An investigation of goal-setting in undergraduate employability

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Overview

- Background
- Theoretical underpinning
- Aims
- Method
- Results
- Discussion
Background

- Graduates are experiencing difficulty obtaining desired forms of employment (Helyer & Lee, 2014)
- Graduate employability a key concern for HE Sector (Tomlinson, 2012)
- Undergraduate students may not be engaging with their employability early enough to achieve positive career outcomes (Tansley et al, 2007)
- The Higher Education Academy (2012) has called for research identifying barriers to engagement with employability
Theoretical Underpinning

- Study drew upon goal-setting theory (e.g. Locke & Latham, 2002)
  - Individuals perform better when setting specific, challenging, but achievable goals for themselves
  - Regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997) – approach and avoidance goals
  - Mastery approach goals associated with seeking opportunities for self-development (Baranik et al, 2007)
Aims

- To investigate the effect of mastery approach on proactive career behaviours and thereby perceived employability

- To investigate the impact of workload demands and career goal commitment on the association between mastery approach and proactive career behaviours
Method – Design and Participants

- Correlational survey design

- 432 Undergraduate student participants (from 19 institutions)

- 71.5% female, 58.1% white British, mean age=22.95 (SD=6.92)

- 53.5% in paid work

- 28.2% studying psychology, 18.5% studying life sciences, 18.3% studying nursing or midwifery
Method - measures

- **Self-efficacy** – measured using the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (NGSE; Chen, Gully & Eden, 2001), comprising 8 items.

- **Mastery approach** goal regulation – measured using a 4-item sub-scale from the Achievement Goals for a Work Domain measure (Baranik, Barron & Finney, 2007).

- **Perceived academic workload** and **perceived employment-related workload** were both measured using the 3 item work pressure subscale of the Work Characteristic Measure (ten Brummelhuis, van der Lippe, Kluewer & Flap, 2008).

- **Career goal commitment** – measured using the Klein et al Unidimensional Target-free measure (KUT; Klein, Cooper, Molloy & Swanson, 2014), comprising 4 items.

- **Proactive career behaviours** – measured using the Proactive Career Behavior Measure (Strauss, Griffin & Parker, 2012). The measure consists of four subscales, each comprising 3 items. The subscales are **career planning**, **proactive skill development**, **career consultation** and **network building**.

- **Perceptions of employability** – measured using the Perceived Employability Measure (Kirves, Kinnunen, De Cuyper and Mäkikangas, 2014), comprising 3 items.
Procedure

- Access sought via departments at pre- and post-1992 HE institutions
- Participants invited to participate in online survey via Qualtrics
- Participation took 10-15 minutes
- Participation anonymous, but students had option of providing email address to take part in a prize draw
- Data analysed using Structural Equation Modeling
Results

- Mastery approach positively associated with skill development, network building, and career consultation – but not career planning

- Only skill development and network building significantly associated with perceived employability
  - H1 partially supported

- Goal commitment did not moderate mastery approach and proactive career behaviours – but did partially mediate
  - H2 not supported

- No moderation effect of workload – H3 not supported
Figure: Model with β coefficients.  *= p<.05, **=<.01, †=p<.001
Mastery approach associated positively with proactive career behaviours
- Helping students to set (appropriately) challenging self-development goals may be a useful intervention

Career planning and career consultation does not seem to make students feel more employable
- Does this have implications for uptake of career service?
Goal commitment appears to mediate rather than moderate mastery approach -> proactive career behaviour
- Important to encourage early commitment to goals

Workload pressure had minimal to no association with proactive career behaviours
- Students finding other ways to cope?
- Is the nature of pressure different for those high or low in ability?
Limitations and future directions

- **Correlational design** – causality cannot be assumed, SEM only tests plausibility of model

- Survey based on self-report – a measure of actual changes in human and social capital would be beneficial

- Future research to explore the effect of a goal-setting intervention
Questions


References