Developing and Enhancing Graduates’ Career Resilience: Perspectives from Higher Education Careers Professionals

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Executive Summary

This research aimed to explore the notion of career resilience as understood by careers professionals in universities based in the North East of England and Northern Ireland. It sought to examine how career resilience is defined and asked whether careers professionals have a role in its development and the challenges faced in its implementation.

The research sought to explore the following questions:

1. How do careers professionals in Higher Education define career resilience?
2. What strategies/practices/frameworks/activities are careers professionals using to develop career resilience in graduates?
3. What are the challenges that careers professionals face in developing career resilience in graduates?

Data was gathered using face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 22 Higher Education careers professionals in the North East and Northern Ireland. The results highlighted that despite career resilience being cited as a key ‘feature’ in the landscape of the graduate labour market it remains highly abstract in application. Careers and employability professionals provided a range of definitions of the term suggesting an absence of a concrete understanding. Definitions of resilience from the individuals participating in this study included self-efficacy, confidence, ability to overcome obstacles and an ability to ‘bounce back’. As such, careers professionals’ definitions of resilience were framed within highly individualized narratives within higher education policy and practice.

The findings highlight a number of challenges, concerning the support and development of career resilience within higher education. These challenges included the heterogeneous student cohort, the need for a holistic approach, the dominant narratives of successful employment outcomes and associated metrics of performance. The changing role of careers professionals in higher education was also noted.

In conclusion, the findings of this project carry a number of implications for policy, practice and research. In particular, it has highlighted the need to consider how the wider context of higher education can support (or not) a range of stakeholders in the development of students’ expectations of and preparations for labour market and their future careers. We illustrate the challenges of acknowledging routes and transition experiences that are counter to dominant notions of successful graduate outcomes. It is hoped that that this research will inform careers guidance and intervention across the HEI sector to help prepare students and graduates for their future careers.
Introduction

In recent years there has been an increased use of the term resilience in relation to graduates generally and graduate careers more specifically. In the press and in practitioner literature graduate resilience is presented as a key ‘attribute’, an essential characteristic for a successful career, something that can and should be developed (ISE, 2018; UCAS, 2018). However, surveys of employers suggest that they perceive graduates as ‘lacking’ in resilience when they enter employment (Ford-Rojas, 2017). This emphasis on resilience is seen to reflect an ongoing trend of individualising responsibility for career success and development (Bimrose and Hearne, 2012).

Whilst debate about the role of universities in developing graduates for their future employment has been ongoing for some time (cf Burke et al., 2017), a subtle yet significant reframing of policy context is occurring in the UK. Against a backdrop of increasing pressure for universities to demonstrate their value to individuals and wider society, underlined by changes to the regulatory regime, there is particular emphasis on their role in preparing students for life beyond university. While the substantial emphasis is still on the individual to assume responsibility for their career development there is now more prominence on the role of ‘the university’ in appropriately supporting this – beyond initial employment outcomes. This is reflected in the primary objectives of the Office for Students which not only focus on access to and experience of Higher Education but are looking to ensure that “all students from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake Higher Education are able to progress into employment or further study, and their qualifications hold value over time” (OFS, 2018:14). Against this backdrop there is increased expectation that it is a key role of universities to develop student resilience (Holdsworth et al., 2018, Pathak, 2016).

Despite its prevalence, the concept of resilience has received limited critical attention in the context of graduate careers and Higher Education. This is important as research highlights that resilience is contextual in nature and varies over the life course (Turner et al., 2017). Although researchers have begun to examine the notion of resilience in careers generally (Lyons et al., 2015; Di Maggio et al., 2016) and student/graduate resilience more specifically (Holdsworth et al., 2018; Morgan, 2016) there has been limited exploration of a key stakeholder in this debate – the higher education careers professional. Against a backdrop of what Christie (2016:72) terms ‘professional turbulence’ and ‘evolution of the role from in-depth work to a focus on breadth’, and given the growing emphasis on university careers services and interventions to ‘build resilience’ for future career (Russell–Watts and Stringer, 2018) we thought it timely to examine the perspective of this group, in particular how HE
careers professionals understand resilience and how they incorporate development of resilience in practice.

