



LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

Citation:

Stevenson, J and Anderson, L and Clegg, S (2010) The Leeds Met Book of Student Futures. Leeds Met Press. ISBN 978-1-907240-18-8

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/2834/>

Document Version:

Book (Published Version)

Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.



The Leeds Met Book of Student Futures

By Jacqueline Stevenson, Linzi Anderson and Sue Clegg



Sociology,
Anthropology,
Politics (C-SAP)





Acknowledgements and contributors

The project team comprised: Jacqueline Stevenson and Professor Sue Clegg from the Centre for Research into Higher Education and Professor Hilary Sommerlad, Head of the Centre for Diversity in the Professions, at Leeds Metropolitan University. Linzi Anderson, graduate trainee at Leeds Metropolitan University, also worked on the

project for six months and provided invaluable support and assistance. We would like to thank C-SAP for initially funding the research project and for their support in producing the booklet. We would also like to thank all those staff and students who participated in the research and helped us to review the contents of this booklet.

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Possible selves.....	5
The research	7
Students with an underdeveloped view of themselves as the future employed.....	8
Students whose views of the future are constantly changing.....	10
Students with an unrealistic view of their future possible selves.....	12
Students who are planning for an unknown future.....	14
Students whose past relates to future possibilities.....	16
Students whose imagined futures are both focused and highly realisable.....	18
Concluding thoughts.....	21
Further reading and resources.....	22
References	25
Other publications in this series	27



Introduction

This booklet has arisen from a research project funded by the Higher Education Academy Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics (C-SAP) exploring further and higher education students' future 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986), including those selves that are desired and those that are not.

As part of the research we asked students to reflect on their past journeys into higher or further education as well as on what their possible futures might look like. We found that while some students had strong orientations towards the future, including highly elaborated 'possible selves' (future representations of the self), others did not. These students were either more clearly orientated towards the present or had only a vague and unfocused view of their future after graduation and were unable to connect these futures with present actions.

Staff in the further education colleges and higher education institutions involved in our research were implementing activities to try and help students prepare for their future, with teachers, advisers and mentors not only acting as exemplars of the possible selves that could be achieved but also providing a context for their elaboration. Concrete pedagogical interventions – and in particular, examples or experiences of workplace settings – also seemed to have a positive impact. However, these activities were often only successful if students were participating in small classes or if the activity was intense. Unfortunately the increasing pressures on academic staff have resulted in some students having limited opportunity to reflect on their future. While the personal tutor system has, historically, been instrumental in facilitating close staff-student relationships, much personal tutoring is now either pragmatic, technical or reactive in nature (Myers, 2008), rather than giving students the time and space for reflection. This might not be especially significant to those students who are able to "reflect productively on experience" (Yorke, 2006) but it is highly significant for those students who cannot imagine their future or the 'possible self' this entails.

This is particularly true for students with low social capital whose prior experiences before coming to higher education mean that they have had limited access to traditional forms of capital associated with educational success (Stevenson & Clegg, 2010).

The research is therefore presented as a series of vignettes highlighting each of these positions along with suggestions for how staff, through, for example, the integration of the vignettes into Personal Development Planning (PDP) elements of the social sciences curricula, can help students plan for an often uncertain future.





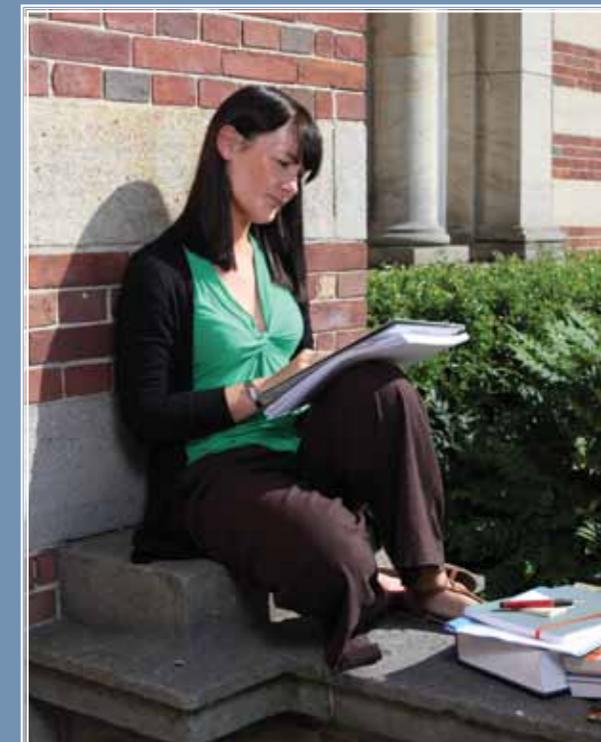
Possible selves

Evidence from previous research suggests that having positive, well-elaborated 'possible selves' is positively related to high academic performance and postgraduate career attainment (Rossiter, 2003; Pizzolato, 2007; Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007). 'Possible selves' are future representations of the self (Markus & Nurius, 1986), including both those that are desired and those that are not. They play both a cognitive and an affective role in motivation, influencing expectations by facilitating a belief that some selves are possible whereas others are not and providing a clear goal to work towards, or to avoid. They therefore influence the development of specific strategies for action, focus an individual's activities, give direction in the pursuit of those goals and energise the person to achieve them. Goal-directed action can result in the positive possible selves being realised and negative possible selves being avoided.

