AGCAS'S NEXT TOP MODEL?

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L ooking around at the recent AGCAS annual conference, I was once again struck by the diversity of roles and job titles of those present. I'd suggest this is representative of the increasing diversity in institutions' ways of working in the area of careers and employability, which makes thinking about the right structures and delivery models for careers services both pertinent and challenging. Pertinent because there are so many models; challenging because the endless comparisons can serve to highlight difference, and an ever increasing range of options. We hear others talk about their ground-breaking new initiative and think: 'would that work here?'.

As module leader for the *Challenges of Careers work in Higher Education* module on the AGCAS/Warwick qualification, I see the benefit of the 'show and tell', but also the value of standing back and looking across the piece. With this in mind, I have engaged in a critical re-reading of some of the key commentaries on the subject in the last 20 years, and offer some observations.

Strategic directions

I began with Tony Watts's 1997 publication, ***Strategic Directions for HE Career Services***, commissioned by AGCAS and the go-to publication in this area around the time I was getting into HE work. As you would expect, there are some quaint anachronisms in a report from the last millennium (CEIGHE is described as a course for careers advisers – it's now relevant to, and attracts, people from a full range of career and employability related roles), but also much of relevance. The report charts the progression from 'appointment boards' to career services with an increasing attention to individual guidance and to autonomy in career decision-making. With the 'Service' as focus, three main locations are suggested (student services, academic services, marketing) and core activities are defined as: individual and group guidance; information and employer liaison; and placement. This latter term, present in one of the models Watt's puts forward, refers to the placement of graduates into jobs – not the way we are tending to use the word now as a form of work experience. In 1997, work experience (in the form of both placements and student employment), was seen as supplementary along with delivering accredited provision, marketing services to others and institutional brokerage.

Watts represents a number of 'models' in his report but they are less of a list of distinct options, more a list of activities. Diversity amongst these models is acknowledged, and today's buzzwordy 'hub and spoke' is foreshadowed, but diversity of approach is aligned to levels of resourcing rather than nature of institution.

Watts' report focuses on the service as physical space, with the dominant image of an open-access model, with drop-in appointments and information resources that students could browse. Of the options identified, the one which extended beyond the boundaries of a service was the curriculum model, foreshadowing the rise of credit-bearing careers education. As well as the perceived gold standard of an embedded 'career management skills' module, we also saw career development seeping out into other aspects of the curriculum in a range of ways. There is perhaps great promise in the possibilities of the 'learning organisation', but here Watts is referring to extending the offer of career support beyond current students, to research staff, for example. Again, this hardly seems like a radical new suggestion given the growth of work in this area over the last 15 years.

A personal reflection is that, when I started in careers work in 1999, it was not uncommon to spend all day actually in the service: students came in and we served them. By the mid noughties, this had changed and the job involved meetings outside the service, getting out and about around the institution. Why? Hold that thought…

Breaking out, breaking up

The next landmark on our journey took us to Watts and Butcher in their 2008 **_Break Out or Break Up?_** report. Funded by HECSU, this looked at four universities, both pre- and post-1992, selected because they were undergoing change in this area at that time. The four case studies suggest that, in some institutions, the traditional core roles of careers services have been extended and in others there had been a radical restructuring of the service within alternative structures in the institution.

Watts and Butcher asked: *'Can the centre hold?'* In other words, can responses to new challenges and opportunities be built around the traditional core roles of careers services? Or do they imply some radical restructuring of such services?