This research, therefore, examines the notion of career resilience from the perspective of careers professionals in HEIs – exploring what they understand resilience to be, if and how careers professionals have a role in its development and the challenges that are faced. It explores the following questions:

1. How do Higher Education careers professionals understand and define career resilience?

2. What strategies/practices/tools/frameworks/activities are careers professionals using to develop career resilience in graduates?

3. What are the challenges that careers professionals face in developing career resilience in graduates?

In doing so we aim to highlight the importance of understanding resilience in relation to graduate careers for both research and practice.
Overview of the literature

Defining Career Resilience

Since the early 1990s there have been increasing calls for a ‘career-resilient work-force’ who are willing to engage in continuous learning and development, be adaptable to change and assume responsibility for their own career management (Waterman et al., 1994). Against the back-drop of what some are calling the ‘fourth-industrial revolution’ - where a ‘perfect storm’ is seen to be leading to significant change in business models, disrupting labour markets and new forms of work, employment and careers are emerging – there is a renewed emphasis on the need for career resilience in the future world of work (World Economic Forum, 2016).

Employers are increasingly citing resilience as “an essential quality for young people to have – to be able to cope with set-backs and criticism to be motivated to overcome obstacles, and to stay calm under pressure” (UCAS, 2018). As such, ‘stronger’ or higher levels of student/graduate career resilience is positioned as helping graduates adapt to challenging labour markets, unemployment, and underemployment. This positioning is not without its critics and concerns have been raised about the implications of a ‘career resilience discourse’ (Burke and Scurry, 2019; Russell-Watts and Stringer, 2018). Stevenson (2016) raises concern over what she sees as a ‘deficit approach’ - which values certain dispositions or traits above others without recognising wider structural inequalities and the need to develop appropriate resources. Within this perspective a perceived ‘lack of resilience’ may be seen as a character flaw (Britt et al., 2016).

Resilience is a complex and contested concept. We draw on the broader resilience literature to inform the report but do not explore this in detail here (for a detailed consideration of broader definitions of resilience from different disciplinary perspectives see Burke and Scurry, 2019). For the purpose of this report we are focusing on career resilience as defined by Mishra and McDonald (2017; 218) - “a developmental process of persisting, adapting and/or flourishing in one’s career despite challenges, changing events and disruptions over time”. This is consistent with the emerging notion of graduate resilience, defined in a recent HECSU funded study by Lancaster University as “the ability to overcome barriers, adapt to problems in the workplace as they arise, and find appropriate solutions” (Morgan, 2016:4).

Applying a career lens moves beyond understanding how graduates are displaying resilience in their role to considering how they are demonstrating resilience in the management of their own careers. This reflects how career resilient individuals are understood in the wider academic literature as
those that are not only able to “bounce back” from adverse employment experiences but also utilise these experiences to develop and advance in both their professional and personal lives (Kossek and Perrigino, 2016).

Career resilience is often presented within the literature as part of a wider picture of employability and career attributes. For example, Botha and Coetzee (2017) explore career resilience as one of three career attributes that contribute to wider employability attributes. Siebert et al., (2016:245) argue that career resilience (“the capacity to continue to make progress toward your current career goals with the resources you have already developed: to keep calm and carry on”) should be developed alongside adaptability (“reformulation of goals and/or strategies to adapt to new career realities”). Doing so increases an individual’s capacity to deal with and overcome career shocks.

Developing Career Resilience

Within the literature there is an increasing emphasis on career resilience being an ‘attribute’ which can be taught and developed. For example, a range of studies have argued the value of incorporating resilience training into education programmes to prepare people for future careers (for example teachers, nurses, veterinary nursing) (Kaplan, et al., 2017; McAllister and McKinnon, 2009; Lloyd and Campion, 2017; Richards et al., 2018).

Within organisational contexts there is growing emphasis on how the organisational culture can help to support the development of career resilience (Cake et al., 2017). For example, Arora and Rangnekar (2015) argue that organisations can develop resilience by training managers and senior colleagues to be proactive in anticipating career challenges. Neumann et al. (2018) also identified a range of organisational factors that may shape resilience (improving the work environment, increasing professional engagement and team building) yet noted the importance of a ‘multifaceted approach’ to thinking about resilience which saw it as a shared endeavour between the individual, the institution and relevant professional organisations.