Research has shown that those with highly developed career-possible selves are more motivated, goal-oriented and energetic (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007) and more likely, when confronted with a sizeable threat to the viability of their career-possible self, to persist with their goals or construct new career-possible selves (Pizzolato, 2007). Students with highly elaborated possible selves are more likely to set higher career goals, put actions in place to realise these, and, overall, to achieve better graduate outcomes than students who have under-developed future possible selves, or whose orientation lies in the present rather than the future. However, possible selves can only include those selves that are envisaged as achievable. Individuals' views of what is achievable (Leondari, 2007) and desirable/undesirable (Rossiter, 2007) are influenced by, among others, family, friends, peers and school, past academic experience, socioeconomic status, and psychological wellbeing.

Pedagogical strategies in the UK, most notably Personal Development Planning (PDP), aim to equip students with the capacity to reflect on and plan for their future.

However, underlying these pedagogical interventions is the often unarticulated assumption that students can imagine their future and the possible selves this entails (Clegg, 2009). Our previous research has shown that students with low social capital may have difficulty in seeing themselves in the future (Sommerlad, 2006), and that social science students, for example, find it difficult to orientate themselves towards the future (Clegg & Bufton, 2008). In addition, evidence suggests that gender and racial differentials are particularly significant in how students view their chances of becoming their desired possible self (Garcia, 1995).





The research

We were interested in exploring the perceptions and experiences of students both at Leeds Metropolitan University and in our partner further education colleges in the Regional University Network (RUN). We purposely selected courses that reflect a range of applied and basic undergraduate Social Science courses (Social Sciences Level 1 and Level 3; Youth Work Level 3; and Development Studies Level 1) and three FE colleges offering Access courses.

Nine interactive focus groups were conducted, comprising a total of 67 students. The focus groups allowed us to explore how (if at all) the students view their future selves as individuals and, as a group, what influences there have been on the elaboration of these possible selves, and what forms of intervention they consider would be most relevant in further supporting the elaboration of these possible selves.

We interviewed the three course leaders of the FE college Access courses, and three of the four HE course leaders (despite our best attempts, we were unable to arrange an interview with the remaining course leader). These interviews explored the overall aims of the courses, how the course leaders help students to develop future orientations, the strategies they are using to support the longer-term future employability of the students, and how they support their students' future social and intellectual development.

Finally we interviewed 19 individual students. These interviews allowed us to investigate in greater depth whether elaborated notions of possible selves appear to correlate positively with the students' post-graduation/post-course plans and aspirations. We were particularly interested in identifying curriculum-based interventions which might best support the development of positive possible selves with particular reference to Social Science students with low social capital on entry.

While each student who participated in the research was highly individual in the ways in which he or she was, or was not, focused on the future, six broad positions could be identified.





Students with an underdeveloped view of themselves as the future employed

These students were not incapable of thinking forward, but they were more clearly orientated towards the present and, in particular, did not have elaborated views of a future career-possible self. They were mainly, though not exclusively, middle-class and because of their more privileged position did not have to work for many hours to support themselves whilst studying. They were particularly focused on enjoying academic life and, where possible, would prefer to continue studying rather than moving into employment. Consequently they were currently undertaking few or no activities which might

support them to become the future employed. They were aware that they would eventually need to engage in activities that might make them employable but were either fatalistic about becoming their future career self, or felt that this was so far into the future that for now no action needed to be taken. This group included students like James:

“I will plan for tomorrow and if I wake up tomorrow I will do what I planned”

James’s story

James is in his third year of a degree in Social Sciences. Born in South Africa, he was educated overseas, including spending two years in the army where he studied Psychology and Sociology. He came to the UK to ‘explore’ the world and is driven by a desire to learn as much as he can about other people. His family are also involved in the field of Psychology, Sociology and research and his brother has recently completed a PhD.

James is clear that he wants to continue studying, first for a Masters degree and then for a PhD. He has various plans for what area of further study he might go into, including Maths, PR or Business, but has not yet applied for anything, even though he is aware that other students have done so and that the deadline for submitting an application for a Masters degree is fast approaching: “I have been saying that for the last few months, I will do it tomorrow, I will do it tomorrow but ... it is just I just don’t know where to go ... because I was looking for funding because I come from a very low income family – and I need some help but there is no one around”. His strategy for gaining a place on a Masters course is currently limited to a belief that “it is inevitable. If you want to do it.”

Although he has no intention of gaining a job when he graduates, James is critical of the lack of employability support he has received during his time at university.

He is disappointed that he has been “left alone” to try and organise his own future. James is particularly concerned that, as an international student, he needs support to understand where to look for employment, who can help him, how to approach employers, how to complete an application form, where jobs are advertised and so on. Were he looking for work in his home country he would “know how the system works; I know what I will have to do. I can tell people to help me out. I will go to my own friends. But in England I know no one, I know nothing”. He also feels that the university operates as a ‘business’ and is uninterested in finding out about actual students and their backgrounds, desires and problems.

