

Developmental tasks, vocational development and career adaptability

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Summary: The ideas of age-appropriate developmental tasks, clear vocational development stages and initial vocational education and training (VET) pathways were predicated on eventually establishing and maintaining a stable career identity. Such trajectories have become problematic, but much initial VET does not reflect this tentativeness and often acts as if a young person has made a definite commitment to the sector or occupation and will find appropriate work. The argument here is that, given career instability and the tentativeness of much initial occupational choice, then the key 'developmental task' for young adults should be the development of 'career adaptability.' This concept is strategically important because it is concerned with the development of, and support for, the capability of an individual to make successful transitions where the labour market, organisation of work and occupational and organisational knowledge bases may all be subject to considerable change.

Keywords: career adaptability; developmental tasks; learning and development pathways; occupational identities

Introduction

Havighurst (1950) believed there were clear age-appropriate developmental tasks to be accomplished at different life stages. In the vocational sphere early adulthood (up to age 30) was seen as 'getting started in an occupation.' Super (1963) built on this approach with his idea of vocational development stages, where early adulthood (up to age 24) was a time where tentative plans were made and occupational choices narrowed but not finalised. The later stages around establishing and maintaining a stable career identity have become much more problematic, but it is interesting that both Havighurst and Super saw the early adulthood stage as being tentative in relation to vocational development. Much initial vocational education and training does not reflect this tentativeness and assumes a young person has made a definite commitment to and will find appropriate work in the sector or occupation. However, career identities are now much less stable than fifty years ago, so this, together with the tentativeness of much initial occupational choice, reinforces the idea that a 'developmental task' for young adults should be 'career adaptability.' The concept of career adaptability is strategically important because it relates to an individual's capability to make a series of successful transitions where the labour market, organisation of work and underlying occupational and organisational knowledge bases may all be changing. This paper investigates the successful transitions of young people (up to age 30) either into their chosen occupations or into sectors other than those for which they were initially trained.

Methodology

Since 2000, the European Union has sought to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, with member states committed to increasing cooperation in formal initial and continuing vocational education and training, and national policies often focused on exhorting employers to train and on encouraging sectoral bodies to formulate plans for skill development in their sector. What was missing, however, from such employer and sectoral-driven concerns was some sense of how individuals are putting learning and development to use in their evolving careers progression across the life-course, particularly insofar as this involves moving between sectors. So the European Commission commissioned a major comparative study of changing patterns of work-related learning and career development in Europe (Brown et al. 2010). The study sought to develop an understanding of the different ways individuals careers are unfolding over time, how different types of learning interact across the life-course and how they may facilitate mobility in the labour market. Focusing mainly on this study, but also drawing on three earlier studies, this research explored the extent to which young skilled workers were equipped to manage career transitions – were they career adaptable?

The methodology for the research underpinning this paper involved the purposive sampling of cases from a database of strategic career biographies of almost 2000 adults across fourteen countries in Europe (in two national and two European studies) on changing occupational identities and patterns of career development across the life-course. These data were collected either using interviews or extended surveys that traced patterns of engagement with learning and development through work, as well as in more formal education and training settings. For this paper the data analysis will focus on the detailed case histories of 50 young people who made successful transitions to experienced skilled worker status in their chosen field mainly but not exclusively from the United Kingdom, half of whom subsequently made a major career change (of occupation, sector, employer or country). Sectors represented include: aerospace and engineering; banking and finance; chemicals; health care; information and communications technology (ICT); media; and sports marketing.

Careers can be viewed as ‘the evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time’ (Arthur et al. 1989) and Ball (1996) highlights how, for individuals to take responsibility for their own career decisions, their ability to review and reflect upon their career transitions needs to be developed. However, it has been found that individuals who take opportunities that present themselves and try to turn them to their advantage are engaged in an opportunistic career transitioning style (Bimrose et al. 2008), which can also be critical in shaping careers. Our research sought to examine the dynamic element of how individuals become engaged with learning and development pathways, which involve upskilling, reskilling and sometimes transformational shifts in perspective as their careers develop, which is largely absent from current policy analysis. ‘Career adaptability’ provides real purchase on the readiness of young people to engage in different employment, education and training contexts precisely because it can be examined in terms of individual proactivity, relational issues and the quality, structure and nature of institutional support.

