

Richard Benjamin Trust Grant final report

DEVELOPING CAREER CAPABILITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Dr Pete Robertson

Lecturer/programme leader: Career Guidance
Acting Subject Group Leader: Social Sciences
Edinburgh Napier University
School of Life, Sport and Social Sciences
Sighthill Campus
Edinburgh EH11 4BN
0131 455 6288 p.robertson@napier.ac.uk

Project Objectives

The project aimed to explore the experiences of unemployed youth in the process of using support services intended to help them re-engage with work, education or training. The conceptual framework was based on Amartya Sen's "capability approach". This concerns attempts to understand the lifestyles that individuals have reason to value, and their potential to implement these lifestyles: their capabilities. The intention was to identify:

1. Areas of strengths, assets, resources and potential for action (capabilities) that young people report
2. The kind of support experiences that young people find empowering (that strengthen their capabilities).

Project duration

The project was planned to run in the 12 month period 1st October 2014 – 30 September 2015. Two factors led to substantial delays.

Firstly, there were difficulties with participant recruitment. The identified project partner, West Edinburgh Action (WEACT: an employability unit run by Edinburgh College) had initially been very confident about their ability to recruit participants for the project. In practice they found it very difficult and were able to supply only three volunteers. With significant gaps between project start dates it took some time for it to become apparent that they were willing but unable to supply the required number of participants. Fortunately an alternative Prince's Trust provider was found in Glasgow Clyde College – a very similar programme also run by a college of further education in a disadvantaged urban setting. Glasgow Clyde had no difficulty in recruiting willing participants, but again there were some gaps between programmes. As a result data collection was not complete until December 2015.

Secondly in May of 2015, I was asked to take on a management role, acting up as maternity leave cover. In effect a temporary promotion, this represented a positive career opportunity. Whilst retaining my responsibility for our career guidance programme, I took on substantial additional line management duties, and a role that is largely incompatible with being an active researcher. This role comes to an end in May 2016, making possible following up on the project outcomes.

Research process

Fourteen semi-structured research interviews were conducted with young people who were participants in the Prince's Trust group programme. This is a 12 week programme for disadvantaged youth not in education, employment or training (NEET). The programme is intended to re-engage them in work or learning through a programme of personal development involving team working. Each week is different, and it incorporates:

- A residential with outdoor activities
- charity fund raising activities/mini-enterprise
- work experience
- classroom based communications skills
- job search skills training

Participants were in the age range 18-24 (five female; nine male) and were diverse in their backgrounds and educational achievement. All were close to the end of their 12 week programme, enabling them to reflect back on the experience. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Research findings

Participants' reports of their experience of participating in the programme highlighted three main features:

1. a social experience – collaborative, supportive and fun engagement with a diverse peer group
2. an experience of overcoming fear, and recognition of this as having lasting significance
3. a memorable maturational experience, in spite of the brief duration of the programme

No single part of the programme seemed to be the 'active ingredient' for everyone. Different elements worked for different participants, with some valuing the variety. The whole seemed to be more than the sum of its parts. Outcomes of the programme were identified as achieving (or regaining):

1. Confidence, or global self-efficacy
2. A sense of direction, or life goals

Crucially these elements seemed to have combined so as to enable participants to access their pre-existing motivations, vocational skills, interests, and contacts. Participants appeared to feel better able to deploy their resources. In the terminology of the theoretical framework for this project, it represents converting resources into capabilities for action, so as to implement a valued lifestyle.

Progress on outputs to date

Given the delays outlined above, inevitably the progress on outputs is unfolding more slowly than originally planned. Reverting to my previous role in June 2016 will release time to complete these outputs.

- In response to a call for papers, an academic article outlining the thinking behind the methodology in the project was submitted in January to ***Recherches Sociologiques et Anthropologiques***. At first glance this bilingual Belgian Journal may seem to be an odd choice for dissemination. However this is for a special edition on social justice and issues of methodology, and one of the editors, Frances Picard, has written on the application of the capability approach to careers settings. So it is likely to be a good fit.
- A short chapter has been submitted to Karen Niven, (copied to Carolyn Kagan and Suzan Lewis) for the planned Richard Benjamin Trust book, briefly outlining the project and the findings.
- I have just submitted a short paper based on this project for the annual conference of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) in Madrid in November 2016. [This replaces the originally proposed submission to the British Psychological Society Division of Occupational Psychology conference, as the timing and focus of the event are more appropriate].
- Together with my colleague Valerie Egdell, who has published recently on capabilities, we are currently planning an article on “The capability approach – implications for career guidance practitioners”. We are currently developing the structure for this article. Currently the ***Journal of Education and Work*** is the initial target publication, and some alternatives have been identified. This will draw directly on the literature review element of the project, and indirectly on my reflections on the findings.
- Over the summer of 2016, I plan to write an article on empirical work in the project. This will be the main opportunity to report the research work and findings. The initial target journal is ***Work, Employment and Society***.
- Once the two publications above are drafted I intend to present the empirical work at our internal Employment Research Institute (ERI) seminar series in the academic year 2016-17.

Personal development from the project

I have found the opportunity to conduct this work to be extremely valuable, from a number of perspectives:

- Developing skills in research project planning and responding to obstacles, in a manageable scale activity.
- Identifying participant recruitment as a critical issue to proactively manage in empirical research of this kind.
- Career benefits from being identified within the university as an active researcher attracting external funding at a scale appropriate to an ECR (early career researcher).
- A strengthened sense of the value of listening to groups who are relatively disempowered in society, using social research methods.
- Developing a sense of a cyclical process in the design of research and theory over time, driven by dissatisfaction with current understanding. This empirical research was informed by a theoretical perspective, but would have been even better with a stronger, more detailed theoretical framework. This research will inform the development of applications of the capability approach to career and employment settings, which can then be applied to further research, tested and refined.
- A key finding for me was that participants had personal resources that at times they were unable to deploy. A supportive programme enabled them to access their own pre-existing resources and convert them into capabilities to achieve results they personally value. By conceptualising career guidance and employment support through the lens of the capability approach, it becomes a process to release personal resources and convert them into potential goal oriented action.
- A recognition that the capability approach to career guidance has the potential to be a long term development project with the potential to unify the disparate discourses in the field (policy, theory, ethics, practitioner and service user perspectives). This is something I want to develop for many years to come. Training programmes for practitioners and a joint academic/practitioner conference on the topic are under consideration.

Whilst delays in this project have been very frustrating, it is difficult to overstate the long terms benefits of this activity to my personal and academic development.