'During the course of the programme my attention shifted and deepened – I was more interested in developing myself as a person': Evaluating a careers award in higher education

Wayne Clark, University of Westminster

Abstract

In the past few years, there has been a proliferation of employability and skills awards across higher education in the United Kingdom (AGCAS, 2011). These schemes have generally been developed by careers services in response to national policy agendas on improving graduate 'success' and enhancing graduate employability. Thus far, evaluation of employability awards has been largely restricted to measuring quantifiable employment outcomes. This article extends existing understandings of the impact of such schemes with reference to small-scale evaluation research undertaken with students on a pilot award at University of Westminster. Drawing upon qualitative data, the programme is evaluated in relation to soft outcomes (Dewson *et al.*, 2000) including student motivations, student belonging and active learning styles, with particular reference to the experiences of non-traditional, or non A-level, entrants to higher education.

Keywords: Skills; employability; careers.

Context

Debates about the social and economic role of higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK) are increasingly focused on how students can be prepared for progression into, and advancement across, the graduate labour market.

There are three main contexts for this. The first concerns a long standing criticism from employers of the extent to which HE produces graduates with the appropriate skills and attributes to function in the globalised 'knowledge' economy (Confederation of Business Industries and Universities UK, 2009). In the past five years there has been extensive mapping of this employer-led demand for skills (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2012; Kewin *et al.*, 2010) and, since the publication of the Leitch Review of Skills (HM Treasury, 2006), attention has focused on the negative impact of this perceived skills gap on the UK's international economic standing.

Secondly, the coalition government's recent reforms to the HE sector (Department for Business, Information and Skills, 2011) have identified the performance of graduates in the labour market as a key measure of achievement. Consequently, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly using statistical data on graduate employment destinations as a basis for recruitment marketing campaigns and to demonstrate how they add value in the context of increased tuition fees and the expansion of competition between HEIs.

Thirdly, the widening participation agenda has broadened to incorporate an increased focus on improved progression across all stages of the 'student lifecycle' (HEA, 2013a), including transition out of HE. Historically, government and HEIs have been preoccupied with entry-related issues of broadening access in order to overcome socio-economic barriers to participation in HE. However, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) expects HEIs to play a more significant role over the next few years in '*ensuring that graduates are prepared with the necessary skills, understanding and personal attributes for employment, now and in the future*' (HEFCE, 2011, p.4). This shift reflects the government's current policy focus on the part played by HE in improving 'social mobility', as well as an acknowledgement that employment gains experienced by graduates from HE are distributed unevenly in line with wider socio-economic inequalities (Pegg *et al.*, 2012, p.7-8; Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008, p.10-12).

In response, there has been growing demand across the sector for mechanisms likely to improve student 'success' (Thomas, 2012, p.5). The Higher Education Academy (HEA) defines success as an acknowledgement that students '*benefit from HE study in a wider range of ways [than retention], including personal development and progression into the labour market or further learning*' (HEA, 2013b).

In this context, the emergence of extracurricular employability, skills and personal development awards has been a notable trend during the last few years (Norton & Thomes, 2009). The aims, format and scope of the award schemes vary widely across the sector, but they are typically promoted as mechanisms for enhancing student employability by enabling students to participate in careers-related activities in order to achieve an award. Schemes of this type have also been linked to the enhancement of student retention and progression (Thomas, 2012). Although the National Union of Students is currently developing a national Student Skills Award (NUS, 2011), employability awards currently operate in a variety of ways in HEIs in the UK. Award programmes of this type therefore present a timely opportunity to consider the ways in which the '*professional service sphere*' (Thomas & Jamieson-Ball, 2011, p.12), specifically the field of Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG), is contributing to emergent understandings of student 'success'. By incorporating student voice into such analysis it is also possible to explore ways in which students are negotiating these agendas.

