

# Students' Opinions on Their Experience of University Career Services: Suggestions for Post-COVID-19 Ireland.

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## Abstract.

This article was written by current students and recent graduates of Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin in conjunction with a guidance counsellor from the college. The goal of the paper is to provide suggestions on what university careers services in Ireland could consider when providing services to students in a post COVID-19 world. The recommendations are as follows 1) embedding careers as a module in the course curricula so that students feel encouraged to engage with career exploration rather than perceive it as optional, 2) focus on developing closer relationships with students with a view to fostering more in depth career exploration, 3) using technology in a manner that supports the development of closer working relationships between student and guidance counsellors, and 4) guidance counsellors to consider introducing green guidance so as to encourage students to consider the wider ecological implications of their career decisions.

**Keywords:** Career; COVID-19; Guidance counselling .

## 1. Introduction.

This article is a response to this journal's call for contributions on student partnership. It explores perspectives on how a university career service should in a post COVID-19 world. In order to explore this research question, the co-lead author, who is employed as a guidance counsellor at Trinity College Dublin, invited three current students and two recent alumni of Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin to share their experiences of interacting with career services via

online methods in the academic year 2020/2021. Drawing on the work of Whelan (2020), we wished to collectively explore further the concept of creating a culture whereby students and guidance counsellors can work collaboratively as '*partners*' in ensuring a student-centered approach to learning. The views expressed in this paper are the opinions of both students, graduates, and one guidance counsellor of Trinity College Dublin. By collaborating with the guidance counsellor, this paper's other co-lead author, a recent graduate, was able to collect deeper insights into the student experience, enabling the authors to shed light on potential strategies which university career services could adopt as we move into a post COVID-19 Ireland. Each student consulted played a role through continuous conversation and contribution to the article itself.

This article aims to add to the literature as Whelan (2020) proposes that COVID-19 has presented an opportunity to reconsider cultural norms in teaching and learning. We are also seeing changes in the employment market, for example a study of 1500 undergraduate students in America found that due to the impact of COVID-19, 40% of students lost a job or internship opportunity, and there was a 20% decrease in their perceived probability of finding a job before graduation (Aucejo, French, Ugalde Araya & Zafar, 2020). Returning to the education sector, a study on student perspectives found that engagement between students and lecturers is negatively affected by a shift to digital learning (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). In addition, the traditional educational approach places the burden of learning onto the shoulders of students, viewing it as their responsibility to engage with the content before them (Trowler, 2010). Dismore, Turner, and Huang (2018) argue that it is the responsibility of lecturers to engage students, and that training should be provided to academics to increase their confidence to drive active discussion within the learning space. Returning to Whelan (2020), we propose an approach that puts equal responsibility on students and educators in creating a partnership in learning. We also propose this strategy is applicable with regards to the relationship between students and university career services.

## **2. The current status of university careers services in a COVID-19 world.**

Technology has brought significant benefits to university career services; however, it has also brought unique challenges. The co-authors of this paper describe their experience of engaging with the career service and other university departments as confusing at times due to the high

volume of information received via email and social media. The impact of which left the students and their peers feeling uncertain in determining where best to direct their attention. A potential cause of this situation may relate to research by Jackson, Lim, Ireland, and Hooper (2011) who propose academics can view their departments as places to autonomously grow their own careers. This potentially leads to each department seeking to keep its own development private thereby potentially limiting opportunities for collaboration via improved collaboration, departments would be better able to manage communication campaigns with the students.

This phenomenon was brought into sharper contrast by COVID-19, which created an environment wherein all Irish university teaching migrated online. This shift online potentially resulted in lecturers, school administration departments, societies, alumni relations, and career services collectively communicating with university students without seeking to create a joint strategy in their approach. This is potentially a missed opportunity as Jackson et al. (2011) found that strengthening a sense of community between learners and peers increases feelings of autonomy. We propose that this collaboration would not just benefit those working in the academic space, but the students which they support. Career services are just one of many departments seeking attention from students. How then, does a university career service engage with its students to deliver a quality service? Furthermore, what does a quality university career service look like in a post COVID-19 world?

