An analysis of the practitioner response to student mental health and wellbeing in Higher Education, through a case study of university careers advisers.

Linda Elizabeth Murdoch
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Dip CG

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the possible alterations that university careers advisers have made to their non-therapeutic practice in order to accommodate changes in student mental health and wellbeing. Firstly, a critical analysis of the relevant literature and policy documents was conducted. This involved an examination of the ways that social, economic, and particularly educational developments have not only changed the student experience of Higher Education, but also the historical evolution of university careers guidance itself. Secondly, the researcher conducted qualitative interviews with 16 experienced university careers advisers that were designed to capture their views of how their practice had developed to accommodate changes in student mental health and wellbeing over the past 5-10 years or more. Through combining key insights from the critical analysis of the relevant literature and policy documents with others that were gleaned from the views of practitioners in the field, evidence is provided for a need to review not only university careers advisers training and practice but also the strategy with which UK Higher Education as a whole supports student mental health and wellbeing. More pointedly, it is concluded that this policy itself may be partly responsible for the marked increase in the numbers of students reporting emotional distress and therefore fuelling the problem it was set up to prevent. Furthermore, as these changes in student behaviour had compelled careers advisers to use their own initiative to gain therapeutic based training in order to continue to support students, this also implied that universities had failed in their duty of care to them.

The study's contribution to knowledge in the field concerns how changes in the way that UK universities support student mental health and wellbeing have had different effects from those intended. These unplanned outcomes have not only impacted changes in how students experience Higher Education, but also how careers advisers work with them in one-to-one careers guidance appointments.

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Author Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Linda Murdoch

Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1 Background to study.

1.1 Personal reflections.

As someone who has worked in the field of Higher Education careers guidance since 1995, briefly as a careers adviser - also referred to as a 'practitioner' in this study - and then for 26 years as either a head or deputy head of university careers services in London and Glasgow, I have been able to gain personal insights of systemic changes in the field. Throughout most of these 26 years, as was the professional custom at the time, I continued to practise part-time as a careers adviser. This dual role enabled me to stay abreast of the ways that social, educational, and economic developments were impacting not only careers guidance practice but also the broader outlook of students. Moreover, as an active member of my professional body the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) for 15 years from 1996, I had some oversight of the ways that Government policy alterations to Higher Education impacted students and careers advisers. For example, as chair of the Scottish AGCAS executive group, I successfully lobbied the Scottish parliament for extra financial resources to encourage companies to employ unemployed graduates who had been left without a job after the financial crisis of 2008. I have also written several publications such as Job Profiles (Prospects 2023) designed to inform students about different occupational areas of interest, and I am trained and experienced in the delivery of the Myers Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) which is designed to helps students learn about their personality ahead of choosing careers that might suit them. Prior to my employment in Higher Education, I spent ten years practising as a full-time careers adviser working in schools and further education colleges.

This long experience, both as a manager and a careers adviser, has enabled me to develop a somewhat critical eye for observing some of the more prolonged changes taking place in university careers guidance. One of these was the steady growth in the number of remarks from careers advisers that some students seemed more anxious or stressed than usual in one-to-one appointments, some of which I experienced in my own practice. At the same time, as also confirmed by research reports (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2017), student counselling colleagues expressed concern that their departments were becoming

overwhelmed by larger than usual numbers of students requesting support to help them cope with being at university (Lightfoot 2018). Amid, or possibly because of these developments, universities began to change their policy approach to supporting students who were having difficulties. Instead of continuing with their targeted strategy where counselling departments on their own treated those who requested help, from 2010 onwards, some Higher Education Institutions as a whole, or individual university departments embarked on awareness raising campaigns which sought to inform all their students about the potential risks to their mental health and wellbeing whilst at university (Thorley 2017, p. 50-55). These approaches, which were later referred to as 'whole' 'all' or 'holistic' mental health and wellbeing strategies, were adopted by Universities UK as the official policy for UK Higher Education in 2017 (Universities UK 2017). The preference for this whole institutional approach over the previous policy was based on its claims that by educating all students about the risks to their mental health and wellbeing and encouraging them to be open about concerns, this would prevent any deterioration in their emotional outlook in the first place. Despite these assertions, according to subsequent research reports (Pereira *et al*. 2019; Baber *et al*. 2021), there has been no abatement in the numbers of students reporting mental health and wellbeing related problems.

As many of the issues that students reported as causing them stress and anxiety, such as worries associated with lack of money, managing workloads, and getting a 'decent' job were not new to them, this prompted me to ask a number of questions. Firstly, if most students had always faced these issues whilst at university, why were they only now becoming a feature of careers guidance appointments? Moreover, in what ways, if any, might this change in student behaviour be impacting careers adviser practice?

Structural barriers aside, careers guidance is founded on the concept of students having the capacity to determine the next steps in their career. It is the careers adviser's role to facilitate this ability for self-governance by helping the student to analyse their qualities and interests towards identifying and realising the best possible outcomes for these. As students who seek careers guidance are contemplating a transition, moving from one state to another, they are therefore considered to be goal orientated and aspirational.

Although careers advisers are instructed in the use of basic counselling techniques to aid them in encouraging students to divulge their interests and qualities prior to gaining advice about their personal career options, this is different from counsellors who are trained to use them to treat student psychological distress. According to Ali and Graham (1996), the matters that a student brings to the careers guidance consultation are not problems per se, such as debt, alcoholism, or depression, but normal issues in their career development which it is the role of the careers advisers to help them resolve. Furthermore, it would be pointless to try to help a student choose one career over another if they were suffering from deeper concerns such as low self-esteem or depression as these would not only be contextually insuperable from moving forward but also unprofessional as their alleviation lies outside the competence of the careers adviser (Ali and Graham 1996).

Overall, it was this query about how traditional university careers guidance might be evolving in response to possible alterations in student behaviour that drove me to embark on this study.

1.2 Aims of study

The broad objective of this study is to contribute to a shared understanding of ways that university careers advisers may have changed their non-therapeutic careers guidance practice to support the reported deterioration in student mental health and wellbeing (Storrie *et al.* 2010; Thorley 2017; UUK 2018; Baber *et al.* 2021). In informing this objective, the enquiry seeks to critically analyse how social, economic, and educational developments have not only impacted the historical development of university careers guidance, but also the student experience of Higher Education itself. Furthermore, it is intended that insights from these, viewed together with key findings from the primary fieldwork designed to capture the views of 16 experienced university careers advisers, will form evidence for a possible need to review not only careers advisers training and practice, but also how UK Higher Education as a whole supports student mental health and wellbeing.

1.3 Overarching Research question

> In what ways have university careers advisers evolved their traditionally non-therapeutic practice towards supporting changes in student mental health and wellbeing?

This broad ranging question was designed with the objective of examining any alterations that practitioners may have made to their practice to enable them to continue to assist students amid what has been referred to as a 'crisis' in their mental health (Baber *et al.* 2021, p.1). Furthermore, in order to assist her in evaluating whether the overall research question has been fully addressed, the researcher formed three further objectives in the form of research sub-questions around individual careers adviser perspectives, institutional expectations, and ways any possible conclusions from these might be put into practice.

1.3.1 Further objectives with linked research sub-questions

Objective 1 *Individual perspectives of careers advisers.*

This first objective is linked to research sub-questions 1.1 and 1.2, the first of which was designed to help elucidate not only careers advisers' observations of possible alterations in student behaviour, but also the meanings that they ascribed to these with a view to understanding what forces could be driving them. Thereafter, the second sub-question 1.2 queries whether these changes have caused careers advisers to revise their practice in any way, and if such amendments are voluntary or institutionally imposed.

1.1 Do careers advisers perceive any changes in how students utilise careers guidance appointments and if so, what are these and some of the reasons provided for any change?

1.2 How do careers advisers revise their practice to accommodate perceived changes in student use of careers guidance appointments? Are these revisions imposed or self-adapted?

Objective 2 *Institutional demands and expectations.*

The second additional objective with related research sub-questions 2.1 and 2.2, sets out to explore careers advisers' perceptions of the extent to which their institutions have either supported them in managing these reported changes in student behaviour or expected them to cope with it within their existing training and practice.

2.1 To what extent is student mental health and wellbeing formally and informally integrated into the advising role of Higher Education careers advisers?

2.2 How much is it expected that careers advisers will be able to deal with changes in student mental health and wellbeing within their current practice?

Objective 3 *Theory into practice*.

This final objective and sub-questions 3.1 and 3.2 are designed to understand whether the existing training for university careers advisers is adequate for ensuring that practitioners can continue to support students, and if not, what changes may be advised.

3.1 Is current careers adviser training and CPD adequate for dealing with student mental health and wellbeing?

3.2 If there are agreed changes in how students utilise careers guidance appointments, in what ways should these be reflected in careers adviser training and on-going professional development?

1.4 Structure of thesis

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 contain critical reviews of the literature and policy documents which present current evidence of the main social, economic, and educational developments which may have influenced not only the views of the participants in the qualitative section of this study, but also its final conclusions and contribution to existing knowledge. Chapter 2 examines the possible effects on the emerging student experience of moves towards therapeutic schooling and more protective parenting, as well as students adopting more instrumentalised approaches to gaining their degree. This exploration of the impact of changes in

policy is continued in Chapter 3 with a critical review of UK Higher Education's adoption of what are known as 'whole', 'all' or 'holistic' institutional approaches towards supporting student mental health and wellbeing (Thorley 2017). This is followed in Chapter 4 by an examination of the factors in the history of university careers guidance which have been instrumental in shaping the current role and practices it employs in universities today, at the same time as highlighting a possible need for its review.

Chapter 5 explains the study's broad theoretical positioning as well as outlining and justifying both its research strategy and design. The strategy adopted is the qualitative inductive approach as there is no existing prior theory against which to compare any of this study's outcomes. The research design also includes explanations of the choice of both the semi-structured interview guide as the method of data collection, and Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) as the process selected to interrogate the data. This chapter also outlines the ethical considerations that were considered as well as the hoped-for benefits for not only the university careers guidance profession, but also those pertaining to the wider Higher Education community. Furthermore, Chapter 5 also explains the effects on the study of the impacts from the restrictions imposed by the UK Government to halt the spread of Covid-19 in March 2020. At this time, the researcher had just gained ethical approval to undertake the primary research of interviewing 16 university careers advisers in five universities throughout Scotland. As Government restrictions limited movement, the researcher immediately reapplied for ethical approval to interview participants using remote technology. This held up the progress of the research by approximately one month, and led to some possible drawbacks which are discussed more fully in Chapter 5.

The critical analyses of the key developments which are examined in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 provide a vantage point for the interrogation of the thematically analysed qualitative data from the careers adviser interviews which are outlined in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. Chapter 6, 'University is a serious business these days' explores and critically examines some of the reasons why students appear to be under more pressure nowadays. Then, Chapter 7, 'It's good to talk', takes one of these possible causes, the change in university strategy towards assisting students with their mental health and wellbeing, and assesses its effects not

only on students but also on careers advisers themselves. Finally, Chapter 8, ‘We’re all counsellors now’ examines the impacts of the developments discussed in the previous chapters on the overall practice of university careers advisers. A fourth theme emerging from the data, ‘Does the training for professional careers advisers require a review?’ is also considered in Chapter 8 but is discussed in more detail in Chapter 9 in the context of the study’s overall conclusions and recommendations.

In Chapter 9, all conclusions from the chapters are critically analysed in light of the study’s main research question and its sub-questions with the purpose of ascertaining how far they have met its overall aim. These analyses are then further examined with a view to ascertaining the contribution that the research has made to existing knowledge in the field as well as recommendations for consideration by the university and professional careers guidance communities. Finally, the discussion concludes with an acknowledgement of the study’s limitations and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2 The emergence of 'the student experience' in UK Higher Education.

2.1 Introduction

The overall research question of this study concerns ways that university careers advisers may have adapted their traditionally non-therapeutic careers guidance practice towards supporting changes in student mental health and wellbeing (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2017; Universities UK 2018; Baber *et al*. 2021). To inform this enquiry, this chapter and the next critically analyse three education-based policy developments which it is argued have impacted the student experience of Higher Education overall. Two of these developments occurred during the New Labour administration of 1997-2010 and the third in 2017. The first of these is the move to integrate therapeutic-based approaches into primary and secondary school education (Ecclestone and Hayes 2019), which took place from 2005 onwards and denoted a revision in curricula away from one that focused mainly on the teaching of knowledge to another which also instils in children and teenagers the primacy of managing their feelings ((Craig 2007; Spratt 2017; Ecclestone and Hayes 2019). The second development, which occurred from 1998 onwards, are the changes associated with instrumentalised Higher Education (Naidoo and Williams 2015) that counterpose the traditional reason for attending university of acquiring knowledge for its own sake, against one of gaining enhanced career prospects. The third development, the change in the way that universities now manage student mental health and wellbeing (Universities UK 2017) which became the official recommended policy for Higher Education in 2017, will be examined in Chapter 3. Also in Chapter 3, the researcher will argue that not only have all three of these educational changes altered the student experience of Higher Education, but also that they may be related to co-incident research reports of a deterioration in students' psychological health (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2017; UUK 2018; Baber *et al*.2021).

It is envisaged that the combined critical review of these changes to the student experience will provide context for the findings from the 16 qualitative interviews of Higher Education careers advisers in chapters 6, 7 and 8.

2.2 The student experience of Higher Education in the UK

The widespread use of the term 'student experience' in UK Higher Education policy began in June 2009 with the creation of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and its new responsibility of governing UK Higher Education. The Government Department for Business, Innovation and Skill's (BIS) document, 'Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy' (BIS 2009) signified a change in how institutions of UK Higher Education were expected to operate. This alteration is denoted by universities no longer marketing their degrees on the basis of their academic merit alone, but now also on the quality of teaching, level of academic and non-academic support and the enhanced careers prospects they offer. Furthermore, chapter 4 of this document, which is entitled 'The Student Experience in Higher Education', outlines how this new business type regime also changes the role of students.

> *'…as the most important clients of higher education, students' own assessments of the service they receive at university should be central to our judgement of the success of our higher education system. Their choices and expectations should play an important part in shaping the courses universities provide and in encouraging universities to adapt and improve their service. But these choices must themselves be well-informed by objective information about what different courses involve, and their implications for future career prospects.'*
>
> *(Great Britain. Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2009, p.70)*

This paragraph defines 'the student experience' as one where students should now have the power not only to influence the content of the courses that they study *'…choices…play an important part…shaping courses…'* but also by doing so, they gain the ability to drive universities to improve the 'service' they deliver to them *'…encouraging universities to adapt and improve their service'*. This statement implies a redistribution in the balance of power, not only over what courses are offered but also how they are actually taught, away from universities towards students themselves. However, at the same time and as noted in the introduction, this statement of increased student empowerment appears to be at odds with the simultaneous emergence of reports of a deterioration in their mental health and wellbeing (Storrie *et al.* 2010; Thorley

2017; UUK 2018), which began to appear from approximately the same time as the statement by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) about the Student Experience in 2009 (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2009). In other words, it is possible that this shift in the student experience, from one where they are viewed solely as learners to another which also includes notions of them as customers with more influence over their university education, may also have some relationship with the change in their emotional outlook.

Therefore, by firstly defining the terms ‘therapeutic education', 'the instrumentalisation of Higher Education’ and the ‘whole university approach to supporting student mental health and wellbeing’, and then critically analysing the claims made on their behalf, these two chapters seek to uncover some unforeseen impacts these may have had on students. Furthermore, this critical review also aims to examine whether these developments have any bearing on students reporting poorer emotional health which could be interpreted as the opposite of the notion of their empowerment that is implied in the statement by BIS (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2009) in 2.2.

2.3 The introduction of therapeutic school education and its impact on the student experience.

As noted in the introduction, this change that was made to the UK’s primary and secondary school education was enacted by the New Labour administration which came to power in the UK in 1997. According to this Government, raising children’s self-esteem not only improves their ability to learn but also enhances their educational attainment and their overall life chances (Social Exclusion Unit 2001). These ideas led to the formal re-centering of school education in the UK around social and emotional aspects of learning which teaches children the importance of managing their feelings in the educative process (Ecclestone and Hayes 2019). Alternative views of the effects of these changes to the curriculum contend that by encouraging school pupils to focus on their feelings first and foremost, their ability to rationalise their emotions may become impaired leading them to regard themselves as vulnerable and requiring protection (Füredi 2004; Ecclestone and Hayes 2019). It is further suggested that some of these features may also be replicated in the student experience of university,

which has led to increasing numbers of students citing feelings of stress and anxiety as negatively impacting their mental health and wellbeing over the past 10-15 years (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2017; UUK 2018; Baber *et al*. 2021).

The formal changes in the school curriculum that were denoted by the introduction of therapeutic education, also developed at a time when theorists and governments were engaging with new discourses about ways that education can mitigate social deprivation (Giddens 2013). Previously, teachers in the UK were already utilising these social and emotional approaches to learning in the classroom, but only with those pupils who were understood to be socially and economically disadvantaged (Ecclestone and Hayes 2019). In what was viewed at the time as a proactive, universal, and preventative approach to solving social problems, the Government now applied these therapeutically- based approaches not only to underprivileged children, but to all school pupils (Craig 2007; Spratt 2017; Ecclestone and Hayes 2019). Wright and McLeod (2015) point to a similar trend in 1990's Australia where what were previously approaches targeted only at children with suspected mental illness, were evolved into one that was applied universally in order to prevent mental health problems emerging in the first place.

At the same time as these changes in educational policy were underway, discourses on the nature of intelligence and the relationship between emotions and rationality were also changing (Salovey and Mayer 1990; Gardner 1993). Where once emotions were thought to be an impediment to rational thought, a paradigm was emerging which suggested that rationality is better understood as a product of the management of emotions. Harvard educationalist Howard Gardner posited that traditional ideas of intelligence were too narrow and restrictive and needed to be expanded to include more emotional categories such as inter-personal and intra-personal intelligence (Gardner 1993). Two academic psychologists, Salovey and Mayer called this Emotional Intelligence (EI), a framework of skills which enable humans to understand, express, manage and regulate their emotions and recognise feelings in others (Salovey and Mayer 1990). This approach suggests that people who have EI are better able to manage their feelings which not only aids rational thinking but is a better predictor of life success than IQ on its own (Salovey and Mayer 1990).