Despite this criticism of the university, however, James feels very strongly that he wants to live his life in the present and not to be continually thinking about a very specific future. He sees his future as a series of far-away images which will slot together like ‘a puzzle’ as he gets closer to them. He does, however, recognise that this attitude may be holding him back.

Reflections

Students like James are not necessarily going to fail as they may develop a more future-focused orientation after graduation which might allow them to retrospectively capitalise on their current activities. It could be, however, that these students lack the know-how with which to think concretely into the future. Some of the course tutors were actively considering how they could modify the curriculum to provide students with more concrete examples and experiences specifically designed to give them a range of examples of future work possibilities. Where this strategy had been tried it appeared to be most successful where people external to the university were actively involved, either with students going out into business or industry and/or the involvement of professionals/practitioners in the curriculum.



Students whose views of the future are constantly changing

Unlike those in the first group, these students know that at some point in the future they want to be employed, specifically in a graduate-level job, but they have been unable to focus on it or decide which career route to follow. These students have elected to undertake degree courses that might lead to multiple different careers (for example Social Sciences) but despite several years in HE have not been able to decide which career to try and progress towards. They have been given numerous opportunities to explore different career

options. However, they have been made aware of so many possibilities that they keep changing their minds. Therefore while these students may have partially developed views of a 'career-possible' self, they are unable to determine and then develop the strategies which might help them to become the 'future employed'.

"I want to keep my options open"

Emma's story

Emma is a 21-year-old white British woman who is in her final year of a BA (Hons) in Social Sciences. She came to university straight from school, having been strongly encouraged to do so by her high-achieving school, her friends, most of whom were also going to university, and because "I couldn't think of anything worse than going straight into work when you are 18".

Neither of Emma's parents have been to university but they both work in well-paid professional jobs and have been able to support her to gain the work experience she needed to get on to her course. However, Emma hasn't undertaken any other work experience during her degree and although she has worked as a waitress she doesn't feel that it will be helpful to her in gaining employment.

Emma is conscious that whatever job she eventually gets she "needs" to have variety and excitement as she gets "easily bored". She is ambitious and wants to gain a 'good' career but is vague about what she actually wants to do, having changed her mind constantly over the last few years: "Firstly I wanted to be a police officer, and I just don't want to do that anymore. I was thinking recently I wanted to be a social worker, but I have looked into it and I just don't really fancy that anymore.

I wanted to work with children, but then I thought I wasn't that sure if I wanted to do that anymore. I was recently talking to a friend, because her mum is in probation, and I was thinking I might do something like that."

The lack of clarity about her future is compounded by the fact that Emma is having a post-graduation 'gap year' travelling round the world before staying with a relative and working in Australia. She is hoping that spending time in Australia will help her to make decisions about her future. Emma is aware that if she is to achieve the sort of career she wants – exciting, challenging and varied – she needs to explore her options further: "It seems to me like I am really undecided ... maybe I'll talk to people about it and see what they think and what they say about working in probation, and maybe over the summer I could get in touch with some people who work in it and see what the opportunities are and how I could go about getting a job, and if I need extra training or go on extra courses – something like that". However, she also knows that she is deliberately keeping her options open since, despite three years in higher education, she is simply not actually ready to make any sort of concrete decisions about her future.

Reflections

For some students their views of the future are highly unstable. Students like Emma are constantly thinking about their future but these views of the future keep changing. Anyone talking to Emma at a particular time might believe she is clear about her future. However, talking to her just a few weeks later would give a very different story. Therefore offering Emma a 'one-off' careers advice and guidance session could be of little use since it might be misleading. There is a need to recognise the fluidity of the lifeworld of such students and to provide ongoing employability initiatives in the curriculum, over the full lifespan of any course, with different forms of support phased over the course of study.



Students with an unrealistic view of their future possible selves

During the interviews many students talked about unrealistic as well as more realistic futures. The majority of those interviewed were fairly pragmatic about the possible self they might become, recognising the limitations of, for example, choice of degree, or family or financial circumstances. However, a small minority of students held views of their future self which were highly unrealistic and improbable. They persisted in envisioning these unrealistic futures even when confronted with

evidence that they were unachievable. They were not, however, putting any strategies in place to support the achievement of their desired future, perhaps recognising, consciously or unconsciously, how unlikely it would be.

“I’ve got ideas. I’ve just not followed them through”

Bridget’s story

Bridget is a 22-year-old white British woman currently living with her boyfriend and studying at university in her home town. At 16 she dropped out of her A-levels and switched to a Health and Social Care course, then left home at 18 to study Nursing. She enjoyed being a student but found the placements difficult and stressful and wasn’t keen on living away from home. She left the Nursing course after six months to work in a bank, then left the bank after just a year as she wasn’t sure whether it was what she really wanted to do. She then made the decision to re-enter university but this time she chose to study locally so that she could stay with her boyfriend, continue with her job part-time and avoid some of the pressure that caused her to drop out previously. Her parents, both of whom had been to university, also put pressure on her to go back as they felt that gaining a degree was the best way to become successful.

Bridget applied to study for a BA (Hons) in Youth and Community Work. She initially wanted to study Social Work but knew she stood more of a chance of getting on to the Youth and Community course. However, at interview she found that “it just sounded amazing” and is happy with the choice she made. She now believes that she ‘always’ wanted to work with children but didn’t recognise it at the time.