### **3. Recommendations for university career services in a post COVID-19 world.**

We propose that each department, including career services, to place a focus on reducing the volume of communication as much as possible. The volume of emails is a good example of this issue, we encourage all departments to consider how best to reduce email volume. For example, this may be achieved by sending one email summarising numerous upcoming events, rather than sending one email per event. We hypothesise this will result in an increased receptiveness by students for content when it does become available. Furthermore, we believe that the inclination university careers services have to be '*visible*' may be counterproductive in the long run.

A better strategy may be to focus on building deeper working relationships with each student via one-to-one career exploration meetings and workshops as suggested by Rayman (1999, pp. 179) "*with the trend of increased technology use in career centers, the need for*

*personalized, intelligent, informed human interaction is more compelling now than ever before*".

The format students may benefit most from today was first proposed more than 100 years ago, this approach involved engaging with service-seekers one-on-one to match their individual differences with suitable jobs (Hartung, 2010). With high student to guidance counsellor ratios, the ease of scaling digitally is an attractive prospect to resource-strapped careers services. However, Reed and Reay (2015) argue that leaning on a scaled, digital approach in academic institutions may diminish both the student's mental health and learning outcomes.

The perspective of the careers advisor who contributed to this paper is that students often do not fully appreciate the degree of self-exploration that is required to determine their career path until certain questions have been posed to them in a guidance counselling session. Students can progress through a degree and masters in receipt of regular communiques about career events and employer talks while at the same time remaining unsure as to what they want from their career. Regular emails, short CV workshops, and fifteen-minute career consultations are all extremely important, but we must also consider how we can help students engage in deep reflection on their career choices. Of course, both the student authors and the guidance counsellor writing this article appreciate that this a challenging task given the restraints in terms of resources that career services often must operate in. To attempt to address this challenge we propose a four-step strategy for the future of career services post COVID-19.

#### **4. Embedding careers.**

Firstly, we propose that career exploration should be embedded into course curricula so that students shift their mindsets from viewing career services as a time-permitting '*add on*' towards career services being a core element of their education. The academic research conducted for this article revealed a lack of existing literature on this topic. Some researchers provided strong evidence in support of utilising work placement initiatives (Mason, Williams, & Cramer, 2009; Bowes & Harvey, 2000), and others such as Taylor and Hooley (2014) noted that empirical evidence around the outcomes of employability initiatives was limited. As a result, there is little research regarding the specifics of embedding employability modules into teaching semesters (Maher & Graves, 2008; Watts & Butcher, 2008). Limited as the literature is, there are indications that a credit bearing component to the delivery of careers services at third level can be beneficial. Taylor and Hooley (2014) suggest embedded careers modules can positively impact participants ability to secure employment. Further supporting this suggestion, AdvanceHE

(2022), a higher education charity which seeks to improve outcomes for both academics and students recently published a framework in the UK proposing that embedding employability in higher education will result in the empowering of students to map their career journey more effectively (2022).

Based on these positive signals, and the feedback of students, we propose embedding career services as a module into course programmes, with the hope it will provide students with the tools to develop the introspection that is required to identify career paths that will in turn provide a sense of meaning (Frankl, 1984). Returning to the earlier observations in this article, discovering a sense of meaning could improve long term career satisfaction.

## **5. Constructing the future of university career counselling.**

Secondly, and building on the point above, the guidance counsellor of this article proposes university career services, where possible, focus on assisting students in engaging in deep dive career exploration strategies that encourage the student to reflect on what it is they truly desire from their career. This approach will require an emphasis on lengthier one-to-one consultations based on career constructionism and narrative career theories (Savickas, 2013). The changing nature of work requires new theories that recognise the subject in the context of a postmodern economy (Savickas et al., 2009). To facilitate this process, we argue a strong working alliance (Whiston, Rossier, & Baron, 2016; Johnson & Wright, 2002) between student and counsellor will be necessary.

This strategy is proposed based on research such as that conducted by OI Global Partners in 2019 which released findings from its 'Future Workforce Readiness Research Study' which indicated 42% of employees are dissatisfied with their careers. While university career services alone are unlikely to be able to solve such a significant problem, an increased emphasis on career exploration with students may reduce this percentage over time. Students who are guided to examine career choices more critically may gain a deeper understanding of suitable options available to them.

We also propose that the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) is an important skill for students to develop. Research indicates EI has an important role to play in improved career decision making, as "*EI positively relates to less dysfunctional career thinking, greater career decision-making, self efficacy, a higher level of willingness to explore a variety of career preferences*"

(Puffer, 2011, pp. 132). Rode et al. (2017) conducted a twelve-year time lag study of graduates as they progressed through the early phases of their career. Their research indicated that EI was an indicator of career success, which puts the onus on third level institutions in Ireland to consider focusing on helping students to develop their EI.