These ideas, that education give primacy to feelings which it is argued improves a pupil's ability to learn, formed the basis of the changes made to the school curriculum throughout the UK. In 2005 the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) introduced the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning framework (SEAL) into compulsory education (Department for Education and Science 2007). Similar recommendations regarding the teaching of social and emotional skills were introduced in Scotland with the introduction of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in 2010 (Spratt 2017). Based on the work of Professor Katherine Weare of the University of Southampton, SEAL draws on studies of emotional literacy, emotional intelligence, empathy, social problem-solving, anger management and cognitive development, arguing that attention to these not only improves standards of achievement, attendance and behaviour but also encourages inclusion, mental health, and skill development (Ecclestone and Hayes 2019, pp.15-16). Weare's recommendations for SEAL's introduction into schools also formally introduced Goleman's five domains of Emotional Intelligence – self-awareness, managing feelings, motivation, empathy, and social skills - as a framework for teaching in schools (Goleman 1995). Quoting directly from Goleman's claims, the DfES states that research on Emotional Intelligence has been shown to be more influential than cognitive abilities for personal, career and scholastic success and that students who are angry, depressed, or anxious cannot learn as they fail to take in information (DfES 2007, p.88). SEAL requires schools to have emotional and behavioural goals attached to the teaching of all subjects, cross-curricular activities such as assemblies and the teaching and management styles of staff (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2019). In her critique of wellbeing narratives in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), Spratt (2017) argues that in Scotland these recommendations for social and emotional education are designed to teach children to manage the internal self in order to operate in the social world, avoid risk and improve their attendance, behaviour and learning at school.

SEAL's two national evaluations were confined to England only, one for primary (Hallam 2009) and another for secondary (Humphrey *et al*. 2010) and partly assessed its claims regarding improvements in child behaviour in class. However, neither evaluation investigated the Labour Government's key claims regarding SEAL's efficacy in improving learning and educational outcomes for children.

Although SEAL's evaluation in primary schools did contain two questions for teachers on its effect on pupil learning and attainment, the outcomes of these seemed to indicate that teachers only associated SEAL with improving pupils' behaviour and not their academic skills and achievements. It is also notable that unlike the evaluation of SEAL's impact in secondary schools, the primary assessment lacked a control group which left it open to accusations of suffering from the 'Hawthorne Effect' (Sonnenfeld 1985), where those observed during a research study temporarily change their behaviour or performance because they are being observed (Craig 2007).

The evaluation of SEAL's impact on primary pupils and teachers was taken from pre and post implementation questionnaires for teachers, teaching assistants and head teachers in 29 English schools and interviews with school staff and pupils in 13 schools. Eighty-seven percent of teachers agreed that the SEAL programme promoted the emotional wellbeing of pupils and 82% agreed it also increased their ability to control their emotions which changed their behaviour and in turn increased teacher confidence in understanding their pupils. In addition, the questionnaire for primary school teachers contained questions about whether they thought that SEAL had improved concentration and listening in pupils, the results of which were equally balanced between agree and disagree or do not know. There were another two questions, one of which asked about SEAL's contribution to improving pupil learning and the other about its efficacy in raising attainment levels. The first of these attracted scores of 29% agreeing, 33% disagreeing and 38% who did not know, and the latter 28% ,20% and 52% respectively. Compared to scores of over 80% who agreed that SEAL helped pupils manage their behaviour, these lower scores indicate that teachers either did not associate SEAL with improving academic performance or based on their current experience of the programme, were not able to assess whether it did or not.

The evaluation of SEAL's impact on secondary schools was conducted by Humphrey *et al*. (2010) and involved 8,630 pupils in 22 SEAL pilot schools with 19 non-SEAL schools for comparison. The assessment aimed to measure SEAL's impact, where implemented, on social and emotional skills, mental health difficulties and pro-social behaviour via a self-report questionnaire at the start of the school term in 2008 and a follow up questionnaire one year later. The

results which were aided by the existence of a control group of non-SEAL schools claimed that SEAL had no significant impact on pupil outcomes in terms of social and emotional skills, mental health difficulties or social behaviour (Humphrey *et al.* 2010).

Despite the claims of Weare, Goleman and the Labour Government that placing social and emotional aspects of learning at the centre of education improves pupil learning, neither of SEAL's two national evaluations set out to rigorously evaluate this assertion. Given that these were the claims on which New Labour launched SEAL, the absence of an appropriate official evaluation of them is notable. Despite this disparity, SEAL's principles have been embedded into the curricula of all primary and secondary schools in the UK.

Those who are in favour of making social and emotional aspects of learning central to the school curriculum argue that its ability in enabling children to control their emotions, also improves their ability to learn and their self-esteem. Others contend that teaching pupils to be pre-occupied with managing their feelings may actually weaken learning as it could leave them feeling fragile and dependent rather than self-reliant and able to influence their environment (Furedi 2004; Craig 2007; Ecclestone and Hayes 2019).

As well as this lack of evidence for its key claims, Ecclestone and Hayes (2019) also contend that as SEAL and CfE inform teachers that social and emotional aspects are now essential elements to the learning and teaching process, they may be compelled to foreground these approaches in their practice. This claim may be somewhat supported by the evaluation of SEAL's impact on primary teachers.

> *The data from the interviews indicated that the programme had increased staff understanding of the importance of social, emotional, and behavioural skills for children and the need to develop them through explicit teaching.*
>
> *(Hallam 2009, p. 327)*

This statement is supported in the evaluation by several teacher quotes which emphasized how using SEAL approaches in their teaching had given them more confidence in handling pupil behaviour. Although this claim needs to be balanced

by the fact that the study lacked a control group, it may support the contention by Ecclestone and Hayes (2019) that as teachers find SEAL useful in managing pupils' emotions and behaviour, this not only becomes the focus through which they teach, but also how pupils learn. In other words, if pupils and students are taught the primacy of feeling good, if they are not in the best frame of mind or if the act of learning itself makes them feel uncomfortable, then they may focus on managing their feelings instead of engaging with knowledge. This idea that learning can cause discomfort may be further supported by the conclusions of a recent study on how some students are influenced by 'trigger warnings', the prior notifications they are given about potentially upsetting course material (Bridgland *et al.* 2023). This meta-analysis of all the existing empirical studies on the effects of these warnings on students concluded that not only do they not mitigate distress as claimed, but their presentation in course material actually increases anxiety in some students which may well reinforce their belief that learning may indeed be harmful (Bridgland *et al.* 2023). Moreover, on-going reports of deteriorating student mental health and wellbeing (Storrie *et al.* 2010; Thorley 2017; UUK 2018; Baber *et al.* 2021), may also disprove SEAL's claims that by teaching children to manage their emotions they are psychologically better prepared to learn.

2.4 The instrumentalisation of Higher Education and its impact on the student experience.

The claim made by BIS (2009) in section 2.2, that students would become more empowered by the change in their primary status from that of learner on its own to one that also includes notions of them as customers, is also associated with the idea of Higher Education becoming instrumentalised (Gibbs 2001). This change is characterised as a shift away from a view of students who learn a subject primarily for its own sake, to one where they do so mainly to gain competitive advantage in the labour market. This idea of students pursuing university study for a reward other than learning itself is also described as students seeking to 'have a degree rather than be learners' (Molesworth *et al.* 2009, p.277), or what is also known as the 'commodification process in Higher Education' (Shumar 2013, p.15). According to these views, when a degree is subject to commodification, its value is measured against what it can buy as a product rather than by its intrinsic worth as a process of learning in and of itself.

Therefore, if a degree's value is now mostly associated with how much it can improve a student's career prospects, then its instrumental worth lies in how successful it proves to be in this respect.

This concept of UK Higher Education becoming increasingly instrumentalised emerged in the late 20th century and is associated with the popularity at the time of the notion of the knowledge economy, which is also part of Human Capital Theory (Becker 1993). In this idea, knowledge, formerly viewed as the socially shared means through which scientific and technological progress is made, now becomes a commodity, a form of human capital owned by individuals. This change leads to the knowledge that is developed by universities no longer being considered a collective good for all society but generated for the private benefit of individual graduates alone. These notions of instrumentalised Higher Education are most associated with the changes that the Labour Government of 1997-2010 made to Higher Education policy. This repositioning of the purpose of universities was already evident in the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing 1997), also known as the Dearing Report. In this report's four stated aims for Higher Education, three mention student's future employment (my italics).

- to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, *are well-equipped for work*, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment;

- to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to *foster their application to the benefit of the economy a*nd society;

- to serve the *needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy* at local, regional and national levels;

- to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society.

(Dearing 1997, p.72, 5.11)

It is useul to compare these four aims with those of the previous review of Higher Education which was conducted by Robbins in 1963.

- instruction in *skills for employment*;
- promoting the general powers of the mind;
- advancing learning;
- transmitting a common culture and common standards of citizenship.

(Dearing 1997, p72, 5.7)

As also noted by Williams (2012), only one of Robbins's four aims point directly to employment, whereas three of Dearing's make direct reference to work and the economy. Furthermore, whilst Robbins's emphasis is on the importance of learning for its own sake, Dearing's focuses on purposing universities to develop skills to enhance the country's wealth. Further evidence of this shift in how the Labour Government of 1997-2010 now viewed the role of universities may also be apparent when subsequently in 2001 it commissioned the Harris Review of Higher Education careers services which recommended that they now work in partnership with academics to embed employability based outcomes into the university curriculum (Harris 2001).

Moreover, since according to Human Capital Theory (Becker 1993) it is now primarily individuals who benefit from Higher Education, this might lead to the conclusion that the tax paying public as a whole should no longer fund it. Put differently, if it is only students who profit from their education through their ability to get good jobs, then it might be surmised that they should pay for it themselves. As noted at the start of this section, previous notions influencing UK Higher Education policy were based on the idea that universities developed knowledge and shared it to the benefit of society and the economy overall. As it is now claimed that the benefits of that knowledge accrue directly to students as individuals who, through their enhanced employment prospects, contribute to economic prosperity, then it is perhaps feasible to argue that its funding should depend on them. This idea was confirmed when in 1998, soon after the

publication of the Dearing report, individual means tested tuition fees were introduced for all UK undergraduate students for the first time. Moreover, if it is individual graduates who pay for what they are taught, then it could also be argued that like any other product they should have some choice over what they are buying. It may not be a coincidence that in the same year as the introduction of individual tuition fees in 1998, the Financial Times and the Sunday Times began their annual publication of university league tables. These benchmarks consisted of a range of performance indicators including entry standards, staff/student ratios, teaching quality indices and graduate employment destinations, all of which were broken down and ranked by university and course. From 2009, this data was also available on the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website ostensibly to enable those applying to university to choose a course which suited them. Despite reservations as to whether the publication of such performance indicators actually helps university applicants make informed choices about where and what they study (Bowden 2000), the requirement that all UK Higher Education Institutions publish such data may have left students in no doubt that choosing a degree was like making any other kind of purchase.

Further evidence of this change in the relationship between students and universities can be seen by the 2005 introduction of the National Student Survey (NSS) which invites all UK final year undergraduates to rate their university experience of teaching, course organisation, assessment, and feedback, learning resources, student voice, community, and skill development. The significance of the introduction of the NSS is that it signalled that, for the first time, students were being asked to participate in their education not only as learners, but also as judges of how and what they learn in the same way as they may well be asked to evaluate any other service that they purchase. Moreover, as it is carried out externally by IPSO Mori on behalf of the UK Higher Education funding bodies and is mandatory for all publicly funded degree awarding institutions in the UK, the launch of the NSS would have made universities acutely aware of the nature of this change in their relationship with students. In other words, as students' judgments could for the first time undermine the funding for courses as well as other student services, universities may now be compelled to consider these when planning their future provision.

However, other views, such as those of Molesworth *et al.* (2010), also argue that as UK universities had been marketing their degrees as a means of enhancing careers prospects since the 1960s and especially in the 1990's, it is unlikely that it was the introduction of individual tuition fees in and of itself that resulted in the increased instrumentalisation of Higher Education. In support of this argument, as early as 1993, the Conservative Government introduced 'The Higher Education Student Charter' which labelled students as 'customers' and universities delivering 'a service' and even this was after the publication of the very first national university league table which appeared in the Times in 1992. These examples indicate that some of the influences which treat students as customers, as well as learners, were already at work long before the implementation of the policy of students paying individual tuition fees, albeit means tested, in 1998, and certainly long before the implementation of variable fees in England and Wales in 2006/07. These views, which imply that what is understood as 'the student experience' was changing long before they were required to pay individual tuition fees, may also support the suggestion posed in the introduction that such changes may have broader origins than those associated with the instrumentalisation of Higher Education on its own.

This suggestion that there are other factors influencing changes in the student experience may well be supported by the Scottish experience of Higher Education. Although undergraduate Scottish domiciled students who are studying in Scotland have never paid variable tuition fees, Scottish Higher Education is subject to exactly the same student charters, satisfaction surveys such the NSS, and performance indicators covering assessment methods, contact hours and career destination statistics as its counterparts in other parts of the UK which benefit from full tuition fees of £9,250 per annum. In other words, despite not having to pay for their degree, Scottish undergraduates studying in Scotland have similar consumer- influenced relationships with their university as students in the rest of the UK. Furthermore, over the same period and like the rest of the UK, there was a growth in the number of students studying in Scottish Higher Education institutions who reported poorer mental health and wellbeing. One study by the Mental Health Foundation (Maguire and Cameron 2021) of 15,000 students at 19 Scottish universities, found that 36% had reported moderately severe or severe symptoms of depression and 45% thought they had experienced

a serious psychological issue which they felt needed professional help (Maguire and Cameron 2021). Therefore, as undergraduates in Scotland have reported comparably deteriorating levels of mental health and wellbeing at the same time as their equivalents in the rest of the UK, it is possible that the changes to the student experience that are associated with instrumentalisation and paying tuition fees, may also be related to other developments. For example, if, as implied by notions of instrumentalisation, the main reason that students apply to university is to improve their career prospects, as many of them do not actually get graduate level jobs it might be expected that more of them would decline the offer of paying tuition fees of up to £27,750 (Donald *et al*. 2018). According to Minocha *et al*. (2017), in 2013, six years after the introduction of variable tuition fees in England and Wales, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that only 47 percent of those leaving UK universities entered graduate level jobs. Furthermore, as argued by Murphy *et al*. (2019), despite having some of the highest tuition fees in the world, almost 50 percent of English school-leavers apply to enter Higher Education (Murphy *et al*. 2019). It is also the case that much of the growth in the numbers seeking undergraduate places at UK universities occurred after the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006/07. According to Bolton (2022), the Higher Education entry rate among UK 18-year-olds increased from 24.7% in 2006 to 30.7% in 2015 and peaked at 38.2% in 2021, with large increases in the participation of female, black and Asian students during this time (Bolton 2022). This extensive growth demonstrates that, even though it may lack the guarantee of improved job prospects and comes with the threat of future debt, students of most backgrounds are willing to pay for their degree. However, it is also possible that many school leavers may feel that not taking up the offer of a place at university in and of itself may risk them being confined to only getting jobs that are associated with low levels of skill. This notion is supported by Brown (2013), who suggests that for many employers, the undergraduate degree is no longer an indicator of a highly qualified job candidate, but a baseline requirement for a wide range of what were previously non-graduate roles. According to Williams (2012) and Murphy *et al*. (2019), another reason for such strong Higher Education participation rates, despite high fees, is that these undergraduate degrees come accompanied by loans which not only offer generous interest rates, but also do not have to be paid back until earnings rise significantly which minimises the burden of repayment on students.

This notion that students may need to be shielded from the repayment of debt for as long as possible, may be another indication that the changes in the student experience might also be associated with broader influences such as changes in parenting and schooling which were occurring at the same time. Although historically speaking the linking of poor parenting with negative child outcomes is not a new development (Hardyment 2007), it only became a key feature of UK government policy in the 1990's (Welshman 2010). Drawing on a number of programmes in the United States such as the Headstart Programme and the HighScope Perry study which claimed that preschool interventions prevented crime, violence, and educational underachievement (Clarke 2006, p.706), the Labour Government of 1997-2010 launched a range of policies and initiatives which increasingly identified good parenting approaches as the key to positive outcomes in the lives of children. In May 1998, The National Childcare Strategy was heralded by Home Secretary Jack Straw as 'the first time any government' had 'published a consultation paper on the family', and as such was 'long overdue' (UK Home Office 1998, p. 3). This policy was accompanied in 1999 by the Sure Start programme, which not only offered children of socially deprived families childcare and learning support, but also set targets for reducing parental smoking and raising breastfeeding levels as well as giving parents advice on how to shop, cook and eat healthily, play with babies and 'positive parenting' approaches to discipline (Churchill and Clarke 2010, p. 43). These programmes of parental advice, which were initially aimed solely at disadvantaged families, were gradually widened to include anyone who had children. Other policy developments such as Parentline Plus in 1998 (Boddy *et al*. 2004) and the National Parenting Academy (NAAP) in 2007, also offered all parents advice on child rearing. According to the Evaluation of the National Academy of Parenting Practitioners' Training Offer in evidence-based parenting programmes, there is a growing body of proof which links expert parenting programmes with reductions in school failure, youth crime, adolescent drug and alcohol misuse and child maltreatment (Asmussen *et al*. 2012).

In his book 'Paranoid Parenting', Furedi (2001) is not only critical of these policy developments, but also argues that their significance lies in the fact that at the same time as they advise parents that they need experts to teach them child-caring, their children are presented as more in danger from unforeseen risks

than ever before. For example, despite evidence which shows that children are far safer in their families and communities than in the past, a 1998 pamphlet by Labour MP Dan Hawes, with a foreword by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair, warns parents that even the most kind and respectable members of their family, friendship groups and neighbourhood could, despite appearances, be a paedophile (Furedi 2001, p.15). Furedi also presents a wealth of statistics which demonstrate that child injury and death from traffic accidents or at the hands of strangers are much lower than previously but also warns that as young children are now far less likely to walk or cycle to school or anywhere else on their own, parents may have succumbed to fear resulting from the promotion of these unpredictable dangers. An overall conclusion of 'Paranoid Parenting' (2001) is that this inflation of risk which accompanies programmes of expert advice places parents in the unenviable position of being at once both the people most responsible for what happens to their children at the same time as they are powerless to protect them from such unforeseen harms.