Bridget hopes to work with young people with mental health issues when she graduates, despite having never worked or undertaken any volunteering in the field. She was inspired to think about mental health nursing when she met someone working for the mental health services through her course. In particular she would like to be a mental health nurse, but recognises that she has “just got no idea how to go into that sector” although she feels she should probably do some voluntary work. She hopes she might be able to do a Masters course to qualify but hasn’t looked into it yet. She has ‘loads’ of other ideas of what she wants to do when she completes her course including working with teenage mums or young people with counselling, or being a Family Support Worker, but she doesn’t know whether she has the ‘right’ qualifications, commenting that: “I think the Youth Worker qualification is recognised in youth work but if you want to go into mental health work, I think you have to do a Mental Health degree. I am not 100% sure. I haven’t really done enough research into it yet. I sort of have been putting it off. I don’t know if there is a job for mental health youth work. Maybe I created it, I don’t know.”

Bridget takes an active interest in the labour market since she is “a bit addicted” but while she sends off for numerous application packs she has never applied for any of the jobs.

Reflections

Like Emma, Bridget also regularly thinks about her future. However, her plans for her future career are not only unstable but also unrealistic. Students like Bridget need time, space and opportunities to reflect on their future, to enable them to make their plans more concrete and more achievable. While there may be time implications attached to doing this on a regular basis it could form the basis of a useful intra-student activity as part of, for example, teaching on research methods where students are given the opportunity to ‘interview’ each other. These students also need help and encouragement to develop clear strategies for action which will enable them to achieve their future goals. However, it is also important to ensure that activities such as study skills and generic provision are provided by subject-specific staff and integrated into the curriculum rather than offered simply as an ‘add-on’. It is also likely to be helpful to these students if the people who are brought in to talk to them have very concrete connections outside the curriculum.



Students who are planning for an unknown future

The students in this group also only have a partially developed view of the future. They know that they want to be employed in a graduate-level job, but not what this employment might comprise. However, unlike many other students they are actively undertaking activities which they hope will be of benefit once they have decided on a specific career path. They are aware that in the future they will need to be 'employable', with a CV that gives them a competitive edge over others. Consequently they are undertaking activities that they hope will benefit

them once their future becomes more decided. However, because their future possible self is vague their strategies are also vague, unstructured or somewhat haphazard. Nonetheless, as Adelina's story shows, these activities are regarded as critical to ensuring that they are not disadvantaged at some point in the future.

"I hope to be working for the UN one day – that's my dream"

Adelina's story

Adelina is a 19-year-old international student of mixed Asian and European heritage. Educated in the Far East, she is currently in the first year of a degree in Peace Studies. Adelina was educated privately, the daughter of ambitious parents who initially wanted her to go into business but are supportive of her eventual choice of course. Her interest in politics developed at a young age, fostered not only by her grandfather who was politically active but also by her family's friends, some of whom worked for the diplomatic service. Her school was also highly influential in helping her to think about her future.

Adelina is currently focused on enjoying the 'whole student experience' although her participation in university life has been relatively low-key. She is, however, involved in a range of extra-curricular activities which not only allow her to enjoy her 'hobbies' but, she hopes, will support her future career choices. She is a Global Ambassador and a Student Union Community Representative charged with running a campaign for the betterment of the community. Adelina recognises that developing relationships during her time at university will also help support her future employability: "It's who you know, it's not what you know. So I am creating a really good relationship with my Professors in order to have them say 'you know what, I actually know someone down in Austria who can hook you up with the World

Health Organisation' or something like that ... because that is what university is for, learning all these things to become more employable". However, Adelina is also aware that she can't wait for things to just happen to her but has to seek out opportunities if she is to achieve what she wants to.

In terms of her future career, however, Adelina has clear parameters but no specific plans: "As long as I am comfortable with what I am doing and I have my principles set straight, and the people I love, love me back – that's fine". In part her lack of specificity is down to a fear of making definitive decisions which she is not yet ready to make: she would prefer to "grow more as a person" first. She is also concerned that she might make a decision which she will live to regret while there are still lots of unpredictable, and exciting, potential opportunities in life which may give her unexpected choices that planning too much could exclude.

Despite these uncertainties Adelina remains upbeat, confident and optimistic that the future will work out. She not only has significant economic and human resources to draw on but believes she has inner strengths, including resilience, which will stand her in good stead: "I think the most important thing is just keep on going, just push forward."

Reflections

It is important to recognise that different students have different social, cultural and family capital that they can draw on and mobilise in the future. Adelina's openness to the future comes from the wealth of resources that are available to her and she is therefore able to imagine her future in a very different way from other students in our study. Adelina can be more confident and more ambitious knowing that she has access to social networks that may help her access employment or work experience. For students like Adelina, unlike many others, being vague about the future is not a particularly risky strategy. It is possible that such highly networked, ambitious and well-resourced students may be able to create opportunities that other students can share through peer-to-peer learning.



Students whose past relates to future possibilities

Many of the mature students, particularly those on the Access courses, had complex, disjointed pathways into further or higher education. They also had experiences of educational failure, family break-up, mental or physical illness, redundancy or other forms of life-changing experience.