The employability agenda in higher education

The drive to improve the employability of graduates from HE is not a new concept. As the widening participation and lifelong learning agendas have become more influential since at least the 1980s, there has been growing attention on the skills that students acquire beyond the academic or technical knowledge traditionally associated with degree-level study. Yorke (2004, p.8) has defined employability as:

> *'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'.*

Over the past decade, various attempts have been made to define and classify 'employability skills' (Confederation of Business Industries and NUS, 2011). In particular, there has been a growing demand from graduate employers for so-called 'soft' skills such as communication, problem solving and adaptability in the workplace (Confederation of Business Industries and Universities UK, 2009). Entrepreneurship (Moreland, 2005; QAA, 2012) and digital literacy (Beetham *et al.,* 2009) have also been identified as increasingly desirable graduate attributes.

However, there is no universal definition in the academic community about the place of employability in HE. Earlier generic skills-based understandings of employability have been challenged by an increasing focus on more holistic and theoretically informed perspectives stressing complexity and lifelong learning (Yorke, 2004, p.13-14). As employability has become a more significant agenda within HE, the dominance of employer or workforce-driven narratives has been challenged by efforts to link employability to broader pedagogical approaches concerned with improved forms of learning. Similarly, critics from within the CEIAG community have argued that discourses of demand led skills acquisition are restrictive (Watts, 2006). From this perspective, careers work in HE is seen as capable of functioning as a pedagogic activity through which new knowledge can be generated in a transdisciplinary manner (McCash, 2008). Others, such as Holmes (2001), have questioned the actual existence of employability skills as objective phenomena that can be transmitted through HE.

Skills awards and CEIAG in higher education

A recent survey by the national body of university careers services, the Association of Graduate Careers Services (AGCAS), found that 67 universities identified themselves as currently delivering an employability award of some type (AGCAS, 2011). This figure has notably expanded from 25 universities in 2010 (Scott & I'ons, 2010). According to the AGCAS research, the majority of awards have been operational for less than two years and have been designed in an individualised manner i.e. not directly based on a model delivered at another institution (AGCAS, 2011, p.3). Most schemes are currently recognised through a certificate but only a small minority of awards is credit bearing (p.3). Unlike established CEIAG programmes in HE such as Career Management Skills, which reflect a movement over the past decade to embed CEIAG in the curriculum, the majority of skills awards function outside of the academic curriculum and operate in a portable manner (p.3). Half of the awards are endorsed by employers, with several large-scale employers being involved in multiple schemes nationally (p.4).

The AGCAS research also indicates that the majority of skills awards are delivered by HE careers services (AGCAS, 2011, p.3). Increasingly, these services are likely to be functioning within a funding and policy context defined by the need to measure quantifiable, or 'hard', employment outcomes. This reflects the continuing status of the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey (DLHE) as the preeminent measure of graduate employment outcomes in the UK[1]. Concurrently, there is a growing requirement for careers services and other practitioner communities involved in student support to demonstrate the measurable impact of their service provision (AMOSSHE, 2011). Although graduate employment destinations have been identified as a key indicator of in the measurement of quality in HE (Gibbs, 2010, p.40-42),

the DLHE survey is not able to capture distance travelled and softer outcomes experienced by students and graduates undertaking CEIAG initiatives. This article seeks to address this shortcoming by evaluating an employability award from a predominantly qualitative perspective. In doing so, the evaluation is able to explore some of the ways in which students from differing educational backgrounds negotiate ideas of career, employability and skills development in the current HE context.

The Career Development Centre Skills Award

The 'Career Development Centre Skills Award' (CDCSA) was a year-long, extracurricular pilot employability scheme delivered between 2011 and 2012 at the University of Westminster in South East England. The University of Westminster is a post-1992 HEI with an established widening participation remit. The Career Development Centre (CDC) provides CEIAG to students and graduates from the University. Having reviewed skills and employability awards at other HEIs in the UK, the CDCSA was designed with three main aims:

1. To support students in acquiring and articulating relevant employability related skills and experiences;
2. To enhance student engagement with a HE careers service and associated CEIAG resources with a view to supporting retention and progression;
3. To provide a space for students to undertake career planning as part of a one to one coaching process.