For others, the influence of these programmes offering expert parenting advice amidst elevated warnings to keep children safe from hidden harms, has led to accusations of over-protective parenting. One of these claims which is illustrated by the label of 'Cotton Wool kids' (Jones 2007, p.1) holds parents partly responsible for cocooning their children from everyday challenges which it is argued could undermine their future performance as workers. Another notion, 'Helicopter' parenting (Howe and Strauss 2000) presents parents as standing ready and waiting to intervene to smooth away obstacles in the lives of their older children. In a study of 289 students from three large British universities which examined their experiences of transitioning into Higher Education, Baber *et al.* (2021) reported that almost half of those responding (49%) claimed that their parents had intervened on their behalf whilst at school. Furthermore, 66% of those students who were living away from home at university stated that they were in touch with their parents by phone either daily or multiple times per week and that most of this contact was initiated by the parents themselves (op.cit). Twenge (2017) and Haidt and Lukianoff (2018) also suggest that partly due to these changes towards more protective parenting approaches, some students have become overconcerned with safetyism at the cost of all else which leads them to demand that their university protect them from emotional risks. In

evidencing this, Haidt and Lukianoff (2018) point to the rise in demand for 'trigger warnings' (Vatz 2016, p.51), where students get forewarned of course material that academics consider might make them feel uncomfortable. However, as it is universities themselves who opt to censor course material in this way, some argue that it is they, rather than students themselves who are responsible for these accusations of overprotection. According to Morgan-Bentley (2022), the responses to a Freedom of Information (FOI) request sent to 140 universities revealed that there were 1,084 texts which either had a trigger warning placed on them, been made optional for students, or had been removed altogether from reading lists due to academics deciding that some students may not be robust enough to deal with the ideas they contained (Morgan-Bentley 2022). Some argue that universities have a responsibility to protect students from feeling upset or uncomfortable as this could not only damage their mental health and wellbeing but also hamper their academic progress (Spencer and Kulbaga 2018). Others contend that as the academic development of students remains a primary purpose of universities and that this can only occur when they grapple with ideas which challenge their own, trigger warnings prevent opportunities for such intellectual contestation (Williams 2016). Although it is difficult to establish definitively whether it is mainly students or academics who are responsible for initiating trigger warnings, as it is universities who implement them, despite in doing so arguably undermining student's full educational development, it is they who are chiefly responsible for their widespread use. This view is supported by Williams (2016), who argues that when academics succumb to institutional equality policies which require universities to protect vulnerable student groups at all costs, this may lead them to tacitly support trigger warnings in an effort to discourage the debate of challenging ideas (Williams 2016).

Therefore, although it is possible that some parents have become overprotective of their children, it is also conceivable that universities themselves have assimilated some of these views of students as more vulnerable to risk and have adopted overprotective measures, such as trigger warnings, in response. However, other views are critical of how having to pay fees itself may actually change the student experience of learning. In this regard, two studies of the approaches that students had adopted in response to having to fund their

education may be insightful. Firstly, Nixon *et al.'s.* survey of 68 students at one university in England argued that having to pay for their degree meant that in order to achieve the highest mark possible, students may choose the subject pathways that are the least intellectually demanding to them including those which consist of material that they are already familiar with (Nixon *et al.* 2010). In other words, when a student's goal is to get the best degree classification possible in return for their money, then it may be too risky for them to opt for a subject that they might find academically challenging. Secondly, a study of 608 undergraduates in English universities argued that when students adopt a strong consumer-based orientation towards their studies, they may fail to develop learning behaviours, such as the critical engagement with course material, that would support them gaining a deep understanding of their course's subject matter (Bunce *et al.* 2017, p. 1961). Moreover, according to Naidoo and Jamieson (2005), when students see themselves as entering a commercial relationship with their education, they may move away from taking responsibility for engaging with it as a learning process towards becoming the passive recipients of its benefits. Put differently, if education becomes something that is purchased solely for the rewards it offers in the labour market, then there may be little advantage to be gained by investing in it intellectually.

However, it could also be argued that when deciding whether to come to university, students may not necessarily treat their intellectual development and their enhanced employability as mutually exclusive objectives. As most universities now require academic staff to embed employability related skills such as teamwork and problem solving into their course modules, students may see no contradiction between how well they understand their subject and their future employment prospects. This view may also be reinforced by the belief that many employers will now only consider job applications from students who are on target to gain at least an upper second-class degree (Ireland *et al.* 2009; Di Pietro 2017). This bar on students who have anything below a 2:1 is widely understood to have occurred as a result of the growth in the numbers of applicants to graduate recruitment programmes, and the consequent inability of employers to screen all students who wish to apply to them (Pollard *et al.* 2015; Di Pietro 2017). Furthermore, as argued by Professor Nigel Seaton, although the difference between a 2:1 and a 2:2 may be a matter of a few marks, it could

disproportionately influence students' future employment prospects leading them to treat it as the line between career success or failure (Seaton 2011). This view may also be supported by Bunce *et al.* (2017), who argues that students who adopt a 'learner' identity, where they prioritise a deep understanding of their subject, achieve higher academic results than those who opt for a more consumer-related approach to their studies. On the other hand, it might also be the case that the act of choosing to study at university itself shows that students are opting to change themselves and not necessarily mere passive consumers of its career related benefits. Put differently, by choosing to invest time and money to gain a (non-vocational) degree which it is implied is essential for them to access improved career prospects, students are making a statement of intent and feel a responsibility to ensure that nothing risks the commitment they are making to that. If correct, this notion may indicate that it is possible for students to treat their degree less as a product to be consumed than as an investment in their future. This idea of investing in themselves is endorsed by Tomlinson's study of the views of 68 undergraduate students from seven across-the-range UK universities who entered Higher Education in 2011 and 2012, at the time when tuition fees were rising (Tomlinson 2017). According to this account, students balanced an appreciation of their individual rights as tuition fee payers with their responsibility within this to put in the intellectual effort to attain their degree. In other words, students are now adopting a utilitarian approach towards their degree study where, in return for not only intellectual engagement but also now a financial investment, they gain what Tomlinson also refers to as an 'Employment insurance policy' (Tomlinson 2017, p.461). Therefore, it is possible that this notion of an investment, which is implicit in policy documents related to the Student Experience (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2009), has been assimilated by students as what Tomlinson (2015) also refers to as 'an ethic of self-responsibility' (Tomlinson 2015, p.149). In other words, although it is not new for students to be short of money, now that for the first time most of them are liable for their tuition fees, this may compel them to try harder than previously in order to profit from the full benefits of a degree. This notion may be supported by Williams (2012) who claims that although students reject the idea that they are now consumers of Higher Education, they also accept that they have chosen to invest in it. This distinction between 'consuming' and 'investing' may indicate that most students have adopted a

somewhat practical approach to getting through university life, that is, one that does not necessarily treat their intellectual development and enhancing their employability as mutually exclusive, but as two sides of the same coin.

This view of students choosing to personally invest in their Higher Education also implies that by doing so they may feel that they have to take responsibility for the risks associated with that investment too. Such risks, it could be argued, might not come just from their need to get good grades, but also from other students themselves. Although between 1994 and 2021 the numbers of students accepted into UK universities more than doubled (Bolton 2022), this has not led to a commensurate rise in the numbers of graduate jobs available to them (Wolf 2002; Minocha *et al*. 2017). As argued earlier in this section, this growth in the numbers of students applying for a limited pool of jobs has forced graduate recruiters to raise the bar by which they will be considered for employment (Pollard 2015; Di Pietro 2016), which may lead students to feel pressure not only from the intellectual challenge of subject learning, but also from each other.

These interpretations of students as somewhat more encumbered by responsibility than previously, may also be reflected in other views of how they are constructed in official Higher Education policy. In a review of 27 Higher Education related policy documents published between 2013 and 2016, Brooks (2018) contends that students are often portrayed as the victims of their universities who are charged with providing inadequate course information, poor quality teaching and of causing grade inflation which may devalue degrees in the labour market. Moreover, Brooks (2018) also implies that it is this perceived exploitation of students by universities which was one of the reasons behind the Government's establishment of the independent Office for Students (OfS) in 2018 (Brooks 2018, p.757). This formation of an independent body to represent the interests of students may be significant in relation to wider views of reduced student resilience and requirements for their safeguarding. For example, according to its first chief executive Dame Nicola Dandridge, the objectives of the OfS are to support students in their university application process, protect them during their studies and to ensure their degree holds its value in the labour market (Dandridge 2019, p.158-9). These aims, which depict students as vulnerable and in need of protection from powerful universities, is also very much at odds with the newly influential role assigned to them in the Student

Experience by BIS, only ten years earlier (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2009), as outlined at 2.2. It is possible that this earlier intention of the Student Experience, that students would become more empowered, may have been somewhat tempered in the intervening ten years, not only by the escalating numbers of complaints from them (Abrams 2014), but also the increase in reports that they seem less able to cope with university life than their predecessors (Storrie *et al.* 2010; Thorley 2017; UUK 2018).

These constructions of students as needful of more support than previously may also be reflected in other views of how they are impacted by universities themselves becoming more instrumentalised. According to Molesworth *et al.* (2010), Williams (2012), Furedi (2017), and Nixon and Scullion (2022), as instrumental approaches in universities tend to inflict increased pressure on academics to ensure they gain positive satisfaction scores, this might also risk them conceding to student demands for more personal support which they also fear may threaten the development of strong pedagogical relationships with them. In Nixon and Scullion's (2022) study of how organisational discourses of 'customer satisfaction' affected academic's views of students, the authors argue that the institutional narratives associated with such approval ratings inclined lecturers towards views of students as somewhat needful of gaining good grades to get graduate jobs in return for their investment (Nixon and Scullion 2022 p. 1798). According to this analysis, academics thought that students tended to internalise the pressures associated with tuition fees and getting a graduate level job, which made them stressed and fragile in what the authors refer to as 'A shared discursive construction of students was as highly vulnerable young people '(Nixon and Scullion 2022 p.1808). In other words, it is the re-orientation of UK Higher Education towards more instrumental purposes, attended by the need to ensure student satisfaction, that may be partly responsible for undermining rather than strengthening these views of students as primarily learners who require intellectual challenge (Hayes 2009; Williams 2010; Nixon and Scullion 2022).

These characterisations of students as more vulnerable than previously may also be supported by other simultaneous developments in universities over the past 25 years. According to Ecclestone and Hayes (2019), it is not only schools but also Higher Education institutions which now teach students that they need

protection from a wide range of risks in life. This view, which will be further discussed in Chapter 3.3, may also be reflected in the fact that unlike previously it is now common for universities to host webpages and apps which inform students that aspects of university life, that were not previously considered as concerning, are now presented to them as a wide range of risks to their mental and physical health. Furedi (2017) and Ecclestone and Hayes (2019) also argue that this guidance that mental health and wellbeing may be in danger from a wide range of stressors from being at university, could reinforce a sense of vulnerability in some students that they first learned in school. Therefore, if students think they are surrounded by risks which they cannot control, they may find it hard to see themselves as independent adults who have the capacity to influence what happens to them, instead feeling vulnerable and in need of protection. According to Williams (2012), this sense of vulnerability is further reinforced by frequent satisfaction surveys and complaints procedures which invite students to relate their experience about everything from their teaching and assessment methods to their accommodation. This emphasis on ensuring students feel at ease at university also recalls several reports over the past 10-15 years of UK Higher Education students professing poorer psychological health (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2017; UUK 2018; Baber *et al*. 2021) which is critically analysed in Chapter 3.3. If these reports are correct, the vision of the student who is newly empowered by their consumer or investor status in 'The Student Experience of Higher Education' which is outlined at the start of this chapter, has not come to pass.

2.5 Conclusion and discussion.

In seeking to understand ways that changes in the student experience over the past 5-10 years or more may have influenced the practice of university careers advisers, this chapter examines the role played by two educational policy developments that were introduced by the New Labour administration of 1997-2010. It is envisaged that the conclusions from this chapter and the next, together with those from Chapter 4 on the evolution of university careers guidance, will help provide a vantage point from which to examine the primary data collected from the qualitative interviews of 16 university careers advisers in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

A critical analysis of the first policy change, which involved the re-centering of knowledge-based curricula around Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), demonstrated that its claims to improve learning in children were not only contested by critics such as Craig (2007), Cigman (2012), Spratt 2017 and Ecclestone and Hayes (2019), but also unconfirmed by the results from its own formal evaluations. Moreover, for over 80% of teachers in the primary school evaluation, SEAL's effectiveness lay not in any proven ability to improve educational attainment in pupils, but in managing classroom behaviour. In other words, if educating children to control their feelings helps teachers manage classroom behaviour, it may not only become the focus of how they teach but also of how pupils learn (Ecclestone and Hayes 2019). Critics further argue that as SEAL teaches pupils to become pre-occupied with managing their feelings, this may well leave some of them feeling at the mercy of their emotions and dependent rather than self-reliant and able to influence their environment (Furedi 2004; Craig 2007; Ecclestone and Hayes 2019).

It is further argued that this official change in school curricula may also prevent students from engaging with challenging ideas at university, especially if doing so makes them feel uncomfortable (Furedi 2017; Ecclestone and Hayes 2019). It is also possible that the widespread use of 'trigger warnings' (Vatz 2016, p.51), the promotion of student safety in universities and also the repeated reports of undergraduates citing poorer emotional health (Storrie *et al.*, 2010; Thorley 2017; UUK 2018; Baber *et al* 2021), may be additional evidence of the impacts from the change to the therapeutic-based approach of SEAL in schools. In other words, through being taught the primacy of feelings, some students may find it harder to rationalise that their stress and anxiety are normal impacts from student life, concluding instead that they are far more fragile than they actually are and that they cannot cope without support.

The second educationally based policy development that may have contributed to changes in the student experience, which is also associated with the introduction of instrumentalised approaches to Higher Education, is the alteration that the New Labour administration made to how UK universities are managed. The widely held view that it was the need for students to pay individual tuition fees alone which led them to develop instrumental relationships with their degrees is contested with evidence from earlier notions

of them as consumers and through the Scottish experience of Higher Education. This argument is further bolstered by figures showing that although coming to university no longer guarantees enhanced career prospects and leads many students to incur high levels of debt, approximately fifty percent of school leavers in the UK still choose to apply to study there. It is also argued that the pressure of competition in a narrow labour market which favours only the highest achievers for graduate level jobs, may also compel some students to put themselves under pressure to work harder at their intellectual development in order to gain the maximum benefits from what they may consider is a personal investment in their future. Therefore, as it is likely that for most students enhanced employability and intellectual development are not necessarily mutually exclusive, then most of them probably adopt a practical approach to obtaining their degree.

It is further argued that these views of students as nowadays facing not only prospects of debt but also diminishing returns on their investment of time, money, and hard work, are also reflected in some UK Higher Education policy documents that present them as victims of their institutions (Brooks 2018). This idea of students being vulnerable may also be echoed by the notion that as they need to gain good marks to have any chance of getting on in life, this presents them as needful and such a view may take precedence over their positioning as learners whose primary requirement is intellectual contestation (Hayes 2009; Williams 2012; Nixon and Scullion 2022).

Moreover, the critical analysis also maintained that this notion of the vulnerable student is further reiterated in changes in parenting and schooling approaches which may teach students that they are exposed to many unforeseen risks from which they now require protection (Furedi 2001; Haidt and Lukianoff 2018). It follows from this view that students' experiences in this environment might well lead them to expect the same level of protection at university and that the array of satisfaction surveys they encounter there may well re-force feelings of fragility and a desire to be safeguarded. Further evidence of these claims of vulnerability and protection are recalled by several reports over the past 10-15 years of student's deteriorating mental health and wellbeing. If these reports are correct, they bear little resemblance to the image of the empowered student which is promoted in 'the student experience' of Higher Education.

Through a critical analysis of the effects of the introduction of instrumentalisation in UK Higher Education (Naidoo and Williams 2005) and the move to therapeutic schooling (Ecclestone and Hayes 2019) it is concluded that the claims made that students would become empowered through 'the student experience' (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2009) do not appear to have occurred. Conversely, it is further argued that evidence from the reports of a deterioration in students psychological health over the past 10-15 years (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2017; UUK 2018; Baber *et al*. 2021) indicate that students may consider themselves to be less psychologically robust and autonomous than is the case suggested by the change in their role that is implied by the 'student experience' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2009). Overall, it is argued that the changes associated with the moves to therapeutic schooling and the instrumentalisation of Higher Education may not only have changed how students actually experience life at university, but also how they are now depicted as learners more broadly.

Chapter 3 The student experience and the move to a whole university approach to supporting student mental health and wellbeing.

3.1 Introduction

At the start of Chapter 2, it was argued that since the late 1990's there have been three educational developments that have contributed to changes in the student experience of Higher Education in the UK, two of which were critically analysed in the last chapter. This chapter examines the third development of a change in the way that UK universities support student mental health and wellbeing, which became their formally recognised policy in 2017 (Universities UK 2017). Following this documentary analysis, the researcher will further argue that not only have all three of these educational developments altered how students experience Higher Education, but also that they may be related to co-incidental research reports of a deterioration in their psychological outlook (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2017; UUK 2018; Baber *et al*. 2021). These critiques are also then summed up at the end of the chapter in order to help situate the thematically analysed data from the primary research conducted with 16 Higher Education careers advisers in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

This policy shift in the way that universities support their students' mental health and wellbeing concerns is described as a move away from one where university counselling services alone treated those who were experiencing distress, to an 'all,' 'whole' or 'holistic' approach which aimed to safeguard every student's mental health and wellbeing (Universities UK 2017). This change in approach which was published in 2017 (Universities UK 2017) was made in response to what was then viewed as a deterioration in students' emotional outlook (Storrie *et al* 2010; Thorley 2017). For example, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) stated that between 2006/7 and 2015/16, there were five times more UK-domiciled first-year students at Higher Education Institutions in the UK who reported a mental health condition to their university (Thorley 2017).

As this study draws on several reports which claim to evidence changes in student psychological health, section 3.2 offers a critical analysis of not only the

terms used to support the view that the student outlook has deteriorated, but also the method of data collection for most of these accounts. Section 3.2 also outlines the possible limitations of some of the factors that are usually cited as driving these changes in student mental health and wellbeing which precedes a critical analysis of the change in policy itself at 3.3.