These students had relatively well developed views of their desired future and the possible self they would like to become. However, their fragmented pasts strongly influenced both the possible selves they could envision as well as their chances of becoming this desired self.

These students were acting in the present to attempt to change their personal trajectory while conscious of constraints. They were very aware of how their past was influencing both their present and their possible future and, consequently, were not confident that they would be able to realise their aspirations for academic and career success. This group includes students like Mitch.

"My past is a double-edged sword"

Mitch's story

Mitch is half way through an Access to Social Sciences course at an FE college. Expelled from school at 15, Mitch left 'semi-illiterate', only gaining a better education when he spent time in prison where he also developed a strong interest in the social sciences. Although he is now in his early 40s Mitch has rarely worked. He has spent time between prison sentences either working for his parents or unemployed. His decision to study for an Access course was inspired by his sister who was a mature student.

Since starting his course Mitch has encountered a range of difficulties, such as problems with time and stress management and getting to grips with academic study. These have led, at times, to a lack of motivation and a crisis of confidence about whether he will complete the course. He has drawn on the support of staff at the college but is concerned that he is sometimes asking too much from them and so has started to draw back from asking for support: "Sometimes I feel like am I over-approaching them. 'Oh I'll just leave it. They don't want to be bothered by me just now', you know, even though probably they would say 'Oh I don't mind'."

Mitch is also concerned about whether he will be able to get onto the university course of his choice, Criminology, as he has had to declare his 40 criminal convictions on his UCAS application form, including a conviction that

will never be spent. Despite these concerns he has submitted his application but has only applied to his local university, as he doesn't want to move house or leave his family and is also fearful of the cost of moving to another town.

Mitch's commitment to studying Criminology is driven by his own experiences as well as the desire to help other people, including his son. However, he knows that he is likely to encounter difficulties in gaining employment after graduation. His past, including being a long-term drug addict, provides him with the empathy and skills to support other offenders, but also significantly reduces the employment options open to him. He has spoken to his local Youth Offending Team Officer to find out whether they would be likely to employ 'someone like him' and was told that it was possible, as long as he remained substance free, but "it is just that you wouldn't get very far in it".

For Mitch, however, gaining any employment "that kept me interested, kept me motivated, got me up in the morning" is his ultimate goal, the reason for undertaking a degree. Despite all the obstacles in his way he is determined to get there, however long it takes – as long as he can stay free from drugs and overcome the family difficulties that keep threatening to stop him.

Reflections

Students like Mitch have complex and fragmented pasts which can, at times, threaten to disrupt both their present and their futures. They may require support and opportunities to integrate the past into the future, and also to help them broaden their horizons to be able to think more widely and in the longer term. For students such as Mitch personal tutoring is highly important and it needs to be sustained at a regular and intense enough level to support him without him having to seek out help himself, which he may be reluctant to do. In addition, it is important that we recognise that these students are not a 'blank page' but bring personal resources and 'community wealth' (Yosso, 2005) to the classroom which can be drawn on by staff and other students.



Students whose imagined futures are both focused and highly realisable

The final group of students had strong orientations towards the future, including highly developed possible selves as fully employed people in graduate-level employment. These students had an integrated past, present and future and were able to relate their future possible selves concretely to present actions. They had made definitive decisions about their future careers and were actively building CVs which would facilitate the

achievement of these goals. They were able and willing to plan for a future often many years ahead and were highly motivated and persistent in attempting to achieve their goals, as can be seen from Natalie's story.

"I already knew I wanted to go into the police"

Natalie's story

Natalie is 20 and in the third year of a degree in Social Sciences. She plans to join the police, a career plan which she has held for many years.

Her school was highly supportive in helping her to think about and apply for university; however, her family are opposed to her joining the police since they consider it an unknown career path. Natalie also has distant relatives who have been in trouble with the law. Despite having made the decision to gain a degree first, Natalie intends to join the police 'at the bottom' as she believes that she will gain better knowledge and experience that way. However, she is aware that entry into the police force is not guaranteed as it is highly competitive. Having a degree will therefore give her something to fall back on if she doesn't achieve her desired goal. It will also support her if she finds out that she doesn't actually enjoy being a police officer after all.

To minimise this risk Natalie is actively building a CV which she feels will be beneficial to her. She has applied for and got a part-time administrative job with the police in her home town for when she graduates. While she is not interested in going into the police as an administrator, she believes that it will look good on her CV and give her an insight into police life. She also

plans to apply for a course which prepares people who want to join the police, covering what to expect and how to get through the exams. Natalie knows that she will need to pass a fitness test to join the police and intends to get very fit once she finishes at university, but wants to concentrate on passing her exams first and not get side-tracked. She has also been very focused in choosing modules that are not only of interest to her but should support her application to the police force, for example criminology; gender, violence and abuse; and investigative psychology.

Since she has already decided on her future career plan Natalie hasn't drawn on any of the employability or career resources of the university, despite recognising that she is not particularly good at interviews since "sometimes I get shy which isn't like me at all, I am usually loud and bubbly, but sometimes I do get shy, so I think that might be a bit of a problem". Natalie knows that it could take up to two years from application to actually passing all the tests and vetting processes and being accepted into the police force; she plans to move back home after graduation, work for the police as a temp and then go travelling.