Results

Findings relate to the potential of the concept of career adaptability: to empower individuals to take positive decisions and actions regarding their skills development,

as well as facilitating participation in skill development in a range of employment, education, training and other contexts. From the (50) detailed cases it was clear that, subsequent to initial (vocational) education and training, experience developed through engagement with challenging work was a major vehicle for continuing development through to experienced skilled worker status. However, where participants had made successful career transitions before the age of 30, it was apparent that development that had occurred while working was often supplemented in a variety of ways, with individuals having different degrees of choice in the combination of learning activities (formal, non-formal and informal) with which they engaged. Individuals usually sought a degree of personal autonomy in how their careers developed (and in the meaning attached to career) but, in parallel, they often also looked for opportunities to exchange experiences with peers, colleagues and experts about possible lines of career development. In particular, individuals with a proactive approach to career development were more likely to engage in various forms of learning and development. Formal learning and development / CVT provision was also highly valued as a form of personal development, even without a direct career benefit: *'I love learning - for the pure enjoyment of learning something new'*.

Findings offer reinforcement for the idea that individuals are responsible actors in creating their own career pathways through learning and development, linked to opportunities in education, training, employment and other contexts. However, at the same time, there is an urgent need to support individuals in navigating their ways through increasingly complex work and life contexts and, in particular, helping individuals become more reflective at the individual level through provision of career guidance and counselling as a key component of a lifelong learning strategy (see also, Biesta, 2008). Even within generally successful careers, anxieties were expressed about career development at a time of organisational change and structural constraints – people recognised that navigating a career path could be fraught with difficulties. Personal agency (pro-activity and responding to opportunities) is important but there is also value in helping individuals develop their own career story of where they have been and where they are going. Many are actively shaping their personal work biographies (and even then they may value help in doing this), while some of those who had not made further successful career transitions upon completing their initial training and finding their first job, sometimes felt they would like to develop a clear sense of career direction but were struggling to do so without support: *'I don't feel like my career has been very well planned and I don't have a clear plan for how it will develop in the future, which means that it's difficult for me to choose training or learning (particularly long-term or big commitments) to develop my career.'*

Career options and choices are limited by context, but individuals can use career self-management to negotiate their own position within these constraints (King, 2004). Some young skilled workers were over-qualified for their jobs with their interest in learning being driven by personal development rather than career progression. Indeed, given the strong emphasis respondents attached to learning for personal development, it may be that messages promoting learning for employability are less effective than those which stress personal development, establishing personal networks and meeting new challenges. That is, messages should emphasise the immediate benefits of being a learner rather than where it leads - particularly if the opportunity structures available to an individual at that time are limited (Roberts, 1997).

Available pathways and different sets of expectations about career choice and occupational mobility are framed within clear opportunity structures that vary within and between sectors and countries. In ICT, for example, both learning and career patterns are highly individualised and as informal learning plays a key role, formal qualifications and career progression are only loosely coupled. In engineering there is quite a strong linkage between learning and careers, as formal training has a key role for many in the close coupling between continuing vocational learning and individual career development. In health, the linkage between learning and careers in health was quite complex. In some cases, developing a career involved vertical mobility, whereas others were happy to continue in a single specialisation or engage in horizontal mobility. There was, however, strong continuity through highly formalised initial and continuing education and training pathways, with a wide range of development opportunities on offer for most people working in the health sector. As a consequence, individual career progression was often linked to formal qualifications. Career pathways were therefore strongly framed by organisational opportunity structures in the different national health systems. The use of the term 'opportunity structures' itself neatly expressed the tension between openness and flexibility and structured pathways.

Two things stand out from scrutiny of these data. First, those who made successful subsequent early career transitions often exhibited career adaptability in terms of their (pro-active) personality, positive psycho-social factors (through the interaction with others, development of personal networks, mentors) and engagement with challenging opportunities. Second, those who had not made early career transitions split into two groups: those who were content with their 'experienced skilled worker' status and those who had reservations about their initial occupational choice. In all of these cases, focusing on 'career adaptability' as an important goal in initial and continuing education and training could be of considerable value in facilitating future career transitions of young skilled workers.

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