3.2 Limitations of the data which is used to report a deterioration in student mental health and wellbeing.

Regarding the terms that are used in the research reports which convey the view that overall UK student psychological health has worsened, Barkham *et al*. (2019) argue that a failure to distinguish between issues of 'wellbeing' and those of 'mental health' in these accounts have hampered the development of a robust evidence base on which to understand what has actually changed in the student outlook (Barkham *et al*. 2019, p.352). According to Barkham *et al*. (2019) 'wellbeing' refers to the levels of resourcefulness that students have to cope with the challenges of university life, whilst 'mental health' issues refer to specific conditions such as depression, excessive worry, and anxiety which students feel they do not have the capacity to deal with (Barkham *et al*. 2019, p. 352). However, as all these symptoms are now blurred together under the term 'mental health and wellbeing,' students now treat and report every emotional concern as a 'mental health issue' or a 'mental health problem,' which makes it difficult to say with any confidence what changes have actually occurred in their outlook (Barkham *et al*. 2019; Hewitt 2019). This view that students tend to label all negative feelings regardless of intensity or duration as mental health issues, is also supported by Baber *et al*. (2021) whose investigation into how students experienced the transition to university also reported that feelings such as stress, panic, worry, and anger were all identified by them as 'mental health problems' (Baber *et al*. 2021, p. 6). These views of Barkham *et al*. (2019) and Baber *et al*. (2021) of the blurring of the distinctions between different symptoms, is further discussed at 3.3 in a critique of Thorley's (2017) 'continuum' approach to understanding psychological health, which also elides a wide range of emotional concerns with those that were once only associated with mental illness (Thorley 2017, p. 8).

Another possible impediment to a robust understanding of what these reports of a deterioration in the student outlook are actually revealing, is that most of the surveys which are conducted to gauge these changes invite students to self-report their concerns. In other words, given that mental health problems no longer need to be diagnosed by a clinician as self-diagnosis is now sufficient (Thorley 2017, p. 9), most of these reports contain evidence from students' own interpretations of their concerns. Moreover, although official figures of students who voluntarily disclosed a mental health condition to their university stood at 5.5% in 2020/21 and was seven times higher than a decade earlier, even these figures are much lower than those quoted by the many widely publicised accounts containing self-reports (Lewis and Bolton 2023). For example, in a 2022 survey by the mental health charity Student Minds, 57% of respondents self-reported a mental health issue and 27% said they had a diagnosed mental health condition (Student Minds 2023).

Given the regularity of these reports and media interest in them (Barkham *et al*. 2019), it is assumed that student mental health and wellbeing is worse than that of non-students of comparable age. This assumption is supported by the most recent statistics. For example, a 2022 National Health Service (NHS) report which surveyed the mental health of over 2,000 17–24-year-olds in England - which includes students and non-students - claimed that 22% 'probably' had a 'mental health disorder' (NHS 2022, p.1). A survey of 12,000 students from 147 universities, the biggest survey of its kind, found that 81% of students had experienced 'mental health difficulties' (Cibyl 2022, p.10). However, as the aforementioned caveats regarding definitions and self -diagnosis also apply to surveys of non-students, it is difficult to say with any conviction which group has poorer mental health. According to Tabor *et al*. (2021), the greater attention paid to reports about the deterioration of student mental health compared to other groups of the same age may be due to their relatively higher economic status which might also suggest that they have more entitlement to support (Tabor *et al*. 2021). It is also possible that as many students now pay tuition fees, these reports of their poorer emotional health are more likely to attract the attention of the media and parents as a way of criticising a perceived lack of support in return for their investment in Higher Education. This accusation that universities may be failing to support students with more serious psychological

concerns also raises the difficult issue of student suicide. According to Barkham *et al.* (2019), despite student suicides being lower than for all other sections of society, the media attention given to them is disproportionate to that of other groups. For example, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS 2022), not only was the overall rate of suicide in the general population significantly higher at 12.5 deaths per 100,000 compared with 3.9 deaths per 100,000 for students, but also among the general population aged under 20 and 21-24 it was 2.7 times higher than for those of the same age at university (Lewis and Bolton 2023). These figures may be yet another reason to caution against a literal take on what reports of poorer student mental health and wellbeing appear to be saying, and the possibility that such accounts may instead be reflecting a greater awareness amongst students and their parents of the potential harms to their emotional health from their university environment.

Despite these discrepancies, it is the evidence from these reports which is used to demonstrate what Baber *et al.*, refer to as the 'Student mental health crisis' (Baber *et al.,* 2021, p.1). On the one hand, it could be argued that as these reports refer mostly to students under the age of 25, which it is claimed is the period when most young people encounter the developmental challenges associated with both the transition to adulthood and also to the peak onset date for all mental health problems, they may not be of concern (Kessler *et al.* 2007; Hunt and Eisenberg 2010). However, a deeper analysis might disclose that up until these accounts of a deterioration in the student outlook began appearing, there was little difference between the reported occurrence of mental health problems in students and non-students in the under 25 age group (Hunt and Eisenberg 2010). Therefore, as the reported increase refers only to students, it is possible that its causes could be associated with the transition to university itself. However, as also noted by Baber *et al.* (2021), as the move into Higher Education was recognised as a stressful time for students long before the rise in the numbers of them reporting concerns, this cannot fully account for this development. The change in the fee regime, causing more students to worry about incurring high levels of debt, has also been cited as another possible cause of the growth in student distress, but three recent studies have shown that this may be less significant for student mental health than it was first thought to be (Richardson *et al.* 2015; Bleasdale and Humphrys 2018; McCloud and Bann 2019).

In addition, it is sometimes assumed that these reports of a rise in mental health problems in Higher Education is a result of more students coming to university from families that have never attended university before. However, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), between 2009/10, when reports of a rise in student concerns began, and 2019/20, this increase amounted to only 1.3% of students (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2010; Higher Education Statistics Agency 2021). Since the biggest increases in those attending universities from non-traditional backgrounds occurred when polytechnics were awarded university status in the early 1990's, which was also well before 2010 when these reports about deteriorating student psychological health began, it is unlikely that it is this factor that is driving the growth in concerns.

3.3 Critical analysis of the 'whole,' 'all' or 'holistic' approach to supporting student mental health and wellbeing.

One of the reasons given for universities changing their approach to managing student mental health and wellbeing in 2017, was the growth in numbers of undergraduates who were reporting mental health problems prior to that time (Thorley 2017). However, as there was also a 150% increase in students raising concerns between 2014/15 and 2018/19 (Hubble and Bolton 2020), it could also be argued that the formal change of approach itself may have had some bearing on this surge in numbers. Given that more undergraduate students were already raising emotional concerns prior to the implementation of the new approach, it is more likely that this rise may also be related to broader changes in how society now views mental health and mental illness which is also discussed later in this section. These wider social discourses will be evaluated together with the change to the 'all,' 'holistic' or 'whole university' approach and the developments which were critically analysed in Chapter 2.3 and 2.4 to demonstrate their possible impacts on the student experience.

The change in how universities manage their students' mental health and wellbeing was announced in a document called '#Step Change: Mentally healthy universities (Universities UK 2017).

> *'Discussions on mental health tend to focus on those experiencing mental illness who need care or support…. But we also have the opportunity to promote good mental health for the whole university population, improving the lives and outcomes of 2.3 million students….'*
>
> *(Universities UK 2017, p.8)*

And

> *'The whole university approach recommends that all aspects of university life promote and support student and staff mental health.'*
>
> *(Universities UK 2017, p.12)*

As these quotes demonstrate, the endorsed policy replacement consists of a move from one where only university counselling services discretely treated students who approached them citing concerns, to another where institutions as a whole - 'all aspects of university life' - promote the importance of student mental health and wellbeing and signpost to support. This endorsement of a 'whole university' strategy recommends that the entire way that a university operates now needs to be constructed around supporting student mental health and wellbeing. In practice, this change recommends that all staff-student interactions now need to be not only informed by the possible risks to student mental health and wellbeing, but also primed to recognise incidences of student distress and advise support (Caleb 2019).

This policy shift was also concurrent with wider social moves aimed at destigmatising mental illness. In the same year that the proposed move to a whole university approach was announced, royalty and famous sportsmen and women talked openly about their emotional struggles in an attempt to encourage the public to divulge their own (Booth 2017). These publicity campaigns were also replicated as a key approach of the new whole university policy to supporting student mental health and wellbeing and involved reminding students of possible risks they faced from university life. Unlike previously, most UK universities now host webpages and posters throughout their campuses which are dedicated to alerting students to the dangers of not getting enough sleep, failing to take study breaks, or not taking enough exercise. In addition, as also discussed in Chapter 2.4, according to the Times (Morgan-Bentley 2022) there is

now widespread use in UK universities of ‘trigger warnings’ (Hume 2016; Vatz 2016), which forewarn students of potentially harmful ideas which they are about to be exposed to in their reading and lectures. Furedi (2017, p.110) points to universities and student unions wide usage of the term ‘micro-aggressions’ which they use to refer to intentional and unintentional views that make some students feel uncomfortable and also of the growth in the number of ‘safe spaces’ where students can go to feel protected from ideas that they may find hurtful or where they can be protected from feeling bullied or harassed (Furedi 2017, p.70). Many student unions such as those at Edinburgh, (https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/about/policy/internal/safespaces), Aberdeen, (https://www.ausa.org.uk/resources/6045/Safe-Space-Policy/) and Imperial College London, (https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/your-union/policies/safe-space-policy) have now developed ‘safe space' policies which they promote on their websites. In addition, also unlike previously, most universities now deliver advice on staying safe to students via a safety app which guarantees protection and help 24/7. Although it could be argued that these apps and safety policies are positive as they re-assure students and their parents that their university is always concerned for their welfare, it also recalls the argument by Furedi (2001; 2017) and Haidt and Lukianoff (2018) that this promotion of possible harms to students at a time when they are safer and healthier than they ever were, may only serve a purpose of leaving them worried and anxious that being at university could be bad for them.

In relation to the view that students might mistake their feelings for mental illness, at the same time as universities were moving towards a whole university approach to managing student mental health and wellbeing, the view of what constitutes good and bad emotional health was also changing. In his study of student mental health and wellbeing in UK Higher Education, Thorley (2017) suggests that emotions which were previously thought of as normal impacts from university life should now be regarded in the same way as those which were previously only associated with mental illness. According to this view, stress and anxiety, which used to be treated as commonly experienced symptoms caused by everyday living, are now to be treated as on a par with mental illnesses such as bi-polar disorder and psychosis. Thorley (2017) further claims that mental health related symptoms do not require to be assessed and diagnosed by a

clinician but only meet a 'threshold for a diagnosis', which he does not disclose (Thorley 2017, p.9). Neither Thorley nor Student Minds (2019) which calls itself 'the universities mental health charity,' outline either the diagnosable symptoms or the threshold by which they should be measured. It is suggested that if students apply this schema to their everyday emotions, they may well be worried by many of them.

As noted, this change in how emotions are viewed is conveyed by Thorley (2017) and Student Minds (2019) through the application of the term 'continuum' to the full range of psychological outlooks.

> *'…mental health is something that is experienced by everyone, all of the time. It exists along a continuum and can, therefore, be positive or negative to different degrees…We are all somewhere on this continuum…where exactly we fall…' (Thorley 2017, p.8)*

According to the continuum view, regardless of our psychological state, we are all together on the same scale 'mental health' whereas previously, those diagnosed with mental illness would have been treated separately. By minimising the differences between mental ill health and wellness to a matter of 'degrees', the continuum idea suggests that many of what were treated as normal emotional impacts from our everyday experiences may now constitute something that is a more serious threat to our mental health. Although these notions about the elision of emotions are contested (Conrad 2005; Horwitz and Wakefield 2007), Thorley's views concur with those contained in the recommendations for universities to change to a whole university approach to student mental health and wellbeing which treats any negative emotion as potentially damaging to students and may convince them that they cannot cope without expert help.

This definition or re-definition of outlooks such as 'worried,' 'stressed' or 'anxious' as 'mental health' related issues, is associated with 'concept creep' (Haslam 2016, p.1) which is used to describe a process whereby formerly clinically bound psychological concepts confer meaning on dispositions that were once outside them. For example, the medical term 'disorder' has been expanded to include anxiety, which in 1980 was relabelled as a 'general anxiety disorder' by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) (Crocq 2017), and

in doing so rendered an emotion experienced by most students in the course of their studies as a medical condition. This medicalisation of human emotions is criticised by Horwitz and Wakefield (2007), who argue that emotions such as worry, anxiety and sadness are normal responses to human circumstances and are only pathological if there is a clinical detection of dysfunction. According to this view, what are today described as student mental health problems such as worry about getting a job or pre-exam nerves, are normal, and should not be diagnosed as disordered unless done so by a clinician. This medicalisation of normal emotions, where medical terms such as 'disorder' or 'syndrome' have been expanded to include them, is usually associated with moves to de-stigmatise mental illness (McLaughlin 2021), to ensure those who suffer from it do not feel ostracised from society.

However, other explanations also associate this medicalisation process with changing views of human frailty and resilience. According to Furedi (2017), nowadays humans are increasingly portrayed as increasingly fragile and at the mercy of their emotions which he refers to as 'the cultural script of vulnerability' (Furedi 2017, p.19). This view of vulnerability is reflected in education where students and pupils in schools are educated to give deference to their feelings (Ecclestone and Hayes 2019) which is also examined in Chapter 2.3. This focus on safeguarding feelings emphasizes to students and pupils their vulnerability to potential harms such as grappling with complex ideas or meeting essay deadlines which are medicalised through their communication in mental health language. In this view, what were previously thought of as normal stresses and strains from the exertions of studying at school or university, may now be treated as potentially harmful as they have been included in the medicalised category of 'mental health' which as noted, elides a whole range of normal impacts from life with what were previously clinically diagnosed psychological illnesses.

However, returning to the policy shift in student mental health and wellbeing itself, a critical analysis of the document advocating the change revealed that other than seeking to 'make mental health a strategic priority' and 'transform the university into a health setting' (Universities UK 2017, p.12), there is no mention either of how this alteration would actually reverse failing student resilience or how any improvement would be measured.

> *'Our shared vision is for UK universities to be places that promote mental health and wellbeing, enabling all students…to thrive and succeed to their best potential.'*
>
> *(Universities UK 2017, p.2)*

Conversely, as also noted at the start of this section, during the implementation period of the new approach, there were even more reports of a deterioration in student's psychological outlook. One of these, a UK parliament briefing paper on student mental health support in England, noted that between 2014/15 and 2018/19 there was an increase of 150% in students reporting mental health concerns to their university (Hubble and Bolton 2020). A similar report from the Office for Students (OfS), the independent body representing students in England and Wales, found that the percentage of UK students studying at English universities who reported a mental health condition to their institution increased from 1.4% in 20212/13 to 3.5% in 2017/18 (Office for Students 2019).

A quote from the foreword of a quantitative on-line survey of 37,500 students at 140 UK universities in 2018, after the introduction of the new approach, demonstrates how the blurring of the differences between terms used to describe student concerns may be hampering an accurate understanding of what has actually changed in the student outlook.

> *'About one in four students experiences a mental illness each year. Students may be at heightened risk for psychological difficulties due to the combination of factors that affect young people in general and university-specific triggers. The stressors that students confront in this period are not trivial – for many, going to university involves moving away from home the first time, finding new networks, forging new identities, being challenged intellectually, and dealing with new financial strains. As a society, we need to recognise the stress that students can be under and how this can affect their mental health.'*
>
> *(Pereira et al. 2019, p.4)*

This excerpt directly associates the changes that most students have always gone through when they move to university with mental illness (line one). Despite the possibility that making students aware that university life might harm them could encourage those with more severe psychological problems to now seek help, it is unlikely that this number amounts to a quarter of all students as suggested by this report. Even considering that those replying to the

survey self-selected to do so and are therefore unlikely to be representative of the whole student population, some might consider it somewhat irresponsible to publish statistics which imply that 25% of students are suffering from mental illness from the impacts of university life.

Despite these accounts of growing numbers of students who are not only reporting themselves to be unwell but also seeking support from university counselling services for their distress (Lightfoot 2018), there is some evidence that educational policymakers realise that these figures may not necessarily mean what they appear to say. In this regard, a quote by the Office for Students (OfS) which represents student affairs in England and Wales may be insightful:

> *'While there has undoubtedly been an increase in students seeking out help, this is not necessarily evidence that the current generation of young people (who make up the majority of entrants to higher education) is more prone to mental ill health.'*
>
> *(Office for Students 2019, p.2)*

This quote seems to indicate that the OfS may well be aware that the current policy, which encourages both openness about stress and anxiety and help seeking behaviour, may itself bear some responsibility for the widespread belief amongst students that they are unwell when they may not be. Despite this, the OfS, universities and all official bodies concerned with UK Higher Education continue to advocate for this approach. In other words, it appears that public bodies which are tasked with the guardianship of UK Higher Education, may be continuing to support an approach to student mental health and wellbeing which they partly acknowledge may be unintentionally harming some students.

However, it is also possible that, as intended, the new approach may have encouraged some students who previously would have been too self-conscious to seek help for more serious concerns to now do so. At the same time, it is also conceivable that the preventative nature of these policies, which problematises all negative symptoms, may be creating other problems which can make matters worse. In his historical and political analysis of the impacts of stigma, Mclaughlin (2021) argues that as awareness raising campaigns encourage those who are temporarily feeling low to view their problem in a medical way, this expands demand for overstretched NHS services which means that those who really need

support may not receive it early enough to prevent their condition deteriorating (McLaughlin 2021, p.73). Lightfoot (2018) also reported that this labelling of everything from exam stress to depression as a mental health problem had led to lengthening waiting times for university counselling services and concern that those with more serious conditions would not get help for a long time. This possible failure to effectively support those most in need also recalls Barkham *et al. (*2019) at 3.2 who claim that the approach of branding all negative emotions as potentially serious makes it exceedingly difficult to not only establish what has actually changed in students, but also how to provide more effective ways to support them. Whilst agreeing that these whole institutional preventative policies may encourage some of those with more concerning conditions to now seek help, Foulkes and Andrews (2023) contend that for others they can also lead to an increase in negative symptoms. According to this view, given that under these awareness raising approaches sufferers of symptoms associated with mild anxiety are more likely to think they have a mental health problem, this may lead them to experience not only an increase in genuine symptoms but also a change in their self-view and behaviour. In other words, once someone views themselves as having a mental health condition, this may lead them to avoid engaging with their usual experiences such as socialising or working in case it makes their condition worse (Foulkes and Andrews, 2023).