Whilst it has been argued that career professionals play an important role in helping individuals develop career resilience strategies (Bimrose et al., 2008), there has been limited exploration of how this is done and the experiences of this group. Although researchers have begun to examine the notion of career resilience (Lyons et al., 2015; Di Maggio et al., 2016) and graduate resilience more specifically (Morgan, 2016) there has been limited consideration of how HE careers professionals understand resilience, how they incorporate the development of resilience into their practice and the challenges they face in doing so. A notable exception is the report by Russell-Watts and Stringer
(2018) which explored the ways in which the career resilience of students can be enhanced. They note a resistance by careers professionals to “using the language of failure and setbacks” to challenge a prevalent narrative of success. They call for research which explores how careers professional can best promote and enhance students’ resilience.

Bimrose and Hearne (2012) argue, there ‘is some utility’ in the concepts of career resilience and career adaptability for framing career counselling support but express concern that the recent shift in policy discourse shifts the focus on individuals to develop resilience. They argue that there is a need to consider this against wider structures and appropriate support. Recent work echoes this perspective and argues for a process oriented conceptualisation to further understanding of how professional and personal factors shape career resilience over time (Mishra and McDonald, 2017; Turner et al., 2017).
Methodology

Data was gathered using in-depth semi-structured interviews with Higher Education careers professionals from six institutions in the North East of England and Northern Ireland. Access to the different units was agreed by the Heads of Service. Data was collected using face-to-face interviews. The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed for data analysis in NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software. Prior to commencing the project, full ethical approval was gained from Northumbria University Ethics Committee. The total number of participants interviewed was 22. In line with good research practice, all participants will remain anonymous and individuals will not be identifiable from any output produced. To that end no information is provided about the composition of the sample (gender, role, and institution) as this may make the individual identifiable to others.
Findings

1. How do Higher Education careers professionals understand and define career resilience?

2. What strategies/practices/tools/frameworks/activities are careers professionals using to develop career resilience in graduates?

3. What are the challenges that careers professionals face in developing career resilience in graduates?

Understanding Career Resilience

All participants recognised that there had been a growing emphasis on career resilience in the graduate labour market in recent years. This was seen to manifest itself in a number of ways. Firstly, there was an increasing sense that employers were looking for resilience as a key ‘characteristic’ during the recruitment and selection process. This was visible in the press coverage of the graduate labour market;

“It is in the press a lot - the buzzword of resilience and whether this generation are resilient to change.”

"you know there’s people blogging about it, writing articles, delivering sessions at conferences [...] there’s an awareness that [...] we need to be thinking about it”

Participants also reported a greater emphasis on resilience as a key skill or requirement from employers in recruitment materials and selection processes;

“It’s resilience certainly a common requirement from employers. We tend to look at different types of sources; to look at the key transferable skills that employers look for from students and graduates and resilience is usually up there with things like team work, and organization, leadership skills – that type of thing.”

Another participant highlighted that Teach First list resilience on their website as a competency they use during selection (Teach First, n.d.).

Furthermore participants highlighted that key stakeholders in the graduate labour market were increasingly discussing resilience and providing resources and advice for graduates about developing and presenting their resilience to employers - for example TARGETjobs, a leading online resource for graduate recruitment and careers advice in the UK, identify resilience as a key graduate skill and have provided advice on cultivating and demonstrating resilience to employers (TARGETjobs, n.d.).

Against this backdrop of increased emphasis on resilience in graduate careers, there was a consensus amongst the participants that whilst they (as career professionals) had a sense of what
they thought resilience is, it was a challenging concept to pin down and define. While employers were increasingly asking for resilience, there was little understanding of what this is and how it is evaluated and assessed within recruitment and selection processes. This had consequences for if and how it could be understood and how the careers professionals felt that they could play a role in developing career resilience in students.

Defining career resilience

In attempting to define career resilience the careers professionals identified a complex combination of personal self-efficacy, perseverance, confidence, ability to overcome obstacles and willingness to move forward as key features. Many felt that resilience also meant being able to manage disappointment, understanding what constitutes success, having the mental strength to achieve goals and an ability to approach change in the light of changing labour market demands.