The approach we propose for assisting students with this '*deep dive*' career exploration process is Kidd's (2003) theory, which comprises the following 4 stages as follows:

- Building the relationship
- Enabling client's self-understanding
- Exploring new perspectives
- Forming strategies and plans

It should be stated that this form of career counselling is open to interpretation as to how it should be applied (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Robertson (2013) suggests that effective third level career counselling can facilitate greater overall wellbeing for recipients by challenging negative thought processes, and hence we suggest that as much as possible, Irish universities invest in training their guidance counsellors as needed to ensure that they can engage career exploration sessions accordingly. It should also be stated that this argument is not revolutionary, Parsons (1909: 25) described career counselling as helping people find a vocation rather than simply helping them in "hunting for a job". With COVID-19 having destabilised existing educational structures, now may be the opportunity to implement Parsons (1909) advice.

## **6. Putting technology in its place.**

Thirdly, while literature referenced above makes note of digitalisation having a negative impact on learning outcomes (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020; Reed & Reay, 2015), the number of students and time restrictions placed on guidance counsellors in our opinion mean that technology should nonetheless be utilised. We argue however, that the enormous influx of online information students are receiving creates an imperative for all university departments, including career services, to prioritise quality over quantity. We propose that university career services carefully consider what should be shared with students. It is also worth noting that students receive increased communications from various stakeholders outside the university such as employers.

In the experience of the guidance counsellor, prior to COVID-19, employers worked more

directly with university career services for the purposes of arranging onsite visits to university campuses to engage directly with the student body. With the onset of COVID 19 employers embraced delivering events via online means, lessening the significance of liaising with the university careers service. This presents an opportunity for university career services. If employers begin to organise more online events in which they communicate directly with students, their bypassing of career services provides more time for guidance counsellors to focus on developing in-depth career exploration strategies with the students.

In terms of online one-to-one counselling sessions, both the guidance counsellor and student co-authors found that the convenience of online was hugely beneficial and encourage its continued use beyond COVID-19. Given our restricted movements due to the pandemic, having this flexibility was helpful, and it was reassuring to know the careers service was just a '*video call away*'. As students, it has been a quick and easy process to book meetings and schedule them into a calendar, particularly during busy moments throughout the semester. The flexibility of meeting online meant more tasks could be fit into each day. Given many job interviews are now held online (particularly during early stages of the interview process), meeting virtually with careers services meant it allowed students to practice their online interview skills. However, we also suggest online one-to-one consultations while extremely convenient, lack the degree of connection found in in-person meetings. Body language an important source of information (Foley & Gentile, 2010) with up to sixty-five per cent of communication being nonverbal (Burgoon, Guerrero & Floyd, 2009; Routh, 1958), we therefore recommend a hybrid approach.

With regards to career and recruitment fairs, we propose that these should continue to take place on campus whenever possible as this is the preferred method for students when meeting and talking to employers at career events. The virtual career fairs that were run during COVID-19 did not replicate the immediacy and connection that is experienced in talking to an employer face to face. With that said, it may be necessary to facilitate international employers that want to contribute but cannot attend in person, hence a hybrid approach is again recommended. In relation to career workshops, we suggest that career services should allow students to attend physically and virtually, in this way students will be able to attend them remotely if preferred. Many universities across Ireland now have live streaming facilities on campus and these could be used for this purpose.

## 7. The importance of ethics in career guidance.

Fourth and finally, existing career theories typically adopt an individualistic approach (Super, 1980; Holland, 2002; Hall, 2004; Savickas et al., 2009; Law, 2009; Cochran, 1992). These philosophies are often joined with the Weberian theory of the Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1958) which focuses on economic pursuit via one's career. These two philosophies of individualism and economic growth have defined career guidance for decades (Plant, 2020). We argue that this approach to career guidance is not entirely in keeping with the challenges that are faced globally today. Giroux (2002) argues that a media saturated society has created an impression in young people that they can define themselves almost entirely through consumerism at the expense of ethical norms such as democratic values and a sense of citizenship. We argue that Giroux's (2002) words have become increasingly prescient today, especially in considering that he made this statement prior to the extraordinary growth of various social media giants.