They looked to institution type for an answer, suggesting that there may be a difference between traditional, research-intensive universities and newer, teaching-oriented universities in this respect. I recall some of the reaction to *Break out or Break Up?* at the time and the perception that both the break out phenomenon it documented (and also, crucially, the act of documenting it) were highly threatening to professionals working in the field. Fortunately, we have got better at having this conversation.
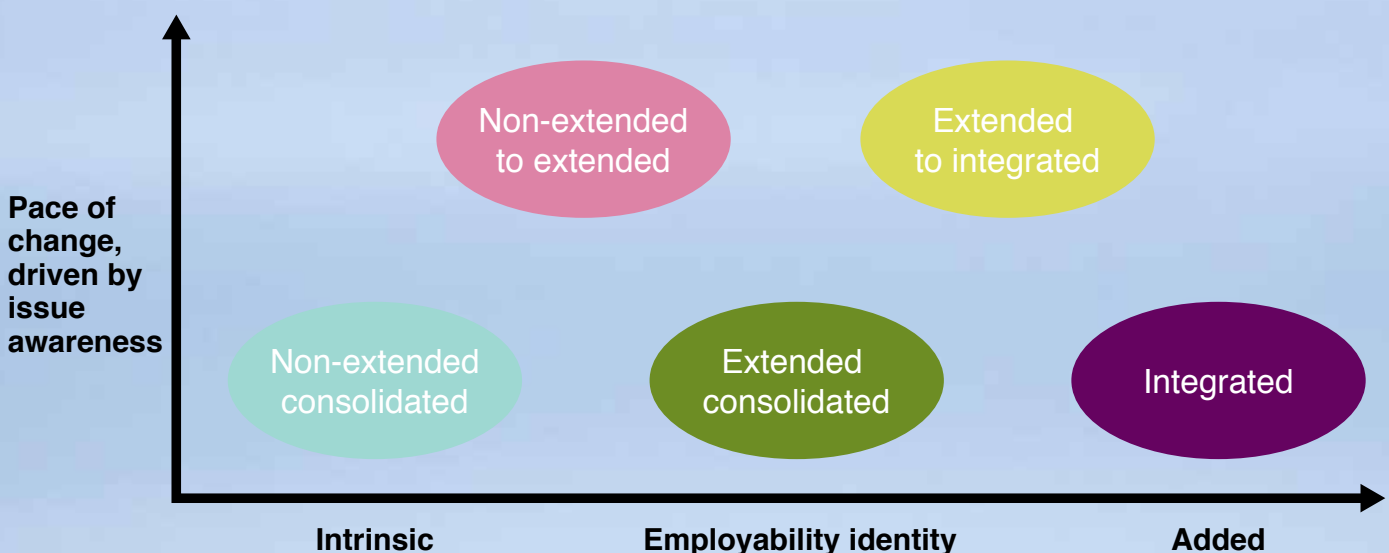
Once again linking back to the practice of the day, this was the era of the 'employability statement', where institutions were writing narratives about how employability was developed through the student experience they offered. However, it has been the move to Key Information Sets (KIS) along with fees (in the English context) that has really changed everything, even for the 'traditional, research-intensive universities' (perhaps even more so).

Institutional responses to employability

Most recently AGCAS's own Bob Gilworth (Director of Research) has made a contribution to this field by looking at institutional responses to the employability agenda. Again using case studies, he has depicted a continuum from extended – consolidated – integrated. He also notes the distinction between consolidated models and those that are on the move, and avoids the inherent 'beauty contest' dangers by looking beneath the model to the institutional identity relating to employability. He highlights the difference between 'employability intrinsic' and 'employability added' identity and the impact on the likely and most effective response. Being 'employability intrinsic' doesn't mean the best destination data, or the best model, it just means the starting point is different.

Gilworth highlights the creative tension between the consumer mentality

HEI responses to the employability agenda

Pace of change, driven by issue awareness

Non-extended to extended

Extended to integrated

Non-extended consolidated

Extended consolidated

Integrated

Intrinsic   **Employability identity**   Added

generated by a high fee context, where KIS data is liberally provided on the basis that it will drive choice, and an alternative view of employability as 'co-produced' between the institution and the student. This reflects circularity, where institutional identity attracts students who will respond in particular ways in terms of their own employability.

A particular dimension is that 'employability-intrinsic' institutions are likely to be those with higher proportions of programmes with embedded placements. One of the most recent debates about delivery models, given the rising profile of placements in policy and practice around employability (Wilson), has been whether to support placement from within the department, integrating it with the subject and curriculum, or from a central unit, integrating it with career support and institutional employer liaison. There is not the scope to rehearse the pros and cons of each here. We have institutions with strong placement models, departmentally supported, but small career services and others where relatively well-resourced placement provision in departments has all been centralised to better leverage the employability benefits. There are pros and cons of centralised and devolved models.

Would that work here?

It is something of a moot point to compare the challenges of being a small service in an institution where everyone knows that employability is why they are there, as opposed to a larger service which is expected to 'do' employability on the institution's behalf. The particularly interesting question is, when change is afoot, how both higher education institutions and their career services develop their capability and refine their model. Gilworth writes about 'issue awareness' amongst institutional leaders as what drives that change: when awareness of employability as a problem is high, then the employability identity will determine the role of the career service in crafting the response.

We've seen examples in the sector of merger, expansion, new appointments with a mandate for change. Sometimes I think it's not the destination but the journey that is most significant – institutions demonstrate the importance of their employability identity by moving things around! It can focus minds and clarify purpose – it can also delay, confuse and obfuscate. Perhaps the learning organisation model could usefully be reconsidered in relation to changing and forming employability identity.

Top model?

Is there a next top model? I sense a moving away from value judgements based on professional's identities to recognition of the value of any approach. Gilworth urges us to *"start from the premise that positional competition will be an underlying factor"*. This recognises that our institutions have never been more different from one another, are highlighting those differences in a competitive market, and are the dominant factor in determining the right model. This highlights for me the importance of thinking about employability at three levels:

- **Macro:** Overall labour market (where government and employers naturally focus)
- **Meso:** Institution and its identity (the position which vice chancellors will most likely take)
- **Micro:** The individual student (perhaps many AGCAS members' natural focus?)

It is complex to manage that consideration at all three levels but important that we find ways to do it to avoid talking at cross-purposes.

So, the diversity is greater than ever, and there is no 'top model'. Institutional competition is rife. So what keeps us together? It is professional curiosity and openness to new ideas as well as an abiding interest in the individual. And there is beauty in that.