The first stage of the CDCSA was funded by Linking London Lifelong Learning Network[2]. As such, the CDCSA was designed, in part, to raise aspiration and improve confidence amongst non-traditional[3] entrants to university. In particular, the scheme was aligned with the Lifelong Learning Network's strategic aim of supporting these learners in making the transition from level 3 to level 4 study. The CDCSA was open to level 4 and 5 undergraduates, but four places were reserved on the CDCSA for students who had entered University of Westminster via non A-level routes. The difficulties experienced by non-traditional and less privileged learners in transitioning into HE are widely recognised by the literature in the 'employability' field (Yorke & Longden, 2008; Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008) although widening participation issues are not always overtly linked to CEIAG work across the sector. Reflecting wider sociological debates over the impact of social and cultural 'capital' on educational participation, research from the CEIAG community has shown, for example, that mature or part-time students are particularly reluctant to make use of support services at university or unable to participate in extracurricular activities (Redmond, 2006). Similarly, students from vocational educational backgrounds have been shown to experience a 'culture clash' with established degree-level learning styles, often leading to a perceived need to rely on personal resources rather than make use of careers advice or student support services (Clark, 2011).

Following promotion of the scheme via established student marketing routes used by the CDC, students were required to submit an application form. Applicants were asked questions in relation to typical recruitment criteria: business/commercial awareness; people skills; project management; team work; self-management; problem solving; communication; and personal motivation. Applicants were then sifted into threshold groups reflecting the quality of

application, and a number of applicants were then selected from within each group. This ensured that a relatively wide range of student experiences were reflected in the cohort.

Twenty six students were recruited to the scheme, and unsuccessful applicants were contacted for follow-up careers advice. Students participating in this scheme came from a range of undergraduate courses at University of Westminster. Discipline areas included Business (Business Management; Business Economics; Business HRM; Finance; Accounting), Law, Social Sciences (Psychology; International Relations), and Life Sciences (Human and Medical Sciences; Cognitive Science). The non-traditional participants included three mature students and came via the following routes: HNC, BTEC, Access to HE, and City and Guilds.

Delivering the CDCSA

The CDCSA was administered by a small project team consisting of a project manager and a project co-ordinator who was employed for one year via funding provided by Linking London Lifelong Learning Network. A team of seven careers advisors from the CDC also participated by providing careers coaching, and temporary staff were employed for specific tasks such as interview transcription.

From the outset, it was decided that successful completion of the CDCSA would be based on student attendance and participation rather than assessment of student performance. The programme itself was structured around five stages requiring regular participation in careers events and activities: preparation (self-diagnostic, CV advice); skills development activities (including attendance at careers-related events); acceptance of place on a programme and obtaining a position of responsibility; work experience (thirty hours of paid work or voluntary work); and reflection (one-to-one careers coaching sessions, mock interview, presentation to an employer panel, e-portfolio). Students were required to complete all of these stages and individual student progress was tracked using a combination of hard copy forms and a CDCSA Blackboard site. A points system was used to measure student participation, with each type of activity being awarded a pre-defined number of points. The points system was weighted such that more substantive undertakings were awarded larger amounts of points. For example, attendance at careers events was awarded five points whereas the career coaching sessions equated to ten points and the work experience was thirty points. Students were required to achieve a threshold of one hundred points to complete the programme, and optional activities could be undertaken to achieve a maximum of one hundred and twenty points.

CDCSA events included pre-existing activities run by the Career Development Centre such as employer fairs, careers workshops (covering topics such as CV writing, job interviews) and volunteering workshops. Extra events delivered specifically to CDCSA participants included a 'graduate game' workshop on assessment centres, public speaking workshops, IT training (in support of an optional specialist IT qualification), and employer presentations.