From the erosion of democratic values, hyper-consumerism, and the climate emergency, we encourage career guidance to take a proactive approach to confronting these existential challenges. Victor Frankl (1984) proposed the pursuit of meaning in one's career is critical to success on a personal level and in terms of society. Similarly, Robertson (2013 p. 255) argues that "*engaging in meaningful activity, taking responsibility and the pursuit of personal growth go hand in hand with adopting productive roles in society*". We propose now is the time for university careers services to take stock of Frankl and Robertson's advice and embed their philosophies into the DNA of career guidance; our current global circumstances demand it.

In addition to societal issues, sustainability is a key issue for third level students. As they face an uncertain future, they are becoming increasingly aware of the need to pursue career paths that will function harmoniously with the environment. Furthermore, we argue that university career services can also play a part to proactively bring the issue of sustainability into the career picture for all students, and not just those that are consciously aware of its need. Green guidance focuses on sustainability in career practices aimed at promoting a balance between individual aspirations and societal needs (Plant, 2020, 2013; Irving, 2013; Di Fabio & Bucci, 2016). Green guidance argues that we must adapt our approach to career management considering the current climate crises. What it proposes is an approach to guidance that supports an individual's career progression while also adopting an awareness of the ecological impact of certain career decisions (Plant, 2020; Di Fabio & Bucci, 2016).



Plant (2015) proposes the following framework for the effective implementation of Green Guidance:

- Guidance should take into account and create awareness of the environmental impact of vocational choices.
- Guidance should play an active role in establishing training and education opportunities with a positive contribution in environmental terms.
- Informational materials on career options should include environmental aspects.
- Guidance should be measured, not only by an economic yardstick, but also by green accounting, (i.e., by relating environmental goals to guidance activities).
- Guidance theories and practices should address common career development issues in addition to individualistic approaches – with a focus on environmental impacts of career choices.
- On a much smaller scale, guidance workers themselves should inspect their own practice: how green are office routines i.e. recycling waste, cutting down on power consumption, etc? How is ICT used to cut down on travelling, for example?

## **8. Conclusion.**

In a post COVID-19 world we believe virtual engagement will become more prevalent. We expect employers who are unable to physically attend the university campus but want to offer their support, advice, and seek new talent will adopt a technological medium to engage students. We also believe many aspects of the recruitment process will continue to move to online. As a result, university career services will need to adapt to such changes to help students understand the new dynamics in the working world. We recommend the adoption of a hybrid approach whereby both virtual and in person aspects will be involved in career services. There are pros and cons to both, therefore striking the right balance can improve the overall careers service experience for students.

We also propose wherever possible that longer consultations between student and guidance counsellor to facilitate in depth career exploration would be welcomed. We echo the position of Austin et al. (2020) by calling for guidance counsellors to use this crisis as an opportunity to bring continued altruism to the profession. In our experience, guidance counsellors are often

constrained by time and hence are often limited to focusing on issues such as job hunting, CV design, and interview techniques. While these are most welcomed and encouraged, we would also welcome opportunities to engage in in-depth career counselling to explore goals and anxieties related to career development. Ultimately, we all seek a career that will bring us meaning, fulfilment, and perhaps one which allows us to access a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) regularly. We all seek work that will allow us to express our true nature while also providing a sustainable future. The students co-authoring this paper would like to reiterate the value of training in designing effective CVs, the writing of a cover letter, and the 'how to' of designing a strong LinkedIn page. It should also be stated that during COVID-19 students experienced a reliance by departments within universities to provide students with a high volume of information which often made it difficult to determine where to direct our attention. We therefore request universities in Ireland carefully consider how technology can be deployed in a manner that will facilitate an educational journey that reflects the challenges of our times.

### **8.1 Recommendations for future research.**

We recommend that quantitative studies are undertaken across Irish universities to explore further the perspectives of students with regards the effective deployment of university career services in a post COVID-19 world. This article merely expresses the views of its authors, and therefore more information is needed. Returning to Whelan (2020) we need studies that explore how we can truly engage students via research mechanisms such as focus groups. Returning to the specific question of career services, as we tentatively exit the COVID-19 era it is vital that we engage in this research now so that we understand what exactly it is that students need from university career services when it comes to the effective utilisation of technology.

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