Central to the careers professionals’ understandings of career resilience was the ability to manage and overcome setbacks:

“it’s about not being too deterred by setbacks, so be able to pick yourself up again if you’ve been rejected from something or something hasn’t gone so well in life”

They also referred to the ability of individuals to ‘bounce-back’ and be flexible and adaptable to experiences in the recruitment process and the workplace. Resilience was not simply positioned as a response to circumstances, there was a sense that resilient individuals planned and prepared for future change:

“But resilience is the ability to be able to move with [shifting] sands and to see what the future landscape might look like”

“... the world’s forever changing and businesses have to adapt and grow and change and, and graduates have to adapt along, alongside that so they really want, they really want their workforce to, to, to be resilient and, and, and to look at knockbacks as – setbacks as a, you know, a way of adapting and changing and evolving rather than in a negative sense”

Whilst there was a wide range of understandings of career resilience, the career professionals’ perspectives clearly echo the perspectives within the literature which present career resilience as a complex combination of personality traits/characteristics and career self-management skills. Participants highlighted the challenge in understanding the relationship of career resilience to wider understandings of resilience in relation to mental health and wellbeing. This highlights the challenge
and complexity for careers professionals in attempting to define career resilience and subsequently develop ‘it’ within students for their graduate careers.

‘The latest buzzword - what’s so different about resilience?’

There was a strong sense from the participants that career resilience was the latest in a long line of ‘employability buzzwords’ used in relation to the graduate labour market. The complexity in defining resilience added to this and led careers professionals to see the development of career resilience as ‘just part of what we already do’ - and that career resilience was fostered through the development of career management skills.

The participants spoke of a slight shift in terms of the emphasis and potential value of facing and overcoming adversity (personal or in the workplace), perhaps reflecting a wider acknowledgement of mental health and wellbeing in society;

“I think sometimes it’s to do with the mental health, that mental health issues are becoming more prominent, people are feeling more confident to talk about background and how things have affected them”

“I think they’re beginning to realize that people have got more resilience, and who have a ducking and diving approach to life, and maybe are more creative and have learnt from um, knockbacks, and probably maybe going to be more successful and make their businesses more successful than somebody who has never failed”

Very few participants used the term resilience with students or graduates unless it was raised during a one-to-one session. Words such as career motivation, confidence and employability were preferred. When probed this was attributed to two factors. First, existing interventions and support were not yet framed in resilience terms, although a growing number were looking at how to tailor some specific resource under the banner of resilience. Second, there was a sense that there was implied negativity in the notion of resilience – the idea that the experience of entering the labour market would be very challenging and that only the resilient would overcome this adversity. Participants questioned the value in perpetuating this narrative.

Why resilience? Why now?

As discussed previously the participants were keenly aware of the increased emphasis on career resilience.
“It’s become quite kind of trendy hasn’t it? [...] the work that we’ve done with different employers seem to be identifying it more as something that they’re looking for successful graduates or successful recruits to be in the work place”

The popularity of resilience was seen to be related to several factors. First, the changing nature of education systems and experiences which were seen to prevent opportunities to experience setbacks and failure as they encouraged instrumental behavior to ‘perform’;

“I’m not sure why it’s [resilience] is more prevalent now than it has been previously possibly its related to changes in the education system that students have gone through so they don’t get as many opportunities to be flexible or creative or experimental it’s all quite regimented and [...] if you’ve had that sort of approach then maybe you haven’t had very many setbacks to bounce back from because you’ve never really been able to sort of experiment in doing things [mmm] your way, you’ve had to do them in a very specific way in order to pass tests”

This, combined with limited experience beyond education, was seen to exacerbate the uncertainty that graduates experienced as they transitioned into the labour market.

Another key factor that the careers professionals saw as driving the emphasis on resilience was a shift away from employers requiring specific knowledge to recruitment that focused on competences, softer skills and attitudes.