Two group events were held for all participants including an initial launch session, at which participants were provided with an induction pack, and a refresh session six months into the programme. 'Drop-in' advice sessions were also held at various points for participants who

wanted to discuss their progress or raise queries about the scheme. E-portfolio training was also provided by the University's Online Learning Team at the start of the programme.

All participants were assigned a designated careers advisor to provide them with tailored one-to-one career coaching and general support. These sessions were designed to function as a space outside of the formal curriculum for students to reflect on their future career and study directions.

The scheme culminated in a series of student presentations to a panel including a careers advisor from University of Westminster and employers working in graduate recruitment. For these panels, students were asked to present on what they had learnt from the scheme and to explain what they planned to do as a result of their participation. Successful CDCSA participants took part in a formal awards event following completion of the award.

The evaluation research[4]

The CDCSA was evaluated as part of the funding provided by Linking London Lifelong Learning Network. The methodological approach utilised a multi-method approach for collecting student experiences on the CDCSA. This article focuses on qualitative data (Silverman, 2011) collected from the student perspective to evaluate the delivery and impact of the CDCSA. The evaluation research consisted of three main elements.

Firstly, ten interviews took place with students following the initial stage of the scheme, including three students from non-traditional entry routes. All students were approach via the CDCSA's Blackboard page to take part. The interviews had the following aims:

- To address student motivations for applying to the CDCSA
- To evaluate key aspects of the CDCSA including the career coaching experience; impact on career planning; usage of the careers service; and event feedback
- To ask students to reflect on how the scheme could be improved and how they felt they would benefit longer term from their participation
- To explore student perceptions of 'skills' and 'employability'
- To explore broader issues of educational, employment and career background, as well as aspirations

The interviews were semi-structured - a widely used method in social research. Following May (1993, p.93), this approach was used in order to allow room for the students to define their experiences on their own terms whilst maintaining an overall structure to the data collection. The interviews were conducted by the CDCSA project manager with support from the project co-ordinator and were fully transcribed.

The interview data was analysed by sifting the data into categories using what Dey (1993, p.104-105) refers to as a *'middle order basis'*. This enables the researcher to develop preliminary categories within the data whilst avoiding pre-empting the entire direction of the research. Once a transcript was complete, the text was annotated and key categories were identified across the interviews. Given the relatively small number of interviews, there was a limited amount of

feedback that occurred between completed interviews and subsequent updating of the interview guide but this was possible to a certain degree. The use of interviews as a research tool raises key ethical issues including confidentiality and informed consent (Seidman, 1991, p.48-55). All interviewees were made aware that their interview data would be presented in an anonymous manner in dissemination of the evaluation findings.

Secondly, case studies of participants were compiled based on a self-completion questionnaire. Again, all participants were approached via Blackboard to take part in this stage of the evaluation but response to this request was relatively low with only five of the participants agreeing to take part. Despite the limitations associated with a self-selecting sample of this type, the case studies were useful in enabling students to reflect in their own time on their participation in the scheme. Students were sent a questionnaire with open-ended questions by email which asked for comments on: expectations of the CDCSA; personal benefits from the scheme; reflections on the value of events attended during the scheme; recommendations for improvement.

Thirdly, participant feedback was collected at CDCSA events on an on-going basis using a standardised evaluation questionnaire[5]. This asked students to assess how useful they found the event (using a standard Likert scale); to identify the best aspect of the event; to suggest how the event could have been improved; and to indicate what other types of events might be useful during the award. Space was also given for more in-depth qualitative comments. A total of 68 questionnaires were completed from a total of 105 participants across five events.

Informal feedback was also collected across the lifespan of the scheme. For example, careers advisors and careers information staff were able to feed back to the project team on a regular basis as the scheme progressed. Informal feedback from employers was also received following the panel presentations at the end of the programme, and several employers were informally consulted at the planning stage of the project.