Reflections

Natalie is an exemplar of the type of student envisaged in much employability policy – that is, a highly motivated, active student with the capacity to imagine, reflect on and plan for her future. As we have identified already, however, students like Natalie are not necessarily the norm and it is important to recognise that such students cannot be used as exemplars of how all students are thinking and acting as they plan for their future. In addition, despite being focused on an achievable future, Natalie still needs support, in her case to be successful during the interview process. If she does not receive this support then, irrespective of how elaborated her view of her future possible self is, she may not achieve it.



Concluding thoughts

We hope that throughout this booklet we have communicated a sense of the sheer diversity and complexity of students' narratives and their capacities to think about and rehearse their futures. Depending on the institutional context and type of courses offered, the balance of the types of students we have identified will, of course, be different. In addition, there may be other groups of students whom we did not identify within this research but whose views of the future are affected by other factors, for example students who are reluctant to think about their futures because of fear and anxiety about the unknown. Nonetheless, within any particular cohort there will always be some students who are more able, or willing, than others to reflect on their future possible self. Both academic and support staff need to consider whether students have developed the disposition to think forward into the future. As the literature makes clear, there may be class, race and gender differences which make this highly problematic for some students.

Further and higher education institutions (FEIs and HEIs) can heavily influence the development of possible selves with teachers, advisers and mentors acting not only as exemplars of possible selves but also providing a context for their elaboration (Rossiter, 2003, 2007). However, this requires time and space for regular reflection. While the FEIs and HEIs involved in our research were implementing activities to try and help students prepare for their future, these were only successful if students were participating in small classes or if the activity was intense. For the majority of students this was not the case. Of more concern was that many of those we interviewed had actually been given little, or no, opportunity to reflect on their personal journeys or to explore what their future possible self might look like

after graduation. Participating in the research interview was, for many, the first opportunity to do so.

Reflection is considered one of the essential principles underlying good teaching practice since it is "about linking ... to the wider perspective of learning – heading towards seeing the bigger picture" (Race, 2002). However, even when opportunities were being made available for students to reflect on their futures, different students had different dispositions towards reflection. Research has indicated that those who engage most successfully with reflective practice are those whose cultural values are most closely aligned to the dominant culture of the academy. Previous educational experience, personal problems, lack of self-worth and anxiety can make it difficult for some students to reflect, while other students may not value their own role in the construction of knowledge. There is a need for both academic and support staff to experiment with different forms of both reflection and narrative. This could include encouraging the use of fictive as well as 'real' narratives.

The lack of interaction between students and staff in some institutional settings has resulted in some staff knowing very little about their students (Clegg et al, 2010) and some students commenting that they feel as if they are in a "sausage factory" (Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, 2008-09). The increasing pressures on academic staff have also resulted in some students having limited opportunity to reflect on a very uncertain future. Students need multiple opportunities to rehearse what their future possible selves might look like, using different contexts, spaces and forms of pedagogy. In an age of mass higher education, we are in danger of under-privileging some students if we fail to give all students the opportunity to reflect regularly on their futures.

Further reading and resources

Staff in further and higher education institutions may find the resources below useful when helping students think more concretely about their futures. They focus on employability as well as mentoring and coaching. The resources are web-based and include academic papers and interactive and downloadable exercises which can be incorporated into the curriculum. There are also resources specifically for students at the end of the list.

Enhancing student employability from a student perspective

The Prospects careers service offers advice on applying for jobs, a graduate job search and advice on postgraduate study: www.prospects.ac.uk

The Higher Education Academy Employability card sort exercise helps students to think about career planning and employability by assessing a set of cards containing career-based tasks and deciding how important each task is:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/employability/employability_tool_card_sorts

Enhancing employability from an employer's perspective

The Future Fit report highlights some of the positive work being done by universities and employers to increase student employability:

www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/FutureFit.PDF

These KPMG resources include case studies of successful graduates and interactive quizzes and skills sessions: www.kpmgcareers.co.uk/Graduates/default.aspx?pg=2

Embedding employability in the curriculum

Case studies of employability embedded into the curriculum, in modules such as PDP and work-based learning:

www.enhancingemployability.org.uk/case_studies.php

ESCaLate (the Higher Education Academy's Education Subject Centre) has resources to introduce employability into teaching, including staff and student materials and a card sort: escalate.ac.uk/3051

This paper evaluates an initiative to improve the effectiveness of personal tutoring by embedding it into the curriculum:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/hlst/documents/johlste/vol8no2/09PP218Stevenson117to122.pdf

This report looks at creating 'future-proof' graduates. It includes resources that can be used to increase students' employability: www2.bcu.ac.uk/futureproof

The Higher Education Academy has published student employability profiles by discipline. Each profile describes skills that have been selected by the Academy's Subject Centres based on the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) benchmark statements. These are then mapped against the qualities and attributes ('generic employability competencies') sought by employers:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/employability/employability499

The Academy also provides a career development learning and employability guide:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/employability/employability700

Mentoring and coaching

Leeds Metropolitan University has a range of books designed to support students. These include *Making personal tutoring work* and the *Leeds Met Book of Resilience*: www.leedsmet.ac.uk/publications