3.4 Conclusion and discussion

In informing the research enquiry of ways that university careers advisers may have adapted their practice to take account of changes in student mental health and wellbeing, this chapter and the previous one examined three education-based developments which it is argued have changed the student experience of Higher Education in the UK. It is envisaged that the combined critical review of these changes will provide context for the findings from the 16 qualitative interviews of Higher Education careers advisers in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

In a critical analysis of the impacts from the change to a whole institutional approach to supporting UK student emotional health, the researcher initially set out some possible limitations to the explanations that are given to account for their poorer psychological outlook. As most of the reports which cite a decline in student mental health and wellbeing not only blur the differences between mild

and severe concerns, but are also based on student self-reports, this makes it difficult to establish what has actually changed in their outlook, far less provide effective support for them (Barkham *et al*. 2019). In other words, a failure to distinguish between negative emotions from what were previously viewed as normal impacts from being at university and those requiring treatment by specialists has led students to report all symptoms as mental health problems. Given that these methodological flaws are also used to survey possible changes in the psychological health of the non-student population of the same age, it is likewise difficult to prove that student mental health and wellbeing is worse than that of others. It is further argued that the reported deterioration in the student mindset also cannot be fully explained by factors such as worry about debt and widening participation, but it is possible that as students often pay fees and are relatively more entitled than other social groups, then these accounts of their mounting distress may be attracting more attention to them. For example, the media attention given to student suicide, despite its incidence being lower than for all other sections of society, may be reflecting a raised awareness amongst parents of the potential emotional harms that their children face from their educational environment.

Despite their limitations, it was these reports citing an on-going decline in the student emotional outlook which prompted the change in how universities support their mental health and wellbeing. In aiming to prevent a further deterioration in students, these whole institutional approaches require universities to reorientate their entire operation around protecting them. In practice, this change recommends that all staff-student interactions now need to be not only informed by the possible risks to student mental health and wellbeing from university life, but also primed to recognise incidences of distress and how to advise support (Caleb 2019). Moreover, the introduction of these preventative strategies in Higher Education were accompanied not only by safety-based approaches such as trigger warnings and safety apps which remind students of risks to them, but also wider social moves to de-stigmatise mental illness. As reports of poorer student mental health and wellbeing appeared to worsen after the introduction of the new all institutional policy (Office for Students 2019; Pereira *et al*. 2019; Hubble and Bolton 2020), it is argued that its introduction itself may have exacerbated the problem that it was established to

improve. In other words, given that the preventative nature of this policy not only treats all emotional concerns regardless of severity as a potential mental health problem, but also urges openness about them, this could be encouraging more students to report themselves to be poorly. Despite some recognition by Higher Education policy makers of this unintentional outcome from the change to a whole institutional approach in universities, there has as yet been no call for its review. Although the preventative nature of this strategy may have encouraged some of those who were previously too ashamed to ask for help to now do so, it is also possible that as this approach problematises all negative emotions, it has lengthened waiting times which may result in delays for those in the greatest need receiving timeous support (McLaughlin 2021; Lightfoot 2018). Others argue that by labelling all negative emotions as potentially concerning, this may not only lead some to develop further genuine symptoms, but also change their self-view and usual behaviour in order to avoid a worsening of their condition (Foulkes and Andrews 2023).

It is further argued that this failure to distinguish between more severe mental health concerns and those associated with normal impacts from university life (Barkham *et al*. 2019; Baber *et al*. 2021) are also reflected in wider discourses which elide emotions from what were previously considered diagnosable mental illnesses with everyday stress and anxiety. This elision, which is also characterised as the 'continuum' approach to mental health (Thorley 2017) and where symptoms no longer require to be diagnosed, is also associated with 'concept creep' (Haslam, 2016, p.1) or the 'medicalisation' of formerly everyday emotions (Conrad 2005) which it is also argued are a result of changing views of human frailty and resilience (Furedi 2004; 2006). It is further claimed that these developments in how psychological symptoms are viewed may also have impacted the previously mentioned changes in how children are socialised (Furedi 2001) and taught to protect their feelings (Ecclestone and Hayes 2019). Therefore, it may not only be the whole-university approach to treating mental health and wellbeing alone which could account for the marked growth in students reporting concerns, but also wider changes in how society views emotions together with the impacts from therapeutic schooling where children are taught to privilege their feelings over rational thinking. When this sense of increased fragility in students is added to by views of them as needing

protection from overburdening debt, diminishing career prospects and possibly increasingly dependent on support from their lecturers, it is perhaps unsurprising that more of them consider themselves to have mental health concerns.

Overall, it is concluded that the combined impacts from the move to therapeutic based schooling, instrumentalised Higher Education, and the change in how universities support mental health and wellbeing as well as wider changes in how we view emotions, has altered the student experience from that of 5-10 or more years ago. Moreover, collectively these impacts on students may also be related to co-incident research reports of an ongoing deterioration in their psychological outlook (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2017; UUK 2018; Baber *et al*. 2021).

It is envisaged that these assertions will provide a vantage point from which the thematically analysed data from the qualitative interviews of 16 Higher Education careers advisers can be critically examined in Chapters 6,7 and 8.

Chapter 4 The evolution of university careers guidance and its response to changes in student mental health and wellbeing.

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to explore the ways that reported changes in student mental health and wellbeing (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2017; Baber *et al*. 2021) may have influenced the purpose and practice of university careers guidance. In the previous two chapters, it was argued that the combined impacts from not only the integration of therapeutic-based schooling approaches and instrumentalised Higher Education, but also the change in how universities support mental health and wellbeing may have influenced the ways students experience university differently from those of previous generations. Moreover, it is further argued that these changes to the student experience may also have influenced the reported deterioration in their psychological health itself. In order to identify the ways that these developments may have impacted careers adviser practice, this chapter has two objectives. Firstly, the analysis aims to examine the influence of key social, economic, and political factors on the development of university careers guidance practice. Secondly the investigation seeks to locate and analyse which elements of this practice may be significant in assisting careers advisers to support poorer student mental health and wellbeing.

The chapter begins by documenting the emergence of university careers guidance practice, which is then followed by an analysis of the reasons for its initial alignment and consequent separation from student counselling. Thereafter, the investigation critically analyses the influence of the economic narratives of the late twentieth century on not only university careers guidance, but also the professional ethics of careers advisers themselves. Finally, the chapter examines ways that university careers advisers may have sought to manage their guidance practice amid changes in how UK Higher Educational Institutions now support student mental health and wellbeing.

4.2 The early history of university careers guidance and the role of counselling in its formation.

According to The Heyworth Report of 1964, early university careers services were first offered at Oxford around 1892 and were known then as University Appointments Boards (Heyworth 1964). As up until well into the 20th century it was only those who were male and from an upper-class background who attended university (Watts *et al.* 1996, p. 128), the role of these boards was confined to setting up selection interviews for positions which were confined to high-ranking roles in the forces, the Clergy, education, and the Civil Service. Also, the staff of these Appointments Boards were themselves dons or at least had attended university and therefore were also entirely male and from the ruling classes whose power then, and arguably now, is still maintained through the occupations it inhabits. Furthermore, as the career routes for many of these students involved their direct recruitment into typically high ranking or influential roles in society and politics, the role of these first careers advisers was administrative in nature. According to Abbott (2014), the question of what a person's career should be is relatively recent, emerging only with the growth in social mobility in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Before this, a person's profession or job was mainly designated by their social status and was therefore not one of choice. The role of the original university careers service was therefore limited, not only by the narrowness of the social strata entitled to a university education at this time, but also the small range of roles that social convention required upper class men to pursue. By the mid -1950s the influence of these Appointments Boards had grown to cover all universities, and their services included not only notifying students of job vacancies and arranging selection interviews for them, but also providing careers information and advisory consultations with staff (Heyworth 1964). Although some of the personnel in the Appointments Boards had previous experience in business and the professions, few of them had any training in careers advising (Heyworth 1964, p.10). Moreover, by the 1960's, the growth in the number of UK universities from 12 in 1900 to 40 in 1966, also signified the emergence of a new kind of institution of Higher Education known as 'red brick' (Sanderson 2002). Unlike the traditional 'ancient' universities which concentrated on teaching the Classics, these new institutions focused more on educating students in the technologies of the time. The expansion of these kinds of universities reflected

the UK's growing need for a technically and scientifically educated workforce to support the country's economic expansion. At the same time, this change signalled that universities were now not only purposed by the State to educate the ruling class but also to support the UK's economy which opened up a university degree to those from a wider range of social backgrounds and also to women. This development prompted a change in the approach of the University Appointments Boards because as more students entered universities whose career destination was less likely to be predicted by their social class or gender, this also meant there was more choice and uncertainty regarding their selection of careers, making the existing structure of these boards less fit for purpose. In other words, as social mobility grew, personal choice became more a feature of occupational preference (Abbott 2014). At the same time, some university careers advisers began to appreciate that this expansion in the range of career choices for students meant that in order to advise them more effectively, they needed to do more than administer job interviews and occupational information (Newsome *et al*. 1975).

According to Watts (1996), it was this interaction between the widening of the UK student's social background, the growth in the type and number of universities and the then rising popularity of counselling in the 1960's and 70's, which helped to formalise the role of the university careers adviser. In illustration of this, Thorne (1985) notes that the first student counselling service in a British University was in 1963 at Keele and was called 'The Appointments and Counselling Service', as it not only supported students with personal problems but also offered them careers advice (Thorne 1985). According to Watts (1996), this combination may have been effective as not only did it support the idea that a student's choice of career was a vital strand in their overall personal development, but also because the staff in this service tended to have more skills which could support students who were confused or uncertain about their futures. Although the Keele model was not universally emulated in UK universities where careers and counselling support became separate services, at the time it began to influence the way in which Higher Education careers services developed overall (Watts 1996). Even though some careers advisory staff were reluctant to get involved in assisting with students' personal problems, there was also a recognition of the limits of offering them

information and advice about jobs on its own, especially to those who were undecided or unsure about their future careers (Kirkland 1988).

These developments culminated in 1971 with the establishment of the Standing Conference for the Advancement of Counselling (SCAC) which aimed to bring together key organisations in the field of advising including those offering careers advice. The domination of SCAC by those who wished to be professionally recognised as counsellors was confirmed when in 1976 it became the British Association of Counselling. At the same time, some university careers advisers launched the Standing Conference for University Appointments Services (SCUAS), which was the first national body that identified the need for university careers advisers to be professionally trained in order to guide growing numbers of students who not only lacked career direction, but often also self-awareness of the personal values and interests required to support their occupational choices. In 1977, the SCUAS became the professional body for university careers advisers, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), with a key objective of supporting the professional training of its members which by 2020 numbered 3369 in 149 UK university careers services. Therefore, it was a debate over the question of the role of counselling in careers guidance which became the catalyst for the establishment of the first professional body for university careers advisers. Today, most universities require careers advisers who wish to work in their careers services to hold a post graduate diploma in careers guidance and there are currently seven universities which offer this qualification. Although their titles vary, all seven courses have career counselling as a central feature of their training for the profession in addition to career development theory, career learning and contemporary guidance practice. All careers guidance courses offer students teaching in not only the basic counselling techniques of structuring one-to-one careers guidance appointments, contracting and empathising, but also professional ethics such as suspending personal judgement when advising students and acting in their interests alone. Moreover, all these courses require trainee careers advisers to undergo significant amounts of supervised practice before they can qualify as practitioners. This training, which is informed by aspects of Roger's non-directive counselling approach (Rogers 1942), teaches careers advisers to facilitate the process of students making autonomous decisions about their

career choices. The emphasis on ‘non-directive’ speaks to the careers adviser’s non-judgemental and facilitative role in helping students feel at ease with imparting information about themselves which might support their careers choices. This use of counselling techniques differs from that of student counsellors who mostly employ them directly with students in order to help them alleviate personal difficulties rather than remove professional uncertainties.

4.3 Changes in UK labour markets and government policy impacting university careers guidance.

In seeking to identify which aspects of university careers guidance practice best assist its practitioners to support reported changes in student psychological health, it is possible that the economic and policy changes of the late twentieth century influenced not only how careers advisers practised, but also their professional ethics.

From the 1970s onwards, the decline of manufacturing as society’s predominant mode of economic production was associated with the term ‘post-industrial’ (Bell 1973), where knowledge or information replaced products as society’s core commodity (Lyotard 1984). According to Watts and Watts (1997), this change to a knowledge- based society is caused by the speed of technological change and globalisation which forces companies to continually drive down costs and restructure in order to stay competitive. As further argued by Collin and Watts (1996), this move to treating knowledge as a commodity which can be bought and sold in the same way as other products places more responsibility on individual workers themselves. In other words, as workers now own society’s key product, not only do they now bear responsibility for their own job security and career development, but also for the prospects of the economy itself (Collin and Watts 1996). The onus is now on individual members of society, including students, to ensure they gain the new skills and knowledge to not only support their ongoing individual career prospects, but also the country’s economic success. According to Hillage and Pollard (1998), the term which is commonly used to describe this change of emphasis in responsibility is ‘employability,’ which means not only being able to get a job but now also ‘maintain

employment and obtain new employment if required' (Hillage and Pollard 1998, p.1).

At the same time that a knowledge-based economy was now replacing manufactured products as the source of economic prosperity, evidence was also mounting about the economic benefits of careers guidance. According to Killeen *et al.* (1992), in 1989 the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) argued that improved careers education and guidance was essential to ensure the development of national skills which it further claimed are vital in driving improvements in the economy. Watts (2013) also contends that careers guidance enhances the workings of the labour market by ensuring those in it have the support they need to ensure that their decisions are well-informed. In accordance with these views, the Education Act of 1997 made the teaching of the basic principles of career planning a mandatory part of the school curriculum (Department for Education and Science, 1997).

This move to a focus on the importance of individual employability driving not only career prospects and job security but the economy too, is also apparent in the changing ethos of British universities at the time. According to Schuster *et al.* (2006), in the late 1990's and early 21st century, Higher Education in the West underwent a shift to a neo liberal agenda, which casts the State as instrumental in creating individuals who are enterprising and competitive. This is a marked change from classical liberalism which characterises the State as something from which the individual seeks freedom. According to Purcell *et al.* (2004), this change in relationship was denoted at this time by Higher Education moving away from the liberal ideal of valuing education for its own sake as a cultural good, to that of an economic resource which the State holds responsible for maximising the UK's industrial performance. It is possible that Charles Clarke, the then UK Government Education Secretary, was indicating this change when in the 2003 government White Paper, 'The Future of Higher Education', he wrote that the purpose of UK Higher Education should now be about harnessing knowledge to wealth creation (Clarke 2003). Also at this time, some argued that the British Government had changed its view of the purpose of the university from one of it as primarily a public service to another which saw it as more of an investment from which they expected a return. Commenting on this change, Cave (1997) points to the introduction of university performance indicators and

league tables as a sign of the expectation that Higher Education should now deliver evidence of their effective use of public money. According to Morrissey (2015), these new State levied indicators may compel academics to mediate their personal teaching and research objectives with those of their institutions. It is also possible that university careers advisers are similarly mindful of the employment destinations of students from their institution, which as noted in Chapter 2.4, have been publicised in league tables for prospective students and their parents since 1992. It is probable that it is not only governments who now expect a return on their investment in Higher Education in terms of a highly skilled workforce for an improved economy, but also parents and students too. Furthermore, these indicators, which also aimed to create competition between universities, were among some of the recommendations of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in 1997 which was led by Sir Ron Dearing (Dearing 1997). This review called for increased funding for universities, which was one reason for the introduction of tuition fees for students entering Higher Education in some parts of the UK that were first introduced by the Labour Government in 1998. Although tuition fees were later abolished in Scotland, the principle of private funding for Higher Education had been established and with it the expectation of a return for those who made an investment in it.

This sea change in the ethos of UK Higher Education is also reflected in the title of the Dearing Report of 1997, 'Higher Education in a Learning Society', which is also discussed in Chapter 2.4. For Dearing and British governments of the 1990's, Higher Education was no longer associated purely with under-graduate students acquiring knowledge for its own sake, but now also with ensuring they were equipped with skills not just for employment but for 'lifelong learning' (Dearing 1997, 9.18). As also noted in Chapter 2.4, previous to this time, universities were not in the main held responsible for equipping students with skills to support them getting employment or acquiring any other benefit apart from knowledge, which was then viewed as a public good in and of itself (Williams 2012). It is further suggested that this change in the ethos of UK Higher education in the 1990's may also have impacted university careers services in two ways. Firstly, it is possible that it directed careers advisers to now not only guide individual student careers prospects, but also to ensure that they are

equipped with skills which as well as supporting their employability, enabled them to keep learning throughout life. Secondly, and as explored in section 4.3.2, it is also suggested that this amendment to the purpose of UK Higher Education may have impacted the professional ethics of their careers advisers themselves, as it might risk them having to place the interests of their employer, the university, ahead of those of students.

4.3.1 The move to employability, careers education and Graduate Attributes.

This change in the ethos of universities from one that was associated with the transmission of knowledge for its own sake, to another which as argued in Chapter 2.4 also requires them to also play a more instrumentalist role now, is also conveyed by the emergence of the term 'careers education' (Dearing 1997, 8.44). This term was also endorsed by the Harris Report of 2001 which as was also noted in Chapter 2.4, recommended that Higher Education careers services worked in partnership with academics to embed employability based outcomes into the university curriculum (Harris 2001). Therefore, the requirement for university careers services to alter their approach to include now also 'careers education' was considered a key practice in ensuring that students are equipped with career management and development skills to ensure their employability (Harris 2001).

> *'Higher Education Careers Services therefore need to be supported in their mission to equip each student with the skills and abilities to manage not only the initial transition from education to employment but also his or her lifelong learning and career development'*
>
> *(Harris 2001, p.153).*

Before this, the Dearing Report (1997), the government inquiry into Higher Education, also stressed the importance of skills development for students albeit not only for their employment, but also their ability to learn throughout life.

