional relationships*" with unfamiliar environments when an individual moves from their home culture to a new one. The concept of cultural adaptation is often related to 'culture shock' - the term first employed by Oberg (1960) who claimed that 'culture shock' simultaneously involves contact with, or immersion in a new culture and a loss of the safety net of familiar social support and practices. While much research investigating the adaptation of international students has been conducted worldwide (Pope, Cheng and Leong, 1998; Reynolds and Constantine, 2007; Ramachandran, 2011), little is known about the experiences of international students in Ireland. O'Reilly, Ryan and Hickey (2010, p. 591) conducted the first in-depth study on the psychological well-being and socio-cultural adaptation of short-term international students in Ireland. The results of their research indicated that overall, short-term international students at Irish universities adapt to life in Ireland reasonably well and reported that they experienced a high level of social support. Contrary to the findings of O'Reilly and colleagues (2010), Reynolds and Constantine (2007, p. 338) found that "*higher levels of acculturative distress*" and "*greater intercultural competence concerns*" were associated with lower levels of career outcome expectations

amongst students from diverse cultural backgrounds. They stress that without an understanding of how career related issues are influenced by the process of cultural adjustment, third level career counsellors run the risk of being insufficiently equipped to meet the unique career needs of culturally diverse students. Furthermore, findings from Pope and colleagues (1998) indicate that students who are removed from their primary support systems such as family and friends can struggle with identifying career goals and making career decisions. Considering the lack of studies on cultural adaptation and career development of international students at Irish universities, the authors of this study deemed it timely to investigate the views of staff operating within Irish university career services.

3.2 English Language Proficiency.

Ramachandran (2011) argues that the English language difficulties of international students can be a significant barrier to performing in an English-speaking environment. Furthermore, poor English language skills can act as a block for international students in availing of career counselling services (Reynolds and Constantine 2007; Shen and Herr 2004; O'Reilly et al., 2010; Bayley et al., 2002). Ramachandran (2011, p. 203) suggests "*the pace, accent, choice of words and terminologies utilised in everyday activities are different from what they (international students) are accustomed to*", this in turn could impact their ability to participate in group activities such as career guidance workshops.

In referring to the Irish university context, O'Reilly et al. (2010, p. 585) suggest that "*language is one of the most important differences between cultures and can be a major barrier to cultural adaptation*." This supports Ramachandran's (2011) findings that local accents and idiomatic expressions can be a significant cause of difficulties for students. O'Reilly and colleagues (2010) propose that international students' high level of English language proficiency was associated with fewer adjustment difficulties. With the above in mind, this paper set out to explore the opinions of staff working in university career services in Ireland regarding how English language proficiency of culturally diverse postgraduate students impacted their career goals.

3.3 Multicultural Career Counselling - Collectivist versus Individualist Orientation.

Robertson (2013) proposes that third level career counselling can facilitate greater overall

wellbeing by challenging negative thought processes, while Parsons (1909: 25) suggests that career counselling is much more than simply helping people in "*hunting for a job*", as it has more to do with helping people find their vocation. An example of how this process of self-discovery can occur is via narrative career counselling which is a post-modern model designed to accommodate socially constructed realities (Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte and Guichad, 2009; Del Corso and Rehfuss, 2011). Savickas, and colleagues (2009, 2013), describe a career constructionist approach that focuses on a narrative which addresses how individuals bring personal meaning to their career choices. This is done via cross reference of the accepted social values "*according to the contexts in which an individual interacts and communicates, she or he designs herself or himself in distinct identity forms (e.g., student, athlete, hobbyist)*", (Savickas et al., 2009: 245).

Cultural worldviews and values shape a student's goals and as such, individual differences need to be recognised when facilitating career development services at universities (Arthur and Popadiuk 2010; Watson 2006; Arthur and McMahon 2005; Shen and Herr 2004). Hartung (2005) proposes research on career counselling should take place in a cultural context. Furthermore, Watson (2006) highlights that choosing a career may not necessarily be driven by identity-enriching needs of clients who reflect the middle-class, white, western and American samples on which much of the career literature is founded. A study of communities in Africa (Platteau, 2000) indicates that individuals who are particularly productive are treated with suspicion, whereas in the west, these same individuals would be celebrated. Watson (2006, p. 50) points out that other cultures put emphasis on "*a self that is interconnected with others, a self that defers to the group*". This is supported by Gorodnichenko and Roland (2011: p. 21,316) as follows, "*individualism can make collective action more difficult because individuals pursue their own interest without internalising collective interests. Collectivism, in contrast, makes collective action easier because individuals internalise group interests to a greater degree. However, it also encourages conformity and discourages individuals from standing out.*"