The multi-method approach allowed for a limited amount of 'triangulation' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p.198) to take place. This enabled the project team to cross reference data provided by students at specific stages of the programme, but this was a relatively minor aspect of the evaluation. Dissemination of the outcomes of the CDCSA has been undertaken via Linking London Lifelong Learning Network (Clark, 2012a) and via the Higher Education Academy (Clark, 2012b).

Findings

The remainder of this article focuses on the qualitative component of the evaluation and draws primarily upon the semi-structured interviews with students. Reference is also made to the data collected via the case studies provided by students. As Devine (1995, p.138) notes, qualitative analysis is best employed when '*the aim of the research is to explore people's subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences*'. The following areas are evaluated from the student perspective: motivations; evaluation of flexible delivery; learning styles; engagement and belonging; personal impact; and impact on career and skills.

Student motivations

For the overwhelming majority of participants, the CDCSA was seen as an opportunity to improve graduate career prospects. Typical comments included a desire to *'increase my employability in the long run'*. Similarly, the opportunity to learn more about the types of skills which are seen as being valued by graduate employers was widely referred to. Some applicants also identified a basic need for help with their personal career decision making. For example, one applicant referred to the scheme as '*a great opportunity to kick start my career*', and another noted that '*I don't yet feel totally decided on what career I want or how I need to get there so I feel this course would benefit me a lot*'. A need to improve self-confidence in relation to employment was also identified by several applicants. One student noted that the award *'...will be able to help me boost my confidence when presenting myself''* whilst another commented that '*I have not worked for nearly two years...I don't feel confident*'.

However, for many of the applicants this focus on employment was couched within broader motivations including, for example, a desire to help others during the scheme:

> *'I feel I can share the skills I have with others and to help develop the skills of the other participants'.*

> *'I like to help people...I want to ensure I do the best for other students as well'.*

> *'My sociable manner can help to get on well with people quickly and easily be able to coach and work with other people'.*

A theme of personal development was also evident:

> *'I am always looking for new ways to challenge myself'.*

> *'I like collecting more experience and extending my horizons...[I want to] gain a deeper understanding of what I want to do with my study'.*

Related to this was a more nebulous desire to undertake some form of self-actualisation or reflection. As one student put it: '*I have dreams, I want to become'*. Another noted that '*there may be strengths and weaknesses which at this point in my life I still have not discovered*'.

Others explicitly linked their participation in the CDCSA to the wider social context of their personal circumstances. One student from an Access to HE background noted: '*I am a hard working student and single mum of one...I am always looking for new opportunities to enhance my prospects and life*'. Another mature student identified the issue of age as being significant in their decision to apply: '*I am a mature person and believe it would be far more difficult for me to enter the world of work due to my age*'. Family background was also referred to by a participant from a BTEC entry route: '*Combined with de-motivated and non-professional family members, I feel a bit left out of the whole business of skills*'. For the students from non-A level educational backgrounds, the scheme was seen as an opportunity to improve the transition into university:

'coming from college straight into university I thought I had a gap in my skills...I still needed that extra help'.

The feedback from students showed that although motivations for participating in the CDCSA were couched predominantly in terms of a general interest in improving career prospects, there were actually more complex factors informing this motivation. These included less overtly individualistic interests of a more social or civic nature. For students from non-traditional educational backgrounds, there also seemed to be a strong personal link between social or education background and the desire to participate in an employability or skills scheme outside of the main curriculum.

Student evaluation of flexible delivery

The CDCSA was delivered outside of the undergraduate curriculum in order to provide a relatively high degree of flexibility for students. This was necessary given that the participants came from multiple degree programmes, and as such it was rarely possible to schedule group activities or meetings at which all participants could attend. At the same time, it was also important to ensure that student engagement with the CDCSA was maintained throughout the year long duration of the scheme.