> *'… because of the importance we place on creating a learning society at a time when much specific knowledge will quickly become obsolete, those leaving. Higher Education will need to understand how to learn and how to manage their own learning and recognise that the process continues throughout life.'*

(Dearing 1997, 9.18).

Dearing not only recommended that universities should teach skills which were 'relevant throughout life, not simply in employment' (Dearing 1997, 9.18), but also that University Careers Services should be integrated 'more fully into academic affairs' and 'reviewed periodically by the Quality Assurance Agency' (Dearing 1997, 8.11). This inclusion of skills which were for 'life', rather than only to ensure students gained quality employment, implies that universities and their careers services were tasked with producing graduates with qualities to sustain them in wider areas of their lives. This association of university careers services with ensuring graduates gained skills which may be applied more widely than for gaining and changing jobs may be related to these competencies becoming known as Graduate Attributes (Barrie 2007), which is further explored later in this section. In the meantime, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Code of Practice for Careers Education, Information and Guidance (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2010) was written to take account of some of the changes recommended by Dearing. This statement of good practice reinforced the requirement for university careers services to help produce graduates who were equipped to meet the fluctuating demands of the employment market. This move to a focus on the importance of employability skills changed the emphasis of university careers adviser practice from one which featured mainly one-to-one careers guidance on its own, to another which now also included work with groups and classes of students teaching them how to manage and develop their careers, otherwise known as careers education (Watts 2006). In practice this involved careers advisers spending growing amounts of their time instructing larger groups of students in how to: reflect on their values and abilities; research and investigate relevant careers opportunities; make decisions through choosing between relevant opportunities and learn how to present their abilities and skills in CVs, applications forms and in interview to make successful transitions into jobs. In other words, the implication of this new relationship between individual graduate job success and economic prosperity meant that university careers advisers were now not only responsible for continuing to guide individual students in their occupational choices, but also tasked with ensuring that they were equipped with the employability skills needed to support society's wealth.

However, as mentioned earlier, Dearing's emphasis on universities role as now mostly concerned with equipping students with skills that are 'relevant throughout life, not simply in employment' (Dearing 1997, 9.18), is also reflected in later discussions regarding the range of attributes that students were thought to acquire from their degree. In relation to this view, according to Gunn *et al.* (2010), employability is only one part of a graduate's attributes, and as such they are a much broader range of qualities.

> *'Employability is about the development of a range of attributes and skills at university that can be transferred into situations beyond university study. Careers is a subset of employability. The graduate attributes agenda incorporates the employability agenda.'*
>
> *(Gunn et al. 2010, p.1).*

Gunn's interpretation is somewhat supported by Bowden *et al.* (2000) who describes Graduate Attributes as:

> *'…the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students would desirably develop during their time at the institution and, consequently, shape the contribution they are able to make to their profession and as a citizen.'*
>
> *(Bowden et al. 2000, p. 1).*

Other views, such as those of Haigh and Clifford (2011), argue that the traditional attributes of graduates required by employers are those that are concerned with communicating well, teamwork, problem solving and planning but also that there was a need to add elements which were internal to the student themselves such as those concerned with personal development and wellbeing. These views may suggest that universities need to be concerned not just about students gaining academic and employability skills, but also with their broader sense of self and personal development. Furthermore, according to Yorke and Harvey (2005), accounts of employability almost always contain 'interpersonal skills' and this involves what has come to be known as 'Emotional Intelligence' (Salovey and Mayer 1990; Goleman 1995) or EI which includes appreciating the perspectives and concerns of others and understanding how to interact effectively in numerous settings.

This inclusion of 'interpersonal' in employability-based skills and later Graduate Attributes, may also be related to the then recent changes made to the school curriculum in the early 21st century which were critically analysed in Chapter 2.3. As also discussed in Chapter 2.3, the growth in the popularity of EI at the time was associated with a change in the understanding of what aspects constituted intelligence. Where once the emotions were considered to be a barrier or impediment to rational thought, a paradigm was emerging which suggested that rationality was better understood as a product of the management of emotions which were now being included in models of Graduate Attributes. This idea that frameworks of Graduates Attributes should now include broader outcomes from a degree than those associated with academic qualities and employability on their own, may be supported by other views. According to Hill *et al*. (2016), models of Graduate Attributes broadly fall into one of two categories containing either skills such as critical thinking, research and enquiry and digital literacy that develop from academic work, or those of a more personal nature such as self-confidence, interpersonal skills and moral and ethical responsibility that are acquired from the broader university experience (Hill *et al*. 2016, p. 156). Previously, it would be expected that a student would gain those competencies in Hill's *et al.'s* (2016) 'academic work' group from their studies, but not necessarily those of a more personal nature. Furthermore, although there is little evidence of a consensus about a generic set of qualities that all graduates achieve as a result of being at university (Osmani *et al*. 2015), where models of Graduate Attributes differ from those concerned with employability alone, it is in their inclusion of aspects which are concerned with a graduate's personal and interpersonal development. In a study described by the authors as '…what we believe is the first systematic mapping of the graduate attributes as publicised by UK universities.', Wong *et al*. (2022) suggests four categories comprising the main qualities that a student can expect to have learned on graduation: self-awareness & lifelong learning, employability & professional development, global citizenship & engagement, and academic & research literacy (Wong *et al*. 2022, p.1340-1341). The authors further claim that amongst universities who published their Graduate Attributes, the most popular of these four categories was 'self-awareness and lifelong learning' which contained 'emotional intelligence' defined as 'a graduate's ability to identify and manage their emotional responses to their environments' (Wong *et al*. 2022,

p. 1344). This popularity of the idea that a graduate's future success might be contingent on their ability to manage their personal feelings suggests that, in the same way that schools integrated therapeutic based curricula as was discussed in Chapter 2.3, universities may have also adopted the notion that intelligence is now emotion dependent. Moreover, according to Jameson *et al.* (2016), employers also favour graduates who can demonstrate high levels of Emotional Intelligence, which is further supported by Harvey *et al.* (1997), who argue that personal qualities may heavily influence a graduate's ability to gain, maintain and change jobs if necessary. Whether these Graduate Attributes are referred to as Emotional Intelligence or personal skills, their development demonstrates that university staff, including careers advisers, are now expected to produce graduates who are not only highly educated and employable, but also in the possession of well-developed interpersonal skills. This expectation of staff is often also notified to students in the learning outcomes of their academic modules which state what they are expected to be able to do by the end of their course of study.

4.3.2 The impact on university careers advisers' professional ethics.

The second possible impact of these developments which widen the purpose of universities concerns how it might threaten the professional ethics of careers advisers themselves. Now that institutions of Higher Education are being held accountable by performance indicators and student satisfaction surveys, this may also impact the accountability of careers advisers who as well as advising students about careers are now also with academics expected to facilitate the development of Graduate Attributes and employability-based skills (Dearing 1997; Harris 2001). According to their professional ethics and to the missions of university careers services, careers advisers are accountable to students, undertaking to act in their interests alone. Now that governments require universities to have their performance measured in return for public and private investment, careers advisers may also have to take these into account when advising students.

The aforementioned Harris Report (Harris 2001) entitled 'Developing Modern HE Careers Services' contained 41 recommendations (Harris 2001, p.6) of what the

Government considered to be good practice for university careers services. These proposals were in line with the shift to the focus on careers services enhancing student employability, rather than as previously, guiding them in choosing a career. However, the report also differs from two previous reviews of university careers services in another way. Both these reviews, Heyworth (1964) which was commissioned by the University Grants Committee (UGC), and that of Watts (1997), which was commissioned by The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), located the student as the central beneficiary of their recommendations for careers services. The Harris Report departed from this as it presented the primary role of careers services as ensuring their institutions remained competitive by helping them produce the graduates required by employers. Although the Harris report maintained that students were still primary stakeholders of UK Higher Education, this was now due to them being the beneficiaries of universities providing employers with the kinds of graduates that they needed to expand the economy, rather than in and of themselves. These developments denoted a discernible change of emphasis of the expectations made of the university careers adviser. Where previously they were expected to guide the individual student to review their individual career choices, now they are also viewed as instrumental in equipping students with skills to compete effectively for jobs to advantage the performance of their university in league tables. It is possible that this change effectively harnesses the work of university careers advisers away from their mission to support individual student's careers choices, regardless of the objectives of their employer, towards mainly ensuring that they gained graduate level jobs and wider Graduate Attributes.

This conflict between the purpose of Higher Education and the professional ethics of university careers advisers may be reflected in the role they are now expected to play. According to Thambar (2016), the concept of employability does not encompass the capacity to make good career decisions, support for which was considered to be the primary skill of careers advisers. In other words, whereas one-to-one careers guidance supports individual students to make meaningful employment choices, facilitating skills or Graduate Attributes is aimed at maximising their ability to be recruited into unspecified types of job which may be compatible with augmenting institutional employment

performance indicators. These indicators do not measure careers adviser performance in assisting students to get the careers that they want or might suit them, only those that meet the criteria which are external to student themselves. Despite this change in what is expected of them, most university careers services have maintained their original mission which is primarily to support individual students to achieve their personal career goals, regardless of the requirements of their universities to achieve competitive graduate destination scores. In practice this means that the mission statement of the careers services of the universities of Edinburgh, Brighton and West of Scotland are typical of most of those published on their websites.

The University of Edinburgh

> *'We aim to inspire and empower every University of Edinburgh student to be the best they can be, to fully develop their potential and to achieve satisfying and rewarding futures.'*
> *https://www.ed.ac.uk/careers/about-us/what-we-do (The University of Edinburgh Careers Service 2023)*

The University of Brighton

> *'Our mission is 'To empower our students to gain the confidence, knowledge, and skills to shape their future careers and employability and make a difference in the world.'*
> *https://www.brighton.ac.uk/careers/index.aspx (The University of Brighton Careers Service 2023)*

University of the Warwick

> *'Here to help you achieve your vision of career success.*
> *https://warwick.ac.uk/services/careers/ (The University of Warwick Careers Service 2023)*

In addition to retaining their mission to support individual student career choices, the training required to qualify as a careers adviser continues to stipulate that the role is governed by the professional code of impartiality (AGCAS 2022). This regulation means that careers advisers are required to put the interests of the student first before all other interested parties, which would include universities themselves. However, as careers advisers cannot ignore the objectives of the universities who employ them, this means that it is more than likely that most of them have adopted a hybrid approach to their practice. In

other words, it is likely that practitioners continue to put the interests of students first whilst also trying to keep faith with their institutions' objectives for employability and Graduate Attributes.

However, it is also arguable that continuing to support individual student interests at the same time as meeting institutional employability targets has created challenges for many university careers advisers. In order to meet both these objectives, practitioners are not only continuing to deliver one-to- one careers guidance appointments but also instruction to groups and classes of students on developing skills to navigate the labour market (Bradley *et al.* 2021). In an effort to offer individual support to more students, most careers services have shortened the length of one-to-one careers guidance appointments (Watts 2006). However, as in 2021 there were approximately 3,369 Higher Education careers advisers (AGCAS 2023) and 2.8 million students (Bolton 2022) in the UK, it is unlikely that every student who might benefit from an individual consultation with a careers adviser will be able to secure one.

Although the missions of Higher Education Institutions and those of their careers advisers may at times be aligned, there are some occasions where these diverge from each other. For example, it is common for students to request support from their university careers service when they are considering whether to discontinue with their courses or not. In these cases, the careers adviser is acutely aware that their institution is, unlike previously, tasked with government levied performance indicators on rates of student retention (Pugh *et al.* 2005), at the same time as feeling bound by their professional ethics to act in the student's best interests. In addition, many students, sometimes also against the interests of their parents and now and then their academic advisers, do not wish to strive for the highly competitive graduate level jobs which support their institution's graduate destination targets. In such cases, careers advisers will usually support the outcome which, based on their professional opinion, is in the best interests of the student rather than one which might fit the formal expectations of their university.

4.4 Adaptations that university careers advisers have made to their practice in response to changes in how UK Higher Educational Institutions manage poorer student mental health and wellbeing.

As outlined in the previous section, since the early 21st century, university careers services have been developing hybrid models of service delivery which support both the changed ethos of universities towards equipping students with skills for employability and broader life, whilst at the same time staying true to their original mission to guide the career choices of individual students. At the same time as these models were being developed, there have been frequent reports of a deterioration in student mental health and wellbeing (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2010; UUK 2018; *Baber et al* 2021). There are several reasons offered for these accounts of increased fragility in students. According to Twenge (2017), technological innovation, but particularly social media, tends to cause or inflate student anxiety and depression. Others such as Choonara (2019) and Donald *et al*. (2018), suggest that students feel more economically insecure due to the significant increase in the student population (Bolton 2022), and the resulting competition for jobs (Minocha *et al*. 2017) places pressure on them to gain good grades and skills whilst at university which in turn makes them more anxious. In addition, as argued by Haidt and Lukianoff (2018) in Chapter 2.4, it is also possible that changes in how the young are socialised is impacting student resilience. According to Furedi (2017) and Ecclestone and Hayes (2019), moves towards a therapeutically based curriculum, where pupils are taught to be overconcerned with their feelings, is one of the main causes of more students reporting that they have poor psychological health. Cant (2018) suggests that the widening of access to Higher Education to groups whose families have no previous experience of university means that these groups may struggle with the academic and non-academic demands of life there, although most institutions now offer all students instruction in academic study and writing to compensate for these shortcomings. Finally, Furedi (2017) argues that students reporting themselves as more anxious and stressed is the result of long-term trends which have encouraged humans to view themselves not as robust and capable as in previous years, but fragile and in need of protection by the state and other institutions such as schools and universities. These accounts of a decline in student psychological health have led to the publication of several reports which

conclude in common the need for universities to abandon policies where only student counselling services treated individual students who approached them, in favour of a preventative based strategy where the risks associated with poor mental health and wellbeing are promoted to all students (Williams *et al*. 2015; Seldon and Martin 2017; Thorley 2017). This new approach is referred to as a 'whole,' 'all' or 'holistic' strategy which was implemented on the assumption that by alerting all students to the possible dangers to their mental health and wellbeing, this also may avert its further deterioration (Thorley 2017; Barden 2019). However, as also argued in Chapter 3.3, as this approach is preventative in nature, its implementation requires staff in all university departments to be vigilant for signs of student distress. In relation to university careers advisers, an investigation of how this policy impacts their interactions with students requires a critical analysis of the ways that they have adapted elements of their existing expertise in managing their careers guidance practice.

In response to universities moving to a holistic approach towards supporting student psychological health, many careers services have been co-located with other student services including those, such as counselling, which are most clearly associated with student mental health. Sometimes this siting of careers services with other student facing departments also involves all such services being re-named as wellbeing- based services (Williams *et al*. 2015). In addition to these alterations, according to AGCAS, the professional body for university careers advisers, some practitioners are utilising their basic training in counselling techniques to improve students emotional outlook before they can consider their career prospects (AGCAS 2017). In other words, it is possible that university careers advisers have utilised their training in therapy-based approaches not only to prepare students to discuss their career ideas but now also to improve their emotional outlook and confidence. For example, according to AGCAS (2017), many university careers advisers now offer students advice on how to build their confidence and resilience in preparation for applying for jobs. In order to boost their sense of self-belief, it is common for practitioners to use exercises which help students identify their personal strengths. In relation to this practice, Snyder *et al*. (2003) and Hass (2018) argue that the act of naming and labelling a positive characteristic sends a positive message to those in one -to -one consultations. Furthermore, according to Yates (2022), as occupational

choices tend to capitalise on available assets and resources, the Identification of a student's strengths before providing careers guidance may well help them to make decisions. Furthermore, other popular approaches aimed at improving a student's mindset before job-hunting include workshops which introduce students to Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness techniques which demonstrate to them how their feelings may impact their thoughts and their behaviour.

In addition, many university careers advisers now employ coaching techniques in their practice (Frigerio and Rix 2021; Yates 2022). Unlike careers guidance which advises students about how their personal values and interests may suggest suitable career choices, coaching is used to improve a person's effectiveness in something they want to succeed at. Therefore, in coaching, as the practitioner guides the coachee to be aware of how their thoughts and emotional reactions might impede such success, their role is to enable the student to feel empowered so that they can act (Whitemore 2002). Yates (2022) draws attention to the cross over points between careers coaching and careers guidance by arguing that both practices are based on a presumption that the student is aiming to reach their potential. However, whereas careers guidance assumes that the student is immediately ready to engage with making choices and decisions associated with their career prospects, coaching recognises that they require additional support beforehand. When adopting coaching techniques, the careers adviser is aiming to reinforce positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviour in students as a pretext to embarking on reviewing their career prospects, applying for jobs, or attending interviews. Like careers advisers, the coach may use counselling-based techniques at the outset of the appointment to encourage the student to open up to ideas, but unlike them, they do not offer a range of advice on how values, skills, and qualities match occupations or on different approaches to job hunting. According to Frigerio and Rix (2021), careers advisers typically practice 'careers coaching' which they argue is a hybrid of careers guidance and coaching (Frigerio and Rix 2021, p.32). This means that most careers advisers' appointments with students now involve elements of both practices, with the coaching elements consisting of cognitive behavioural approaches to address motivational barriers to change (Frigerio and Rix 2021, p.36). These new models which involve elements of coaching assume that the

student's psychological wellbeing requires boosting before they can make occupational choices, identify suitable opportunities which match their personal values, qualities, and experience, prepare CVs and applications, and develop the skills required to compete effectively at job interviews. In other words, for some students in careers guidance appointments, career planning and careers related decision making may come second to improving their confidence or emotional outlook (AGCAS 2017).

4.5 Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this thesis is to explore the ways that reported changes in student mental health and wellbeing (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2010; UUK 2018; Baber *et al*. 2021) may have influenced the purpose and practice of university careers guidance. Towards this objective, this chapter reviewed the historical evolution of university careers guidance and critically analysed the impact of key social, economic, and political influences on its development. The investigation then located and assessed which elements of careers adviser practice may be significant in assisting careers advisers to support poorer student mental health and wellbeing.

In the first section, the development of the modern university careers service was attributed to the outcome of a discussion amongst student advisers about the role of counselling in universities. Furthermore, this conclusion helped to clarify the role of counselling in careers guidance which resulted in the establishment of the core training that is taught to those aiming to qualify as careers advisers to this day. This tuition requires student careers advisers to undergo significant instruction and practice in techniques such as structuring one to one student appointments, contracting, empathising, and gaining an understanding of the importance of the suspension of practitioner judgement in order to encourage students to disclose the personal values and interests which could have a bearing on their choice of career. This practice is differentiated from student counselling which utilises counselling techniques to alleviate student distress.