3.4 The Skill of Reflection and Personal Development Planning.

In the UK, one of the components of a broader employability agenda which has been actively encouraged through policy, is the implementation of Personal Development Planning (PDP) as part of academic programmes (Baker, Perkins and Comber 2014; Hilsdon 2012; Clegg and

Bufton, 2008; Clegg and Bradley, 2006). PDP is defined as "*a structured and supported process undertaken by a learner to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development*" (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2009). With regard to PDP and cultural diversity, a point often overlooked relates to a significant challenge that culturally diverse students face, which is their wide variety of social, cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds which may impact on their understanding of the process of reflection – an essential skill for PDP (Baker et al., 2014). Baker and colleagues (2014) also report that UK postgraduate programmes frequently attract many international students, but generally do not incorporate PDP. These programmes also fail to appreciate the difficulties that international students who come from a collectivist culture might have in engaging in the process of self-reflection. Therefore, the authors were eager to explore the opinions of staff from Irish university career services to determine what impact PDP and career management might have on culturally diverse postgraduate students.

4.   Methodology.

Christie (2016) examined career guidance and social mobility in the UK from the practitioner's perspective via semi structured interviews which led to interesting findings. The utilisation of interviews provided the opportunity to "*probe the subtlety of individuals' opinions and practices*" (Christie, 2016 p. 76). With her research approach in mind, a similar methodology was taken by the authors of this paper in an attempt to focus "*on what views individuals expressed about their own practice and the values they demonstrated in what they said*" (Christie, 2016 p. 76). For the purposes of this study, a purposive sampling approach was followed as it is an effective use of resources (Patton, 2002). The interviews were recorded and transcribed with a reflexive and iterative approach undertaken (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) to reading the text to identify themes. The interviews were coded for themes via an initial review of the text and sentences of interest highlighted. It should be stated that engaging in a coding process is subjective and hence open to interpretation (Dunne, 2009). A further, more in depth reading of each interview was then undertaken to examine any emerging themes. This study received ethical approval from the authors' host institution, while pseudonyms are used throughout to protect identity.

As stated, the purpose of this paper is to examine the four criteria as identified in the literature

review via interviews with career services staff across four Irish universities. A total of six staff members were interviewed for this paper. The four interviewees were careers advisors who all had in-depth knowledge and experience of career counselling at third level. The remaining two interviewees functioned as international student support staff within their respective universities. The following section will explore their opinions on the four themes highlighted above. Admittedly, this is a small sample size of respondents and hence the findings are not generalisable (Dunne, 2009).

5.   Results and findings

5.1 International Students' Cultural Adaptation and Integration.

In general, the views of those interviewed for this paper regarding culturally diverse students' integration and adaptation to Irish culture stated that the degree of integration differs from person to person, and group to group.

For example, Michael (Careers Adviser) with six years' experience of supporting culturally diverse students, acknowledged there are differences within groups. However, his experience would suggest that, in particular, those coming from the eastern cultures such as Indian students can encounter difficulties in adapting, and they tend to stay close to their compatriots:

> "*You could probably say that the further east you go, probably the less integrated they get…they would be quieter…ask fewer questions….You would see for example, at lunch time, tables of Indian students, they would tend to stay with their classes a little bit more…*"

When asked about the biggest differences between Irish postgraduate students and non-Irish postgraduate students, Careers Adviser Paul stated:

> "*…a lot of international students do not have what we would call the cultural capital. They don't have the understanding, they don't know people here as much, they don't have the networks built up at this stage… if they don't have the networks and the contacts who can look at these things for them… they will often use the careers person for it…A lot of the career service can be just about being that person…I have seen this happen, when you become that kind of a rock, something for them to lean on, and be a bit of a support for them and a little bit of a home or a safe place.*"

In contrast to the views above, Claire, an International Officer, revealed that in her experience Indian students do try to learn about the host culture and to integrate with the local students:

> "*you might have a large group of Indian students who are on technology classes and 90% of these students are Indian. So, they have very little opportunity to integrate with Irish students. But they do, you can definitely see it from the clubs and societies point of view and the students' union….the football team or whatever team it might be, they integrate very well, they are very friendly and more open to…yeah.*"

5.2 English Language Proficiency.

English language competency of culturally diverse postgraduate students was one of the key challenges mentioned by the careers and international support staff. All the participants attributed its pivotal role in supporting students' needs, and all expressed concerns regarding the English-language proficiency of international students. Moreover, it was stated that it came as a shock for some students that they needed to improve their English language skills to increase their employability. Careers Advisor Paul stated:

> "*So where there is limited language ability or difficulties there, the simplest instructions can be a huge issue and it might mean that ehh, that as a careers adviser you're having to spend a lot of time actually working at perhaps even structuring a sentence which is not the role of career guidance to an extent to write sentences*".

Anne (International Careers Adviser) further pointed out the shock that some students can experience when they become aware their level of English might negatively impact their career goals:

> "*…how do you write a business email, how do you address a person in an interview so all of that is really important…Being at the top of the class can be what gets you in so it can be a shock, sometimes I will just say if you really want to find work here you definitely have to work on your English and they will kind of be a bit surprised. Because they do not see that as a factor…*"

Andrew (Careers Advisor) further highlighted the importance of English language in relation to self-expression and writing an effective CV that can attract the interests of potential eployers:

> "*…If you cannot articulate yourself to another person, let's say in the context of trying*

to get a job, if you can't articulate yourself to other people verbally and in particular in the written form, you're not getting a job. That ability to express yourself is key… if you can't write your strengths down or speak about your strengths, that's a huge barrier…"

Concerns over self-expression both verbally and written were reported to pose a considerable barrier for some culturally diverse students. The lack of English language skills that would facilitate a person in articulating their values, interests, personality, and skills was of serious concern. Speaking specifically in relation to career management, the inability to draft an effective CV and cover letter in the hope of attracting potential employers can come as a shock to some students. It is often only when they begin their studies at an English-speaking university that international students understand the gravity of the situation they find themselves in. They then realise that they must continue advancing their English if they wish to succeed in the Irish labour market.

5.3 Multicultural Career Counselling - Collectivist versus Individualist Orientation.

All the participants of this study confirmed that securing employment was a principal concern for the international students they worked with. The choice of studying abroad can be a great financial commitment on behalf of their families, and therefore the need to succeed in terms of their career was of paramount importance. For example, Michael (Careers Adviser) stated:

"there is an element of pressure on them, for some of them, and their families as well, it is a significant investment to send somebody over to an overseas institution. They want that person to perform incredibly well…and they (the students) are quite nervous to face the people back home to say I did my education overseas but now I'm back looking for a job back here…"

Careers Adviser Paul, further acknowledged the combination of immense pressure from families and communities on international students which equates to high levels of motivation to succeed in finding employment:

"…a lot of students who spent a lot of money perhaps coming over, they've relocated to Ireland to study. Perhaps there can often be a lot of commitment. They're really quite motivated for their reasons for doing their course and so forth. So there is often a

desire and drive to, you know, to actually make things happen."

Anne (International Careers Adviser) further emphasises the commitment and financial pressures that these students face:

> *"I would have people that come here from eastern countries where it has been a battle to convince the parents to let them come here to do a course that is maybe a course in humanities and the parents just say nobody is going to deal with that. And they do not have an answer and it could be huge pressure and then I would have to find a job that will fulfil X, Y, and Z…they will be around certain types of companies, certain types of jobs. Certain jobs will be very respectable and others not so… that will reflect back on the family, so did you get this job, it will be done out loud, people talk about this thing in specific cultures."*

For many international students, studying overseas is a significant financial commitment. Furthermore, there is often a pressure to secure a respectable job in a reputable company that will bring pride to the family.