Each student was able, within certain restrictions, to access the CDCSA in a way that suited their personal timetable. This also enabled students to progress through the various stages of the programme in a personalised manner. The opportunity to 'dip in and out' of the scheme was generally well received by students as indicated by this comment:

> *'I think it's very helpful because you're used to having everything structured for you. If it was structured I would have to think about how I would fit it in into what I'm doing. That would have maybe put me off...because I want something which is easier to fit around my studies, family life and everything else I do'.*

Initially, it was hoped that the e-portfolio aspect of the scheme would provide a basis for students to develop their own personal development portfolio. However, only a small number of students used this on a regular basis despite training being provided and the e-portfolio being confidential to only the student and the careers advisor (if permission was provided by the student). Nonetheless, those students who used the e-portfolio reported that it was a useful resource:

> *'...you've got the work space which is like computer-generated area where, if for example if I went on a CV workshop, I can type in what I've learnt and the feelings at the time, just to make notes of it at that time rather than going back later on. And only my careers consultant can actually see that, so she can actually see my thoughts of how I'm feeling about certain things'.*

Acquiring a position of responsibility or enrolling on a programme proved to the most challenging aspect of the programme for students. This part of the scheme was interpreted as broadly as possible by the project team and various positions of responsibility were acquired by

students (e.g. course representative, student union posts, volunteer positions) but this process required extra support from the project team in a number of cases.

Overall, the student testimonies perhaps challenge the assertion that the academic sphere necessarily remains the most significant site within HE for efforts to improve a sense of student belonging (Thomas, 2012, p.6). Rather than being undervalued by students as a consequence of being extracurricular, the CDCSA was actually regarded by participants as having relatively high status.

Student learning styles

Although the scheme was not linked directly to the academic curriculum, issues of pedagogy were relevant to the design and delivery of the programme. From the outset, the CDCSA was designed to foster independent forms of learning in relation to CEIAG. In effect, we wanted to enable learners to begin to become active learners rather than passive recipients of CEIAG. Feedback from the students suggests that the CDCSA was, to a degree, able to foster active forms of learning. Firstly, students were required to progress through the programme on an individual basis and undertake some level of self-management, although with support from their designated careers advisor. This process was seen positively by this student:

> *'...it helps you to actually be independent. And actually you as a person, you go and find out what you want to find out'.*

Secondly, the one-to-one coaching component of the CDCSA provided a student-centred approach to CEIAG. The appointment of a designated advisor underpinned this relationship, and students generally responded positively to having a reflexive space outside of the demands of the undergraduate curriculum:

> *'...it's made a difference. I have my careers advisor if I've got any kind of issues, I can speak to her about it and she can direct me in the right path, what I need to be looking at'.*

> *'I have a mentor to guide me in the right direction if I was ever going off course'.*

Thirdly, the opportunity for participants to personalise their navigation through the award also opens up the possibility for learners from differing educational backgrounds to define progression, and perhaps the broader concept of 'success', on their own terms. For example, one A-level entrant referred to the way in which she had been able to focus on specific skills:

> *'It helps you to evaluate the skills that you want…and the skills that you want to develop. At the moment I'm trying to develop leadership skills as much as possible so will be trying to do that for the coming month'.*

In contrast, a mature student from an Access to HE background focused more on how the scheme had been useful in supporting her to progress from a difficult initial period at university:

> *'I did find it difficult and now, I'm finding it easier…I can take information in a lot better now and able to look at other things that are happening in the university, like the skills award, able to do the skills award as well as doing my university course at the same time. So I've gone a long way from my first year in university'.*

By adopting a pedagogic approach, where possible, based broadly on a student-centred approach the CDCSA provide some opportunity for students to undertake active forms of learning. The fact that the scheme was not subject to the traditional pressures of the academic curriculum was generally welcomed by participants although it is important to note that one-to-one coaching was necessary to support students in developing independent modes of learning.

Student engagement and belonging

Student engagement with the University of Westminster careers service was generally enhanced amongst the CDCSA students. When asked if they felt more connected to the careers service as result of the programme all interviewed students responded positively. However, only half of the interviewees stated that they felt more likely to use the careers service as a result of the scheme. More broadly, all of the students stated that they felt more connected to University of Westminster as an institution following their involvement in the CDCSA.