Up until the late 1990's, it was one-to-one non-directive careers guidance appointments which made up the core support offered to students seeking help

with their job prospects. During the late 1990's and early 21st century, changes in the global labour market and in UK Labour Government policy in Higher Education required university careers advisers to now not only support student career choice in one-to-one appointments, but also work in collaboration with academic staff to deliver employability-based interventions to larger groups of students. However, given that universities were now answerable to governments for their education and employability-based outcomes, careers advisers also became mindful of their responsibility towards institutional performance indicators such as graduate destination targets. In this, it is possible that supporting the careers choices and prospects of individual students does not always align with these employability- based targets and may challenge careers advisers' professional impartiality. In addition, the requirement for universities to widen the range of individual qualities they need to develop in students is denoted by the shift from employability-based agendas to those associated with Graduate Attributes. It is argued that unlike education and employability on their own, models of Graduate Attributes suggest that universities are responsible for ensuring students gain a wider range of personal and interpersonal qualities which support them developing into good citizens.

Bearing in mind that universities are now tasked with not only educating students but also supporting their wider personal development, the final section of the chapter investigates how the reported changes in student mental health and wellbeing over the past 10-15 years have influenced careers guidance practice. There is some evidence that most careers advisers have expanded their training in counselling techniques for careers guidance in order to support students in one- to- one appointments (AGCAS 2017; Frigerio and Rix 2021). To this end, many practitioners have also adopted coaching and other therapeutic approaches to improve student confidence and emotional outlook ahead of reviewing their career prospects in the one-to-one careers guidance appointment. In relation to these alterations, most careers advisers now practice what is called a 'careers coaching' approach which combines coaching or counselling techniques to improve mood before any further discussion about careers prospects can take place (Frigerio and Rix 2021). This is a change from original careers guidance practice where counselling approaches are used to encourage students to disclose the personal values and interests which could

have a bearing on their choice of career rather than improve their psychological outlook and confidence beforehand.

Chapter 5 The research method and theoretical positioning.

5.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 1, the aim of this study is to contribute to a shared understanding of ways that the reported deterioration in student mental health and wellbeing (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2017; UUK 2018; Baber *et al*. 2021) may have influenced university careers guidance practice. It is intended that insights outlined from relevant literature and documentary analyses in Chapters 2-4, together with the findings of the primary fieldwork conducted to capture the views of university careers advisers in Chapters 6-8, will support a review of not only their training and practice but also of the current institutional support that is afforded to student mental health and wellbeing in the UK.

This chapter aims to 1. introduce the study's broad theoretical framework and 2. outline the process used to collect and analyse the primary data which informs this study. To this end, following a restatement of the research questions from Chapter 1, the explanation proceeds to outline Talcott Parson's concept of the expert basis for professionalism which is the broad theoretical approach that the researcher chose to provide a framework for the primary research phase of the study. Thereafter, the researcher provides a justification for the adoption of both the qualitative inductive approach for the data collection as well as her own insider perspective. This precedes an explanation of how the research phase itself was designed which includes not only the considerations that were made when selecting participants for interview, the method of data collection and applying for ethical approval, but also how the researcher attempted to mitigate any possible disadvantages from the imposition of Covid 19 restrictions in March 2020. Issues of confidentiality were also subject to serious consideration particularly due to the difficulties of ensuring the anonymity of participants given that the number of university careers advisers practising in Scottish universities is relatively small and predominantly female. Finally, the researcher provides an explanation of the reasons for the adoption of both NVivo for the storage of the collected data and Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013) for its interrogation. This account also involves some clarification of how the patterns of themes which were emerging from the analysis were associated with

the sub-objectives and research questions which are also outlined at 5.2 and in Chapter 1.3.

The research offers university careers advisers the opportunity to reflect on changes in their careers guidance support for students over a period of 5-10 years or more. It is hoped that this will allow practitioners to consider if their response to such changes has been gradual and largely reflexive or more conscious and deliberate. If such changes in practice are evident, the research also presents careers advisers with the opportunity to suggest how such alterations should be reflected in their professional training and CPD going forward. Furthermore, it is envisaged that the analysis will offer a significant contribution to the limited evidence base of how changes in education policy may have impacted the student experience of Higher Education. The research is also therefore likely to inform future strategy not only for university careers services, but for how universities themselves support student mental health and wellbeing.

The collection of the primary data for this study took place between 20th June and 8th July 2020. This period coincided with the time in which most of the UK population was confined at home from the unprecedented restrictions enforced to stop the spread of the Covid-19 virus. At the time, the researcher had already gained ethical approval from the University of Glasgow to conduct the interviews with participants in their customary workspace of private offices or meeting rooms in university careers services. Once the restrictions were imposed, another application was made and approved to conduct the interviews by remote technology from the researchers own residence, into the homes of participant interviewees. The possible strains on participants from the pandemic and the restrictions themselves were acknowledged in the Participant Information and Consent forms (Appendices 1 and 2) which were issued to those who offered to be interviewed and are outlined in more detail at 5.5.2 and 5.5.3. However, it was also felt important to explain the coincidence of this research with the pandemic at the outset of this chapter in order that the reader can take its possible social and emotional pressures on participants into account in their interpretation of the material.

5.2 The research question and research sub-questions.

Overarching research question

> In what ways have university careers advisers evolved their traditionally non-therapeutic practice towards supporting changes in student mental health and wellbeing?

As explained in Chapter 1.3, this broad ranging question was designed with the objective of examining any alterations that practitioners may have made to their practice to enable them to continue to assist students amid what has been referred to as a 'crisis' in their mental health (Baber *et al*. 2021, p.1). Furthermore, to assist her in evaluating whether the overall research question has been fully addressed, the researcher formed three further objectives in the form of research sub-questions around individual careers adviser perspectives, institutional expectations, and ways any conclusions from these might be put into practice.

Research sub-questions

Objective 1. *Individual perspectives of careers advisers.*

1.1 Do careers advisers perceive any changes in how students utilise careers guidance appointments and if so, what are these and some of the reasons provided for any change?

1.2 How do careers advisers revise their practice to accommodate perceived changes in student use of careers guidance appointments? Are these revisions imposed or self-adapted?

Objective 2. *Institutional demands and expectations.*

2.1 To what extent is student mental health and wellbeing formally and informally integrated into the advising role of Higher Education careers advisers?

2.2 How much is it expected that careers advisers will be able to deal with changes in student mental health and wellbeing within their current practice?

Objective 3. *Theory into practice.*

3.1 Is current careers adviser training and CPD adequate for dealing with student mental health and wellbeing?

3.2 If there are agreed changes in how students utilise careers guidance appointments, in what ways should these be reflected in careers adviser training and on-going professional development?

5.3 Broad Theoretical framework: Talcott Parsons theory of professional authority (Parsons 1939).

As the main objective of this study is to examine ways that university careers advisers may have had to adapt their practice in response to reported changes in student mental health and wellbeing, broadly speaking, it is possible that this may change the basis on which their professionalism is constituted. In this regard, in the Professions and Social Structure (1939), Talcott Parsons distinguishes professionals from businesspeople and family members by their disinterest in personal profit. Businesspeople pursue financial profit- making above all else and family members those interests which pertain to the family, whereas the role of the professional is primarily to use their expertise to benefit those they serve. Furthermore, also according to Parsons (1939), the authority of the professional is not based on social status or higher moral character, but on superior technical competence although only within a defined sphere. The doctor, lawyer or careers adviser deploys this authority only in what Parsons calls the 'specificity of function' (Parsons 1939, p.460); their technical competence is limited to a particular field of knowledge and skills. In other words, a doctor would not be asked to advise on legal matters nor a careers adviser on medical concerns.

Parsons also draws attention to the contractual nature of the relationship between the professional and those to whom he/she delivers their service. If the professional asks a client or patient a question, it is deemed legitimate only for the specific function that the professional is performing. Questions which cannot be legitimised in this way would normally be resented by the client. Therefore, in Parson's 'Sick Role' (Parsons 1951), his well-known theory of the nature of therapeutic authority, the contract between doctor and patient is one of dependency on the technical skill of the former. It is the recognition of this

technical competency that not only informs the basis of the doctor's authority but also obliges the patient to comply with their advice. In turn, the legitimacy of the patient lies in their choice to seek the doctor's assistance and agreement to follow their advice to get well. Similarly, the traditional contract between the careers adviser and student occurs as the latter has a choice whether or not to seek the expertise of the former but in doing so, he/she is expected to listen to the advice offered and act on what is agreed in order to improve their career prospects. As this study examines how reported changes in the outlook of students may have influenced university careers advisers to adapt how they advise them, this may result in a number of queries regarding the professional expertise on which their current role is constituted. Such professional expertise is based on a range of professional competencies that are recognised in a post-graduate qualification, the training for which typically consists of theories of careers guidance, labour market trends and instruction and supervised practice in basic counselling skills to encourage students to speak about their personal interests, values, and aspirations. However, if according to the research findings there are changes in student behaviour in one-to-one careers guidance appointments which require a different range of competencies out with those associated with careers adviser expertise, this may question the current basis for their professional authority. It is also possible that the competencies which are at the present time associated with careers guidance are no longer fit for purpose and need to be reviewed for their suitability to support any changes in the student outlook. In other words, following Parsonian logic, the limited technical competence on which the professionalism of careers advisers is currently based may require some review.

5.4 Research strategy

5.4.1 Method

According to Bryman (2016), the research strategy, design and method must be carefully considered and chosen to fit a study's research questions. This thesis explored not only the views and meanings that Higher Education careers advisers derived from changes in student approaches to careers guidance, but also the ways they may have sought to evolve their practice in response. With this in mind, the researcher selected a qualitative inductive approach to the research

with the semi-structured interview guide as the method of data collection. The choice of a quantitative deductive approach which seeks to prove a theory or test a hypothesis (Braun and Clarke 2013) would have been inappropriate for this study, because as far as the researcher knows, there is currently no theory that has already been developed from careers adviser views of the ways that their practice has been impacted by changes in student mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, the selection of a qualitative method such as the semi-structured interview guide to collect the data is appropriate as it not only supports the development of new theory from careers advisers' reflections of their experience with students, but also enables their voices to be heard in attempting to understand a potentially complex issue (Creswell and Poth 2016).

5.4.2 The researcher's perspective

As a professional careers adviser of 38 years' experience, 26 of which was spent in Higher Education as a manager/practitioner, the researcher was motivated to begin her enquiry by the growing numbers of students who were presenting for careers guidance appointments with higher levels of stress and anxiety despite relatively good levels of graduate employment. Corresponding reflections from academic colleagues and those in other parts of student services led her to question whether this phenomenon was limited to student engagement with their career planning alone. In other words, it is conceivable that this growth in the number of distressed students may be signalling a changed feature in the student outlook more generally and most noticeably in increased demand for student counselling (Thorley 2017; Lightfoot 2018).

As the researcher's reflection on these issues deepened, it became clear that careers adviser views of student stress and anxiety could reveal valuable insights into perceived changes in student mental health and wellbeing beyond those encountered in careers guidance alone. In addition, these alterations in students, and the potential of careers adviser reflexivity to evolve their professional practice to support them, could assist appropriate recommendations for changes in careers adviser training and their Continuing Professional Development (CPD). As both a practitioner of careers guidance and a manager of careers advisers for many years, the researcher's deep immersion in their role and of the theories unpinning careers guidance offered a unique situation from

which to explore these interests. To the researcher's knowledge, there is no scholarly study on the impact of student mental health and wellbeing changes on university careers guidance. It is also possible that if more students were presenting with stress and anxiety in careers guidance appointments, this might well be masked by the focus on the pressure that this places on student counselling and wellbeing services (Lightfoot 2018). In other words, as Gitlin (2008) also claims, in educational research, institutional boundaries sometimes determine who has the authority to tell their stories. Therefore, this research is original in that it is the first which attempts to provide a vehicle for the participants, careers advisers in Higher Education, to relate their experiences of supporting students who are expressing increased levels of stress and anxiety.

Given that the researcher had worked for 26 years in the field of Higher Education careers guidance, she would be considered to be conducting her research as an 'insider'.

> *'Insider research is that which is conducted within a social group, organization or culture of which the researcher is also a member.' (Greene 2014. P.1)*

There are pros and cons to this positioning. According to James and Busher (2006), as insider researchers are viewed by the study's participants to have chosen to investigate a phenomenon which is part of the same world that they inhabit, this can strengthen rather than impair trust between them. In other words, to participants, this shared experience may reflect the researcher's genuine commitment to their investigation, and therefore enhance the effectiveness of the research method itself. Moreover, according to Hockey (1993), because the researcher is identified as a member of the group, sharing their norms and understandings, she may have considerable credibility and rapport with the subject of study and may engender more candour from interviews than someone from outside.

On the negative side, it is widely understood that the position of researchers as insiders can adversely influence the power relationships between the study's participants and the investigator (Bryman 2016). According to Glatter *et al.* (1988), one such drawback might be that as the researcher's views on the subject being studied may be known to the participants beforehand, they might tell her what they think she may want to hear. Aware of the possible distortion

that such bias could have on the data, the researcher avoided airing her personal ideas about any changes in the student outlook to university careers advisers prior to the data collection period. Furthermore, she also made it clear at the start of each interview that her personal impressions about changes in student behaviour were from her own experience alone, and therefore may be anecdotal, and that one of the reasons for the study was to test whether such observations were local and transitory or more widespread and enduring. Although at the time there were more reports of students seeking support from their university counselling departments (Lightfoot 2018), there was as yet no concrete evidence that this was being replicated elsewhere in the university.

Although the researcher was known to the participants as a head of a university careers service, and by implication a highly experienced practitioner, of the 16 participants, there were only two with whom she had regular working contact. Therefore, her wider personal views on professional matters, such as they were, would not necessarily be known to most of the participants in the study. Moreover, although the researcher would be considered an insider from a professional point of view, at the time of the study she was predominantly a manager of a careers service which may have afforded her the view of someone who was occupying a more objective stance in the eyes of those she interviewed. In other words, before they agreed to take part in the study, the participants may have understood that the researcher was less focused on the individual preoccupations of careers advisers themselves than what they meant for the overall development of university careers guidance. This was endorsed in the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 1), which stated that it was envisaged that the outcome of the research may have implications for the long-term strategy of careers guidance in universities. The researcher also drew each participant's attention to this point in the Participant Information Sheet at the start of the interview.

The Participant Information Sheet was also clear that participation was entirely voluntary and that participants could change their minds and leave the interview at any time, whether they had answered any questions or not. Those who took part were invited to receive a copy of the transcript to review their answers and it was also made clear to them that although they may know the interviewer

professionally, their answers would not affect their relationship with her or their employment.

5.5 Research Design

5.5.1 The Participants

Participants were careers advisers working in Higher Education Institutions in Scotland. All were over 18 and none were from a vulnerable group. Most of the sample was female, which reflects the gender composition of the profession more broadly and was drawn from five Scottish universities representing the ancient, red brick and new university sectors. Given that the sample of 16 mainly female participants from five universities was drawn from a possible population of under one hundred careers advisers practising in 15 Higher Education Institutions, in order to protect the anonymity of participants, the researcher opted to identify them by gender neutral pseudonyms.

All the participants were required to be professionally qualified by holding either a post graduate diploma or Master's degree in vocational guidance or equivalent qualifications or experience. The other main inclusion criteria stipulated a minimum of five years consecutive work experience in advising students in one-to-one careers guidance interviews. This period was chosen to ensure that those taking part were practised professionals who could draw on a broad range of experiences of working with students. Requiring participants to have a longer period of professional practice may not only have limited the pool of those who could participate and therefore possibly narrow the scope of the study, but also potentially disqualify a younger group of practitioners from taking part in an overall field which is broadly speaking, middle-aged. Table 1 lists the participants by their gender-neutral name, years of experience and type of university.

Participant	Years of experience	Type of university
Alex	10+	Ancient
Bernie	5-10	Ancient
Charlie	5-10	New
Frankie	5-10	New
Gerry	10+	Ancient
Jackie	10+	Ancient
Jess	10+	New
Lee	10+	New
Leslie	10+	Red Brick
Lou	5-10	Ancient
Nicky	10+	Red Brick
Pat	5-10	Red Brick
Rae	10+	Ancient
Rowan	10+	Ancient
Sam	5-10	New
Steph	5-10	Red Brick

Table 1 Participants by pseudonym, experience, and type of university

The researcher issued an e-mail to the heads of the five university careers services which outlined the objectives of the research and made the formal request to approach their careers advisers who met the qualifying criteria. Permission given, the researcher then e-mailed potential participants a written invitation with a research outline, logistics of their involvement by interview and the study's anticipated benefits. The respondents were sent Participant Information Sheets (Appendix 1) and Consent Forms (Appendix 2), with the intention of conducting research interviews in person in the participants place of work. However, the restrictions imposed by Government to manage the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 required her to replace this arrangement with remote interviewing by Zoom which took place between June 20th and July 8th, 2020.

In the interviews themselves, participants were requested to relate their experiences 'from over the past 5-10 years or more'. This timeline was selected because not only did it allow the inclusion of newer members of the profession who had the minimum criteria of five years' experience of advising students, but it also enabled those with more than ten years of experience to bring forward older recollections. Moreover, this timeline was also chosen because the initial reports of a deterioration in student mental health and wellbeing began to appear around 2010 (Storrie *et al*. 2010), which is ten years prior to the summer of 2020 when the qualitative interview data was collected.