The 'miracle question' is a form of solution-focused brief therapy which can help students solve their own emotional problems by focusing on the future rather than the past:

www.teachingexpertise.com/e-bulletins/solution-focused-brief-therapy-sfbt-helping-students-solve-their-own-emotional-problems-7872

The Windmills programme provides information concerning career organisation. The online resources provide hints, suggestions, motivations and proposals which may help students take control of their future life: www.windmillsprogramme.com/
www.windmillsonline.co.uk/

Student resources

The Student Stories (Reading CETL) site features students talking about their experiences at university and their career aspirations: www.studentstories.co.uk

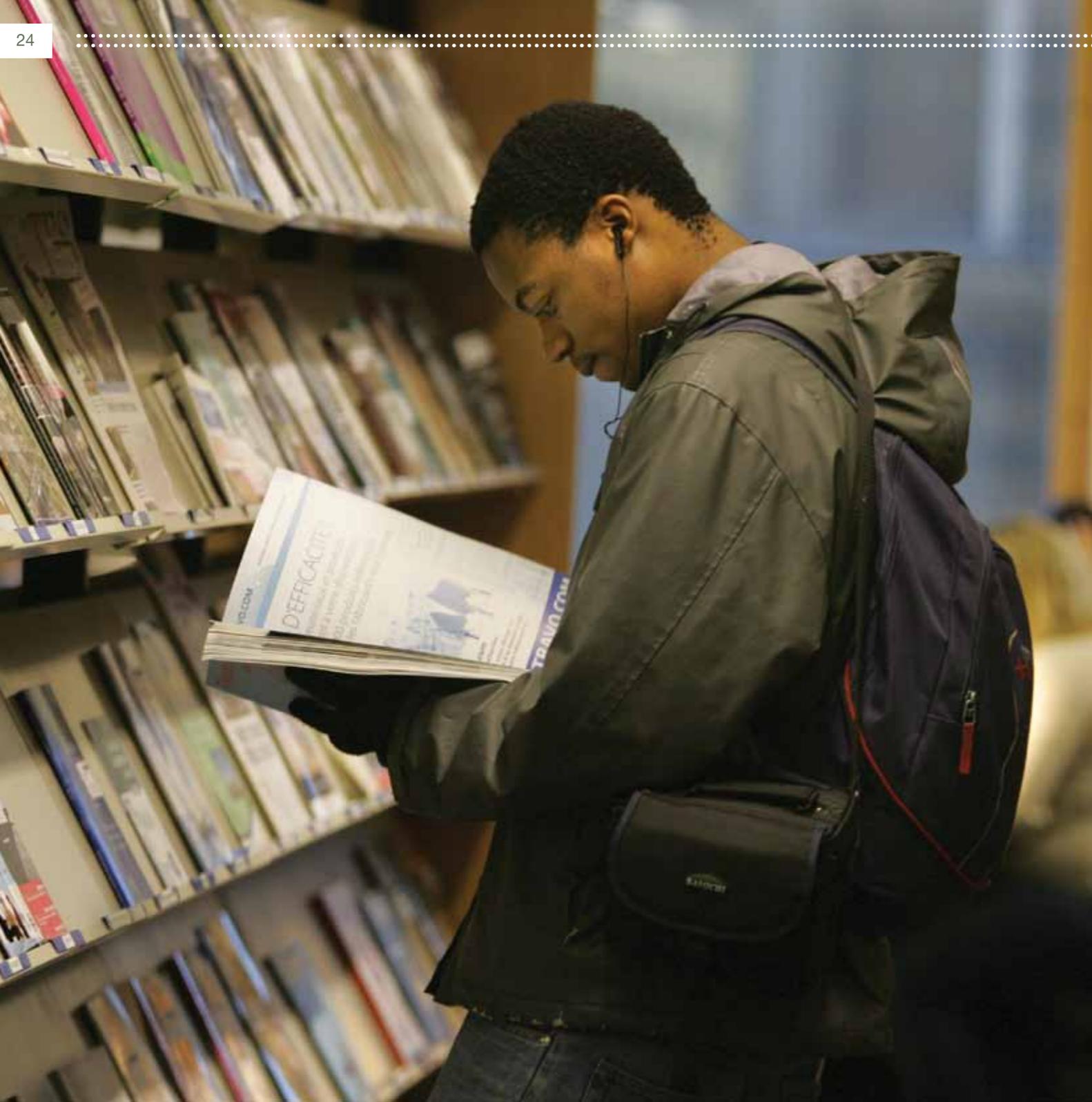
Gradvert provides tips, tools and training to increase student employability: www.Gradvert.com

The Bright Futures website includes resources such as CV tips, presentation skills, application forms, interview techniques, networking and psychometric tests: www.bright-futures.org.uk

Leeds Metropolitan University Learning Objects contains interactive exercises students can work through. The material produced could be used in a personal development plan: www.leedsmet.ac.uk/metoffice/employability/resources/learning_objects/index.htm

Leeds Metropolitan University Futures Workbooks contain information and exercises for students to work through concerning particular aspects of their career development: www.leedsmet.ac.uk/employability/index_Futures_workbooks.htm





References

Clegg, S. (2009) *Time future: the dominant discourse of higher education pedagogy*. Paper presented at the Time, Work and Education Symposium, 17-19 February 2009, London.