When asked if they felt more motivated with their academic studies as a result of the award, all bar one student gave a positive response. The potential for crossover between schemes of this type and the curriculum was highlighted by a mature student:

> *'I've started applying for part-time jobs which is part of one of our modules; professional competencies. So I'm already ahead of the game, whereas other people are still struggling'.*

In particular, the non-traditional students viewed the CDSA as adding value to their degree. Specifically, they viewed the CDCSA as offering careers and skills guidance which they did not feel was necessarily available in their degree programme:

> *'These things are not taught anywhere. People just do the best that they can and muddle through as much as they can. It's not taught anywhere…but with the award, I've been given a careers consultant who can guide me'.*

> *'And also it helps you…you're actually getting more experience and you're actually showing that you're doing more than following what your course is saying'.*

With issues of student engagement becoming increasingly central to debates about improving student retention and progression (Thomas, 2012), schemes such as CDCSA offer new opportunities for enhancing a sense of belonging in HE. With students responding positively to programmes outside of their existing academic programme, it is important for CEIAG and other student support staff to work collaboratively with academic staff to identify spaces in which activities of this type can be developed in creative ways.

Personal impact

When asked if they felt more confident about themselves as a result of the award, all of the students bar one reported increased levels of self-confidence. This was an important aspect of the scheme for a number of students:

> *'It's giving me the confidence to not think about what I can't do. But what positive things that I've done that I can articulate'.*

> *'I learnt that the confidence I had was hidden inside me somewhere. But now slowly the confidence is coming out'.*

> *'The award increased my confidence by making me get out there and actively participate'.*

The students were asked to reflect if they learnt anything about themselves as a result of the CDCSA. A sense of empowerment was evident amongst some of the responses, with one student noting that she had learnt that '*I can do anything if I plan carefully and be persistent'*. Another commented that '*it helped me believe in my potential more'*. This theme was echoed by a student who stated that the CDCSA had '*made me see a better future for myself'*. One student remarked on the expansion of loci she had experienced as a result of taking part in the scheme:

> *'In complete honesty, I started the programme being interested in simply receiving the certificate to include on my CV but during the course of the programme my attention shifted and deepened. I was more interested in developing myself as a person'.*

This shift in personal perspective was also reflected in the fact that all students reported undertaking new activities following the completion of the CDCSA. These activities included applying for a national volunteering award, working overseas, becoming a course representative, joining a mentoring scheme, undertaking charity work and various forms of volunteering in the community.

Echoing previous research into the benefits of employability awards (Watson, 2011), the research has shown that the 'process' of taking part in the CDCSA often became more meaningful than the 'product' of the scheme. Outcomes such as increased confidence and improved self-esteem continue to be significant factors for students participating in these types of programmes and should not be overlooked when reflecting on the role of CEIAG in contemporary HE.

Impact on career and skills

All students reported that they were now more active in researching their career options, and when asked if they had changed or modified their career plans, all reported that involvement in the CDCSA had led to a change in their forward planning. Examples included a student who had changed from a planned career in Business/Finance to Medicine. As one student noted: '*I was*

very narrow minded regarding my career path while now I am more flexible and ready to grasp opportunities'.

Another student noted that she now has a '*plan B*' and a '*plan C*' with regard to her career, whilst another similarly noted that '*I've learnt that there are so many opportunities…and I shouldn't limit myself*''. One of the non-traditional students noted that she is now '*able to see the bigger picture*'. When asked if they felt better equipped to articulate their skills, all students reported a positive improvement. One of the non-traditional entrants also felt that the CDCSA enabled them to recognise pre-existing skills: '*My career coach drew out of me the importance of skills that I already had*'.