5.4 The Skill of Reflection and Personal Development Planning.

All the interviewed participants confirmed that the skill of reflection and taking ownership of managing one's own career is often a new concept for international students. For example, Careers Adviser Michael stated the following about international students' opinions on self-reflection and personal development planning:

> *"They don't necessarily have the language for it. And then you add the complexity of them trying to understand a whole different way of approaching a job search, compared to what they would have had at home..... There is a lack of understanding, realising that you need to plan your career as well as just look for a job."*

Furthermore, Anne (International Careers Adviser) stated that international students often assume that the only thing that matters to employers in the west is grades:

> *'…Often when you look at India and China it is a lot more like the top grades and you know employers here are quite holistic in what they look for, where it could be slightly different in other cultures and countries and different expectations. Being at the top of the class can be what gets you in, so here it can be a shock…'*

An emphasis on grades alone might well explain why some international students struggle to engage in deep self-reflection to explore other qualities they may be able to provide employers.

5.5 Further Findings from Interviewing - Managing Students' Expectations.

A significant point raised by the career development staff which was not addressed in the literature review, was the necessity to manage students' expectations with regard to the role and scope of university career services in Ireland. Claire (International Officer) described international students' shock when they realise the amount of work they are required to put in when managing their career.

> *"In their home country, the top student might just get a job and or an internship. Or they might have never had a problem getting jobs before in their home country. They think that all the big organisations will come in and suck up all the best students and offer them jobs…It might come as a surprise to them how different it is here."*

Anne (International Careers Adviser) also echoes the point above by stating that international students at times expect the university career service to simply place them in a job:

> *"…there is a lot of work that happens in terms of managing expectations, and we are very clear in terms of our service offering. And the whole college is very clear on what we offer, what we do and do not do. But that message does not always get through because when you are going to a new country, there is then a thousand things to think about so sometimes it just doesn't register."*

The necessity to face a completely new way of approaching a job search comes to many international students as a surprise. In light of this, the career development staff are often faced with unrealistic expectations from students, such as the expectation that career services will 'place' students in jobs on their behalf.

6.   Discussion.

In the Irish context, it is important to note that culturally diverse students' level of cultural

adaptation differs from student to student and from group to group. Nonetheless, the key theme that emerged from the research conducted for this paper concerns students' general lack of cultural capital. The absence of a support network such as family and friends have implications not only for the students, but also for the staff in a university careers service. For example, students' reliance on career development staff for practical guidance and information relating to job seeking in the Irish labour market can often go beyond the remit of the university career services. International students can often rely too heavily on careers advisors when careers service staff are stretched across a large caseload of students. We suggest that it might be necessary to clearly identify the purpose of a university careers centre via a pre-emptive approach which outlines the specific role of a career service to international students. This could be done via an introductory session during orientation week for example.

Arguably the greatest issue identified from the interviews with career service staff relates to the level of English language proficiency. The university career service staff were at times gravely concerned by the lack of knowledge of international students in terms of their English language skills, which made basic exercises such as drafting a CV difficult. Compounding the problem further appeared to be a failure on the part of the students to realise their weakness in this regard. For this reason, and with reference to Ramachandran's (2011) proposals, it may be necessary for universities to introduce additional support which focuses on developing international students' English language skills. This might incur a high cost, however in consideration of the substantial financial contribution of international students to the Irish economy it might prove a worthwhile investment. In addition, supplementary sessions for culturally diverse postgraduate students which clarify the differences related to job seeking methods between Ireland and other countries may also prove advantageous.

The findings also indicated there is no single guidance approach in use by the career development staff when career counselling culturally diverse postgraduate students. As one participant points out, '*they're individuals*' and '*they're all human beings*'. Nonetheless, elements of multicultural counselling theory (Yang et al., 2002), Super's (1975) concept of life roles, and Rogers' (1951) concept of empathetic listening have been noted when dealing with this type of student (Sharf, 2010, Ali and Graham 1996). Sharf (2010, p. 322) proposes the use of constructivist approaches to career counselling which present an "*open way of viewing the client*." Guichard and Lenz (2005) further elucidate how a constructivist perspective can be advantageous in dealing with diverse cultural traditions and attitudes to work by appreciating individual narratives. Considering these authors' views, we recommend continuous training for

career guidance practitioners in ever-evolving career theories, particularly in cultural diversity.

7.   Recommendations for further research.

As the international student presence in Ireland continues to grow, further studies are required to understand how best to support this section of the student population. We therefore recommend studies examining the themes above on a larger scale by taking in the opinions of more staff across universities in Ireland, not only in career services but also across all departments within a university. Large quantitative studies exploring the views of international students studying in Ireland would also be welcomed to determine how best to support them, and also to clearly establish what their expectations are of university career services.

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