Well I suppose its [Resilience] part of their, yeah I suppose it’s part of the sort of broader thing of wanting graduates not necessarily who have specific knowledge and sometimes not necessarily even who have specific skills but who have the right mindset if you like, the ability to learn things and grow when they’re sort of within a position so and that you know we can train for some things but we can’t train for mindset and I suppose really resilience is part of that mindset isn’t it? And the idea of growth mindset and kind of having a positive outlook on things and being able to be all of the things that I mentioned before I think is something that’s really important to employers now.

The changing nature of work and careers was also raised, with a need to consider resilience in a way that recognizes the processual nature of careers. Participants referred to the decline of traditional careers and structures which meant that individuals would be experiencing numerous changes and uncertainty across their career.

“we’re only really enabling them to make that first transition, but we are conscious that they’re probably going to have to do this over and over again they’re not embarking on a sort of solid career with a given organisation”

Developing Career Resilience

Three key themes emerged when considering how career professionals were developing career resilience. First, resilience is being addressed within existing support and guidance structure as
opposed to separate interventions or initiatives. Second, there was an awareness of specific tools and practices emerging to support developing resilience but there was uncertainty over which tools were valuable. Third, there was a need for an integrated and holistic approach to developing career resilience. We shall now go on to discuss each of these in turn.

Just part of the wider ‘package’ of support

The majority of individuals felt that using existing interventions including one-to-ones and career conversations, credit bearing skills development modules and extra-curricular employability awards were the most effective way to develop resilience as part of a wider conception of careers. In addition, participants’ accounts highlighted that the value of a range of existing practices to develop employability such as work experience, placements and networking were vital components to develop career resilience but they faced challenges in making students aware of this. Practice differed widely within and between institutions, with some saying a lack of buy-in from academic staff meant it was difficult to embed development within the curriculum while others benefitted from close ties across their institution.

“I don’t think we’ve got a systematic way of doing that [developing resilience], I think when we are talking about the plethora of sessions that you do on getting a graduate job in one form or another, or preparing for placement and you know those sorts of programmes, those sorts of sessions we would, you would make reference to things which were really about being resilient but we don’t have a systematic way of really kind of ensuring that, that happens or a particular method of introducing it which might be something we should think about.”

Separate resilience themed/branded interventions or resources were not generally being offered, although some institutions were starting to explore this through the introduction of coaching sessions and workshops specifically to address resilience related issues. There was a sense that resilience was being developed and addressed in a responsive rather than strategic way. For example, it may become part of a discussion in a one-to-one session with a student, often in response to student experience in job applications or emerge as part of wider discussions and practice:

“It kind of you know there’s a – there’s, everything sort of overlaps with everything else really you know so, if you’re talking about strengths based recruitment you can kind of see there’s a connection there as well and that kind of focusing on that whole sort of having a sort of solution focused mindset and you know lots of things like that can be touched upon that I think are connected to resilience”
It is interesting to note that wider structural constraints were highlighted as particular challenges for addressing resilience – some careers professionals felt that composition of the student population or limited local graduate labour markets made the issue of resilience a sensitive one.

Which tools and where to find them?

Many of the professionals interviewed expressed a desire for more specific training on resilience related tools and activities. Participants were aware of resilience ‘toolkits’ but were not using them specifically and this stemmed from an uncertainty in identifying and evaluating the different ‘solutions’ and ‘interventions’ on offer. There were also ongoing concerns that this was another buzz-word which drew attention away from the wider notion of career development and management. Despite this, participants said they would welcome more training and guidance in this area from their institutions and the wider professional community.

Need for an integrated and holistic approach

A common theme throughout the interviews was the need for an integrated and holistic approach to developing resilience in students and graduates.

“Well I suppose ultimately it’s the individual who’s gonna have to make the changes in order to achieve that [resilience] but I suppose then it’s a joint responsibility isn’t it with everybody whose involved in higher education in terms of working with students be that through the career services, be that through teaching staff - I think it probably needs to be wider than just one area because as you say it’s [resilience] very much linked to aspects of peoples character and personality so, doing it in a kind of now you’re gonna do two hours and then you’re gonna come out the other end and be resilient probably isn’t going to work so it needs to be something really that’s weaved throughout kind of the whole university experience I would think.”

Careers professionals recognized that while the student has a responsibility to manage their own career resilience a wide range of stakeholders including the careers service, academic staff, support staff and employers, all have a role to play.