Clegg, S. & Bufton, S. (2008) Student support through Personal Development Planning: retrospection and time. *Research Papers in Education* 23(4), 1-16.

Clegg, S., Stevenson, J. & Willott, J. (2010) Staff conceptions of curricular and extracurricular activities in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education* 59 (5), 615-626.

Garcia, T. (1995) *Gender and ethnic differences in college students' academic possible selves*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 18-22 April 1995, San Francisco, CA.

Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, 2008-09 *Students and Universities. Eleventh Report of Session 2008-09*. Ev 237. London: The Stationery Office.

Leondari, A. (2007) Future time perspective, possible selves, and academic achievement. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 114, 17-26.

Markus, H. & Nurius, P. (1986) Possible selves. *American Psychologist* 41, 954-969.

Myers, J. (2008) Is personal tutoring sustainable? Comparing the trajectory of the personal tutor with that of the residential warden. *Teaching in Higher Education* 13(5), 607-611.

Pizzolato, E.J. (2007) Impossible selves: investigating students' persistence decisions when their career-possible selves border on impossible. *Journal of Career Development* 33(3), 201-223.

Plimmer, G. & Schmidt, A. (2007) Possible selves and career transition: it's who you want to be, not what you want to do. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 114, 61-74.

Race, P. (2002) *Evidencing reflection: putting the 'w' into reflection*. ESCalate (Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Education). Available at: escalate.ac.uk/resources/reflection/ [Accessed 29 September 2010].

Rossiter, M. (2003) Constructing the possible: a study of educational relationships and possible selves. In: Flowers, D. et al (eds) *Proceedings of the 44th Annual Adult Education Research Conference*. San Francisco: San Francisco State University, pp. 363-368.

Rossiter, M. (2007) Possible selves: an adult education perspective. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 114, 5-15.

Sommerlad, H. (2006) Becoming a lawyer: gender and the processes of professional socialization. In: Sheehy, E. & McIntyre, S. (eds) *Calling for change: women, law and the legal profession ten years after touchstones for change*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, pp. 159-177.

Stevenson, J. & Clegg, S. (2010) Possible selves: students orientating themselves towards the future through extracurricular activity. *British Educational Research Journal*. Available at: dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411920903540672 [Accessed 30 September 2010].

Stevenson, J. & Willott, J. (2008) Attitudes towards reflective practice: emerging findings from a TQEF study. *Assessment, Teaching & Learning Journal* 3 (Winter), 46-51.

Yorke, M. (2006) *Employability in higher education: what it is and what it is not*. Learning & Employability Series 1. York: ESECT/Higher Education Academy. Available at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/employability/id116_employability_in_higher_education_336.pdf

Yosso, T.J. (2005) Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity & Education* 8(1), 69-91.



Other publications in this series

Other publications available from Leeds Met Press include:

In at the deep end – starting to teach in higher education (2nd edn 2009)

By Phil Race
ISBN 978-1-907240-00-3

Hands-on internationalisation

By Leeds Met International Teacher Fellows
ISBN 978-0-9555017-9-1

Cultural inclusivity

By Yasmin Valli, Sally Brown and Phil Race
ISBN 978-0-9560099-2-0

Writing and using good learning outcomes

By David Baume
ISBN 978-0-9560099-5-1

Using peer observation to enhance teaching

By Phil Race with Metropolitan University Teacher Fellows
ISBN 978-0-9560099-7-5

Designing first-year assessment and feedback: a guide for university staff

By Ruth Pickford and the Leeds Met First Level Assessment and Feedback project team
ISBN 978-0-9560099-8-2

A student guide to university assessment

By Ruth Pickford and the Leeds Met First Level Assessment and Feedback project team
ISBN 978-0-9560099-9-9

The Leeds Met Book of Resilience

By Lucia Poole and Ruth Lefever, with Jacqueline Stevenson, Sean Dirrane and Amanda Wilson
ISBN 978-1-907240-04-1

Course design for increased student satisfaction

By David Baume
ISBN 978-1-907240-05-8

Learn with Leeds Met: top tips towards your success

By Phil Race
ISBN 978-1-907240-07-2

Using assessment to support student learning

By Graham Gibbs
ISBN 978-1-907240-06-5

A short guide to oral assessment

By Gordon Joughin
ISBN 978-1-907240-09-6

Making personal tutoring work

By Phil Race and Leeds Metropolitan University Teacher Fellows
ISBN 978-1-907240-11-9

Ordering

To order printed copies, singly or in bulk, or to enquire about site licences to customise publications for your own institution, please email publications@leedsmet.ac.uk or telephone 0113 812 9257.

Contact details

For further information on the project contact:

Jacqueline Stevenson
Centre for Research into Higher Education
Carnegie Research Institute
Leeds Metropolitan University
Fairfax 204
Headingley Campus
Leeds LS6 3QS

Tel: 0113 8123798

Email: j.stevenson@leedsmet.ac.uk

To obtain further copies of this booklet contact:

Leeds Met Press
Leeds Metropolitan University
Old School Board
Calverley Street
Leeds LS1 3ED

Tel: 0113 812 9257

Email: publications@leedsmet.ac.uk

www.leedsmet.ac.uk/publications

ISBN 978-1-907240-18-8

© Leeds Metropolitan University 2010