With HE careers services increasingly concerned with demonstrating their contribution to graduate 'success', schemes of this type can provide evidence of how CEIAG impacts upon students. Importantly, evaluation of the CDCSA has shown that the nature of this impact becomes evident as a result of adopting a qualitative approach to understanding the outcomes of CEIAG.

Conclusions

The students on the CDCSA indicated that the scheme has generally been successful in engaging students and having a positive impact on improving personal career planning. More broadly, the flexible nature of the scheme does appear to have had some impact in inculcating a sense of belonging as part of student life, particularly among students from non-traditional educational backgrounds. With universities increasingly looking for ways to 'add value' to the learner experience, a skills or employability award can be seen as an opportunity to provide students with an independent and active way of working, as well as an increasingly rare opportunity to participate in one to one learning situations.

However, schemes of this type face significant challenges in the context of growing pressures on HE careers services to deliver improved student success. The scheme was highly resource intensive due to its emphasis on one-to-one guidance and support. Given that a relatively small number of students took part in the scheme, a larger scale version of the award would require a rethink of the underlying structure of the delivery mechanism. This may well require increased collaboration with academic staff, and at University of Westminster a portable version of the CDCSA is being developed alongside the existing undergraduate curriculum in one faculty. Sustainability and scalability are clearly challenging issues for small scale schemes of this type (Norton & Thomes, 2009, p.20; AGCAS, 2011, p.5).

There is also a danger that skills or employability awards of this type reward the most able students and, as such, reinforce persistent socio-economic inequalities associated with HE and, concurrently, the graduate labour market. These issues are particularly important given that recent longitudinal research carried out for the Futuretrack project suggests that inequalities in participation in extra curricula opportunities in HE reflect, and potentially reinforce, wider socio-economic disadvantage (Purcel & Elias, 2012, p.8). With this in mind, it would be instructive to gather feedback from the nine students who failed to complete the CDCSA. Additionally, further

research could explore the perceived value of such schemes from the perspective of CEIAG practitioners and employers.

By challenging the predominant emphasis on quantifiable outcomes of CEIAG, this evaluation has reinforced the value of improved understandings of student subjectivities associated with discourses of 'employability' and 'career'. The students displayed a wide range of motivations, some of which challenge assumptions and emerging orthodoxies around student behaviour in an increasingly consumerist HE environment. Although the CDCSA evaluation was small-scale, many of the students reported an expansion of focus beyond the simplistic doctrine of 'getting a job' or 'learning to earn'. As such, the students appeared more inclined to engage in civic and social activities outside of their degree as a consequence of their participation in the CDCSA. These findings support recent work in the employability field which asserts that '*the ability to articulate learning and raising confidence, self-esteem and aspirations seem to be more significant in developing graduates than a narrow focus on skills and competences'*. (Pegg *et al.*, 2012, p.9). It is therefore important that educational practitioners and managers look beyond the statistical measurement of graduate employment destinations when reflecting on the future role of careers work in HE.

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Notes

[1]Statistical findings from this statutory survey are used as the basis for ranking the employability performance of HEIs in competitive league tables on an annual basis in the UK. From 2012/13, DLHE data is being used as the basis for employability data in Key Information Sets (HEFCE, 2012).

[2]Linking London Lifelong Learning Network Development Project funding (Reference: 62)

[3]The binary opposition of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' learners has been criticised as a deficit model of learning (Aberton, 2012, p.237-8) and the terms are used here only for purposes of classification.

[4]The author would like to thank Norma McEnery for her input into the design and collection of the evaluation data.

[5]This data was only collected at CDCSA-specific events given that client feedback was already collected as part of the existing programme of CDC events.

[6]Recent research has similarly shown that non-A level students studying in Further Education and planning to progress to HE (Clark, 2011) and older men re-entering post-compulsory

education (Findsen & McEwen, 2012) display a diverse range of motivations beyond the purely economic.

About the authors

Dr Wayne Clark, Senior Manager - Research & Development within the Planning Office, University of Westminster.

Email: W.Clark@westminster.ac.uk