“I think employers have to take some responsibility for this and not just individuals so, I don’t want to sort of say, ‘Oh yes the answer to’ is for us to develop resilient individual students and we’re going to take the interventions we need to do that cos I think employers need to be involved as well”
Challenges for Careers Professionals

Four key themes emerged when considering the challenges that career professionals were facing in developing career resilience. First that a one-size approach was not appropriate given the heterogeneous nature of the student/graduate population. Second, the tensions in challenging dominant narratives of success. Third, the changing role of careers professionals in Higher Education, in particular the pressures surrounding ‘deliverables’ and markers of success. Finally, the need to think about defining and developing resilience as part of a bigger picture – in particular the challenge in developing a ‘shared understanding’ of what resilience is. We shall now go on to discuss each of these in turn.

One size doesn’t fit all

The careers professionals identified a significant challenge in addressing resilience in different contexts for different groups – leading to a need for varied approaches in engaging with different students and graduates to develop career resilience. This stemmed from the varied nature of students and graduates within and between institutions. They saw career resilience as stemming from a complex combination of personality traits, behaviours, career history (skills and experience) and wider contextual factors (support from family, labour market). Building on this career resilience was seen to be linked to access to resources - capitals (economic, social and cultural) – although it was acknowledged that access to resource alone did not necessarily result in resilience. Factors such as family, location and career support (formal and informal) were seen to play a role.

“I think a lot of our students actually have a socio-economic background where they have had to be quite resilient already and that lends itself to some aspects of what I’ve sort of described as resilience [...]. So, I think adaptability, they’re often quite strong because they’ve just had to deal with a variety of circumstances and have not necessarily always succeeded so, you know we see quite a lot of students who’ve had this [...] the slightly mature student like you know the younger mature students who’ve had issues at school and then have found ways around those afterwards and come to university kind of a roundabout route. So, you know there’s quite a, there’s a reasonable proportion of people in that kind of situation so they have that kind of resilience and the strength in the sense of you know facing a challenge not going well, starting again and acting to different circumstances, students who have two placements go on and study. You know there are lots of those sorts of opportunities there a quite a lot of students that have engaged with those kinds of challenging situations. But there are also students from that you know with those same sort of socio-economic background etc that, that really lack the kind of confidence, self-efficacy as well so, there’s nothing, there are no guarantees.”
**Tensions in challenging dominant narratives of success**

A significant minority of participants expressed concern about the negative associations with emphasising the development of resilience. These participants spoke of a sense that this was ‘preparing students to fail’ and ‘lowering expectations’. This was viewed as a sensitive topic as it might be seen that instead of encouraging ambition and success, by focusing on resilience the careers professional was highlighting the limits to individual endeavour. Participants identified a need to be sensitive to the local context and the opportunities that this afforded (or not) for students and graduate future careers. This was seen to go against institutional and sector wide narratives of career opportunity and success arising from investment in Higher Education. This reflected a general sense that there was limited discussion of negative outcomes for graduates. Related to this was a concern over ‘measuring the value’ of the input into developing resilience, reflecting a sector wide shift in meeting key metrics as a service and an institution.

**Changing role of the careers professional**

Following on from these discussions there was a sense that the role of the careers professional was changing, with more emphasis on strategic contribution than on the relationship with the students and graduates. The need to be more responsive to trends and demands of employers was seen to be a significant shift. The majority of participants highlighted the need for more career development and support for them as careers professionals to recognise this change.

**Part of a bigger picture**

A key challenge identified was the need to consider career resilience as part of a ‘bigger picture’ – which also involved academics, student wellbeing/mental health professionals, employers and the students themselves. An integrated and holistic approach was seen to be central but wider consideration also needed to be given to broader societal issues.

“I think that’s quite a difficult question isn’t it? Obviously we probably think that it [career resilience] is something that should be developed because it’s something that is very prevalent, it’s something that employers are talking about I suppose it also has a dimension of kind of broader wellbeing and we’ve got a responsibility to instil that in our students to make sure that they’re sort of equipped to deal with challenges both when they’re at university and beyond it. And yes, it probably can be developed but I think it’s probably quite difficult to think about how to do that because of some of the reasons that I mentioned about broader sort of society and education and other things that are outside of our sort of control.”
Conclusions and recommendations

The notion of career resilience is at once ubiquitous and ethereal, it is a term that features highly across employability literature and is often cited as a key requirement for graduates to demonstrate to employers, yet it remains highly abstract in application. This research highlights that careers professionals face a number of challenges in attempting to understand and develop career resilience in the context of higher education. Perhaps given the growing emphasis on and attention to ‘resilience’ more broadly, it is timely for HEIs to review how they develop and support careers professionals in this area. It is important to note here that our research highlights the importance of a holistic approach, that this does not simply lie with careers services, yet the careers professional plays a significant role.

Whilst there is significant debate and differing perspectives of resilience more broadly, it is an inevitable part of the wider discourse surrounding students generally and their future career more specifically. We therefore recommend that HEIs seek to establish shared understandings across different stakeholder groups and take the opportunity to open up the agenda and explicitly acknowledge that there are both structural and agentic elements to resilience, career resilience and more broadly, employability. Failing to engage with and acknowledge the structural elements of career resilience risks placing the responsibility solely on the individual student and graduate. In a recent HECSU research report Christie (2016) argues for more nuanced approaches by careers and employability professionals that highlights both positive and negative experiences of graduate careers, and considers barriers (for example, social class and geographic location) to achieving career outcomes. This would suggest that in order to develop career resilience in graduates, careers and employability professionals would not only need to acknowledge that graduates may encounter ‘sub-optimal’ labour market outcomes but also the potential for wider structural factors to limit individual agency.

This may be challenging to do in an increasingly competitive landscape, where HEI performance metrics are increasingly focused on blunt proxy measures of successful graduate outcomes. However, we echo the concerns of our participants, that whilst there is a need to provide realistic insight and guidance to students at the same time as not limiting aspirations, current approaches to evaluating performance of careers services and the changing role of careers professionals are often not conducive to this approach. The research has highlighted the tensions experienced by careers
professionals between students’ subjective expectations of the labour market, inculcated through human capital narratives such as the ‘graduate premium’, and the objective reality of the labour market which for some can be characterised by experiences of underemployment (Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2018). We would argue that self-efficacy, a key element of resilience, can be supported by a critical and accurate understanding of the objective conditions within the labour market.

Another key challenge to consider is the need to think about the connections between career resilience and wellbeing. We would recommend that career resilience is considered against a wider institutional approach to developing and supporting academic resilience. There are significant opportunities to develop joint initiatives with student wellbeing services for students and different stakeholder groups (academics, careers professionals, employers).

Finally, whilst the research highlights that careers professionals perceive that employers are asking for ‘resilient’ graduates, there is limited understanding of how this is being defined, assessed and evaluated during recruitment and selection practices. There is a need to understand employers’ practice in relation to this. Institutions should look to develop ways to explore this further with employers. This could then inform the development of workshops and support within university careers services.

In conclusion, the findings of this project carry a number of implications for policy, practice and research. In particular, it has highlighted the need to consider how the wider context of higher education can support (or not) a range of stakeholders in the development of students’ expectations of and preparations for labour market and their future careers. We illustrate the challenges of acknowledging routes and transition experiences that are counter to dominant notions of successful graduate outcomes. It is hoped that that this research will inform careers guidance and intervention across the HEI sector to help prepare students and graduates for their future careers.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this research we offer a number of recommendations for higher education institutions generally and careers professionals specifically:
• Stakeholders would benefit from applying a theorised definition of career resilience that incorporates both structural and agentic elements.

• Higher education institutions should seek to adopt a holistic approach to develop and support career resilience in students.

• Careers professionals and other stakeholders would benefit from CPD opportunities to develop understanding and expertise in career resilience tools and frameworks.

• Careers professionals would benefit from a ‘career resilience gateway’ to resources/tools etc.

• Careers professionals should be supported to gain further insight from employers on how they understand career resilience and the ways in which they are evaluating this during recruitment and selection processes.

• University staff, careers professionals in particular, should be supported to provide realistic insights into the graduate labour market and career experiences to increase awareness of transitions and challenges that are faced and the benefits of career resilience in an increasingly challenging context.
References