5.5.2 Method of data collection

This study aims to explore career advisers' reflections on changes in student behaviour in careers guidance appointments, how they understand these variations and the meanings they ascribe to them. Therefore, the researcher sought a data collection method which would not only allow her to encourage participants to talk about their experiences, attitudes, and values, but also probe the meanings they ascribed to these and even learn from them both during the interview and afterwards (Rubin and Rubin 2011). In contrast to the structured interview which requires questions to be asked in a particular order or precisely worded, the semi-structured interview guide consists of a list of loosely worded but consistent open-ended questions that can be asked in any order. Therefore, this method not only acts as a steer in helping to build and support the interaction between researcher and participant, but also allows the former the maximum flexibility to interrogate the latter's responses to questions. This approach not only enables the further probing of responses to questions to clarify or expand them if they appear to offer promising roads of deeper enquiry, but also sometimes opens new pathways for investigation which may not have occurred to the researcher at the outset of the investigation. For example, in the current study, participants reflected that students were more inclined to lack confidence today than previously, but it was only with further probing that it became clear that this was not necessarily limited to particular groups of students as first assumed. Although this method enables the researcher to both vary the sequence of questioning or omit some questions altogether depending on how the discussion unfolds, it still allows her to compare participant responses to each one asked of them. Moreover, as this approach

affords the researcher the flexibility to fully probe answers, this can encourage participant use of non-verbal clues which can help the researcher understand what they are trying to express. In this study, when their answers were probed, most participants paused in contemplation before answering and they later opined that they found this helpful as it encouraged them to gain much needed reflection on their practice. Due to time constraints from student demand on careers guidance appointments, other pressing work tasks and latterly remoteness from colleagues due to government restrictions on human contact due to Covid 19, participants may have had little opportunity to consider and discuss how they were responding to changes in student behaviour in appointments. This was further evidenced by the fact that when participants were asked whether they thought there needed to be changes made to how they practised, most recommended that they should be given more opportunity to reflect on their experiences with students in careers guidance appointments together with other careers advisers.

Although the researcher chose the semi-structured interview guide to collect the qualitative data solely on the basis that it was the one that would best enable her to investigate the research questions, it is also possible that this method was the one that best aligned with her own and her participants professional experience. In other words, as careers advisers are trained and experienced in active listening, reflecting back and summarising, this replicates the semi-structured interview guide which involves using loose questions to encourage participants to tell their story whilst still maintaining the overall purpose and format of the interview.

Due to the social restrictions imposed by the Government to contain Covid-19's spread, data collection was switched from the original plan to interview participants physically face-to-face to conducting them remotely via Zoom. The main drawback of this change, a possible loss of observable non-verbal cues and overall tone of interviewees responses, was somewhat mitigated by the fact that not only were all participants experienced careers advisers, but also that they had already been conducting one-to-one student appointments remotely for at least two months prior to the start of data collection period. As invitations to participate in the study were issued on the basis that the interviews would be

conducted remotely, the researcher assumed that those who agreed to be involved were comfortable with this arrangement.

Before the interviews began, the researcher checked each participant's consent to be verbally recorded and also proffered the alternative of her taking notes of their answers if they preferred. This option was not taken up by any participant. Those involved were also informed that they could receive a copy of the transcript of their interview once it had been cleaned of software generated errors if they wished to check or change their responses to questions.

5.5.3 Ethical considerations

As noted at 5.1, ethical approval to conduct the study's fieldwork with careers advisers in five Scottish universities was originally applied for in late February 2020. Preparation for this application involved the researcher ensuring the selection of the most appropriate method of data collection and compulsory attendance at the University of Glasgow's Researcher Ethics workshop. After minor adjustments to the application, ethical approval was granted but had to be refreshed given government restrictions from the Covid-19 epidemic banning non-essential travel and physical face to face interactions outside the home. Ethical approval for remote interviews by Zoom was granted on 3rd June 2020 and the interviews took place between 20th June and 8th July 2020. As Zoom is not GDPR compliant, the consent form sought participants permission for their speech to be auto recorded and confirmed that this data would be stored using pseudonyms on the researcher's university password protected personal computer. These remote face-to-face exchanges were conducted during daylight working hours, in safe spaces with no known risks to participants or the researcher. At the same time, the researcher also acknowledged to participants that she was aware that remote interviewing involved reaching into their private space and linked them to the current advice from the Government regarding safety during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Once participants had agreed to be interviewed, they were asked to complete and return the consent form ahead of the interview itself and their continued agreement to being interviewed was checked at the start and throughout the consultation itself. Moreover, in the consent form and again at the interview's

outset, participants were also offered a transcript of the conversation after it had been cleaned of Zoom generated errors of breaks in sentences, mis-recorded words, and speech inflections, for them to edit before it was validated for inclusion in the analysis process. Three participants requested these transcripts, which they returned to the researcher unchanged. All other participants declined to check their interview transcripts.

Interview participants were de-identified in a reversible process whereby their names were replaced by a gender-neutral pseudonym and their university referred to as either a new, red brick or ancient university located in Scotland, which the researcher also retains in a password protected location. Participants were further informed that they and their universities would also be de-identified in any publication arising from the research. However, participants were also advised in the Consent Form and Participant Information Sheet that confidentiality may be impossible to guarantee, and that de-identified research data may be shared and archived in accordance with official Data Sharing Guidance. Once cleaned of software generated errors and converted into word documents, the transcribed data was stored on a University of Glasgow password protected cloud. All personal data was destroyed upon final analysis of the data on 1st April 2021.

5.5.4 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis (TA)

The method of analysis of the collected data was informed by the principles of Thematic Analysis, which is one of a group of methods that focus on identifying patterns of meaning across data sets (Braun and Clarke 2006). As the data set consisted of 16 X one-hour interviews of participant experiences which had been gained over several years, TA offered the researcher the best means by which to interpret such broad ranging material with a view to detecting repetitions of meaning. Moreover, TA was also selected due to its theoretical flexibility in that it can be applied not only to data driven themes, but also to other ideas from existing theory and research. This means that from the same qualitative material, the researcher can generate themes through applying both her own ideas to the data as well as those which emerge literally from what is conveyed by participants on their own.

Braun and Clarke (2006) advocate a six-stage approach to Thematic Analysis which guide the researcher through the process of data familiarisation, generating codes and building themes for analysis.

Stage 1. Data immersion

According to Braun and Clarke (2013), the transcription process is the first stage of the data immersion process. The 16 interviews from the study were auto recorded by Zoom which automatically produced a transcript of each discussion in a VTT file. The researcher removed the participants real names from the transcripts, replaced these with a pseudonym and deleted or changed all other data recorded which could identify the participant, including references to the university, location, and personal information. Transcripts were then closely reviewed for accuracy, and errors occurring in the text were located by the researcher on the audio file and corrected. Once cleaned, all timings recorded on the transcript were removed and they were converted into Word documents ahead of importation into NVivo for analysis. The VTT files and audio recordings were stored on a password protected cloud and deleted from the researcher's laptop.

Cleaning Zoom generated errors of indecipherable speech inflections, sentence breaks, mis-recorded words, names, and timings required the researcher to undertake multiple re-readings of transcripts. This deep engagement and familiarity with the data enabled the researcher to begin to identify patterns of meaning across the entire data set. The importation of Word converted transcripts into NVivo also supported good record management and aided the researcher in constant reading and re-reading of data to code, compare codes and check synchronously against the research questions.

Stage 2. Generating initial codes.

NVivo Coding

The researcher decided to utilise the data management tool NVivo 12 Plus due to its ability to assist with the management of the large data set of 16 x one-hour verbatim interviews. Moreover, as NVivo uses clustering tools which are

based on search and retrieve processes to organise data, this also enabled the researcher to index segments of text which she decided according to the TA approach had something in common. By then giving these segments of text code names such as *'pressure'* and *'confidence'* which expressed their meaning in the context of the research questions, this supported the researcher in making sense of the data in preparation for identifying themes for analysis.

Table 2 shows a list of 18 initial codes that the researcher generated with the corresponding number of careers advisers who mentioned each of them (files) and the number of times overall they were referred to (references). According to TA, multiple files and references may not only denote the relative strength of a code, but also the probability of it becoming an overall theme.

Table 2 NVivo codes

Name	Files	References
awareness raising or signposting	11	21
Being busier	6	8
changed institutional approach to MH & WB	11	39
changes in confidence	15	59
counselling comparisons	11	37
Covid relieves pressure temporarily	10	23
Encouraged openess about mental health and wellbeing	10	35
Identity, student journey or story	8	17
Instrumentalisation	7	13
Less resilience due to changes in parenting and education appraoches	4	5
MH disclosure is wide ranging in cg appointments	16	62
MH language	7	14
more counselling techniques in CG	16	83
Pressure	13	33
Repeat appointments	7	8
Self sourced training and self evolved practice for MH	12	33
social media impacts	9	18
Trainining for HE careers advisers	16	60

The researcher generated these Initial codes, not only from the frequency of issues raised by participants in response to interview questions that were loosely based around the sub- research questions with synchronous reference to the overall research question, but also her own background reading. The interview data originally generated 40 codes which were systematically reviewed to

identify similarities and conceptual overlaps and also merged whilst continually referencing research questions to check coherence of analysis. For example, most practitioners suggested that compared to traditional careers guidance support required 5-10 or more years ago, students today used careers guidance appointments to gain reassurance and build confidence in response to a perceived increase in pressure. This generated initial codes *'reassurance' 'confidence' and 'pressure'* which were later merged into two codes '*confidence*' and '*pressure*' as requiring '*reassurance*' had far fewer incidences of text and was assumed to be a feature of 'changes in confidence' (Table 2). By using this process, the researcher reduced the initially generated 40 codes to 18 to be analysed for emerging themes.

Stage 3. Searching for emerging patterned themes.

According to Braun and Clarke (2013), themes are typically ideas which act as a central organising principle of data expressing something meaningful in relation to the research question. These themes or patterns are developed by the researcher through reviewing codes with the object of identifying overlaps or similarities between them. Appendix 3, 'Mindmap of codes and themes', shows the process whereby the researcher mapped codes which were recurring across the entire dataset and clustered these together to identify four emerging themes in the context of the overarching research question and further research objectives.

An early initial code, *'widening participation'* was developed after some participants implied that they thought that the lower socio-economic background of their students was one possible source of them presenting as under increased pressure. Its prevalence placed it under consideration as a theme. When other participants mentioned that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds also presented as appearing to be under more pressure but for different reasons such as parental expectation, lack of experience of failure and being gifted confidence, the code 'widening participation' was considered to be a feature of the data rather than a theme. A feature of the data is defined by its clustering of a lot of ways widening participation is evident in the data but when reviewed against the research questions, it does not tell us something meaningful across a range of codes. Widening participation was

merged into a bigger code, *'pressure'* as in the context of students presenting as under more pressure than before, it had similarities and overlaps with other codes such as '*social media'* and '*students doing so much more'*.

Stage 4. Reviewing emerging themes.

Whilst reviewing coded data to confirm emergent themes, the perceived lack of student *'confidence'* compared to previously, which was cited by 15 of 16 participants in 59 references, presented itself as a possible theme. It is suggested that this lack of confidence could be related to a student's previous socialisation and education as well as their experiences from university life itself. Therefore, to ensure that both relationships are investigated, the researcher decided that lack of 'confidence' may straddle two emergent themes. On the one hand, the emerging theme of 'University is a serious business these days' expresses careers advisers' views that it is not only changes in students' experience prior to university but also alterations in Higher Education itself which might have impacted their confidence. On the other hand, another possible theme 'It's good to talk' enables practitioners to relate ways that students are more open to talking about their feelings in careers guidance appointments than previously, which may also indicate wider reasons for their perceived lack of confidence.

In reviewing the boundaries of emerging themes, an initial code, '*international students'* which was mentioned by four participants, was initially grouped with other codes describing changes in careers adviser experience in careers guidance appointments over the past 5-10 years or more. This code was later removed as the previous educational and social experiences of international students in their home countries could not be accounted for in describing impacts on student behaviour in careers guidance appointments.

Stage 5. Defining and naming themes.

Four main themes were identified and constructed and form the basis of the thematic analysis.

Table 3 Themes by grouped research sub-questions

Research sub questions by objective	Theme(s)
Objective 1. *Individual perspectives of careers advisers* (questions 1.1 and 1.2)	*'It's good to talk' and 'We're all counsellors now'*
Objective 2. *Institutional demands and expectations* (questions 2:1 and 2:2)	*'University is a serious business these day's'*
Objective 3. *Theory into practice* (questions 3.1 and 3.2)	*'Does the training for professional careers advisers require a review?*'

Stage 6. Writing up the analysis.

In this section, to help answer the research sub-questions, the researcher has grouped these with their corresponding sub-objectives and the themes that are emerging from across the dataset.

Objective 1. *Individual perspectives of careers advisers* (research sub-questions 1.1 and 1:2).

Sub-question 1:1 Do careers advisers perceive any changes in how students utilise careers guidance appointments and if so, what are these and some of the reasons provided for any change?

Theme, 'it's good to talk'.

The theme '*it's good to talk'* conveys careers adviser observations of students increased openness to talk about their mental health and wellbeing in careers guidance appointments.

The code, lack of 'confidence' was mentioned by 15 of the 16 participants, illustrating its strength as a code. Chapter two of this study 'The emergence of the student experience in Higher Education' analyses some of the reasons that may be associated with this observation that at the same time that students overall are more open to expressing their feelings, more of them than previously seem less confident in their ability to cope with university life.

Sub-question 1: 2. How do careers advisers revise their practice to accommodate perceived changes in student use of careers guidance appointments? Are these revisions imposed or self-adapted?

Theme 'we're all counsellors now'.

A possible companion but separate emerging theme *'we're all counsellors now'* is differentiated from '*it's good to talk'* as it conveys how careers advisers have self-adapted their practice by adopting a wider range of counselling-based

‘*techniques in careers guidance’* in response to increased student openness about their mental health and wellbeing. It also describes how careers advisers now compare their practice to that of student counselling *‘counselling comparisons’*.

Objective 2. *Institutional demands and expectations* (research sub-questions 2:1 and 2:2)

Sub-question 2.1. To what extent is student mental health and wellbeing formally and informally integrated into the advising role of Higher Education careers advisers?

Sub-question 2.2. How much is it expected that careers advisers will be able to deal with changes in student mental health and wellbeing within their current practice?

Theme ‘University is a serious business these day’s ‘.

‘University is a serious business these days’ is defined as an emerging theme describing changed institutional demands and expectations of the ‘Student Experience’ (Ciobanu 2013) at the same time as there is a perceived increase in students feeling under more *‘pressure’* due to these changes. It is supported by the codes *‘instrumentalisation’* where students expect a degree to enhance their employability and careers adviser views that students are ‘*busier’* today.

This theme may also reflect institutional demands and expectations (questions 2:1 and 2:2) of university staff, including careers advisers, to deal with the impact of these changes on students. Participants reported that changes to their own practice were mainly self-initiated ‘*self-sourced training and self-evolved practice for mental health’*.

Chapter 4 maps the social, economic, and educational changes which have impacted the historical development of careers guidance in Higher Education, seeking to uncover which aspects of its evolving practice may have supported its adaptation to changed student mental health and well-being.

Objective 3. *Theory into practice* (research sub-questions 3.1 and 3.2)

Sub-question 3.1. Is current careers adviser training and CPD adequate for dealing with student mental health and wellbeing?

Sub-question 3.2. If there are agreed changes in how students utilise careers guidance appointments, in what ways should these be reflected in careers adviser training and on-going professional development?

Theme 'Does the training for professional careers advisers require a review?'

A final theme of *'Does the training for professional careers advisers require a review?'* emerges in response to the other three themes where careers advisers have adapted their own practice to accommodate changes in student behaviour in one-to-one appointments which may also express deficiencies in their current professional training and CPD. These issues of changes in practice and their possible implications for the role and training of university careers advisers, will be discussed further in the conclusions Chapter 9.

Each of the following three Chapters 6-8 is organised around presenting, analysing, and discussing the data emerging not only from these major themes, but also their corresponding sub-themes. These sub-themes consist of data from the dominant codes which the researcher has conceptualised and re-grouped in the context of the research questions that are outlined earlier in this section at stages 5 and 6 of Thematic Analysis (TA). As these sub-themes now form part of the overall discussion and critical analysis of the data, they will now be referred to as factors and will be discussed as chapter sections. These major themes and supporting factors are elucidated through analysis and discussion with supporting evidence from interviewee verbatim quotes which are presented in brackets with their pseudonym and the line(s) where they appeared in the audio transcript.

Table 4 Chapters, themes, and sub-themes (chapter sections).

Chapter and theme	Sub-themes (factors in chapter sections)
Chapter 6. 'University is a serious business these days.'	6.2.1 The instrumentalisation of Higher Education. 6.2.2 Reduced student resilience due to changes in parenting and education. 6.2.3 Perceived adverse impacts of social media. 6.2.4 The impact of Covid-19 restrictions on student resilience. 6.2.5 Change to a whole-institutional approach to student mental health and wellbeing. 6.2.6 Changes in careers adviser approaches to careers guidance practice.
Chapter 7. 'It's good to talk.'	7.2.1 Encouraged openness. 7.2.2 Mental health disclosure in careers guidance appointments. 7.2.3 Changes in student self-confidence. 7.2.4 Changes in mental health and wellbeing language.
Chapter 8. 'We're all counsellors now.'	8.2.1 Counselling comparisons. 8.2.2 More counselling and coaching techniques in careers guidance. 8.2.3 Self-sourced and evolved training and practice. 8.2.4 Does the training of professional careers advisers require a review?

Chapter 8's fourth sub-theme, 'Does the training for professional careers advisers require a review?' will also be further considered in Chapter 9 alongside the overall conclusions of the thesis as well as its contribution to knowledge and recommendations for policy review and future research.

Chapter 6 University is a serious business these days

6.1 Introduction

This chapter comprises the analysis of the first of four themes, 'University is a serious business these days', which emerged from the findings of the fieldwork and was introduced in Chapter 5, The research method and theoretical positioning. This data is derived from the qualitative interviews of 16 university careers advisers conducted in June and July 2020. The interviewees were asked a range of questions that were designed to help the researcher explore the overall research question of how the professional practice of Higher Education careers advisers may have been impacted by the reported deterioration in student mental health and wellbeing (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2017; Baber *et al*. 2021). Based on this data, 'University is a serious business these days' examines the contention that due to a number of factors, students are perceived to be under more pressure today than students 5-10 or more years ago. It is further claimed that these pressures may also have been impacted by the change in how universities now support student mental health and wellbeing itself (Thorley 2017; UUK 2017; Baber *et al*. 2021). The final section of this chapter goes on to explore ways that this perceived increase in pressure on students is understood by careers advisers to have influenced how they approach their professional practice in the current institutional context of a heightened concern about student mental health and wellbeing.

The theme of 'University is a serious business these days' is briefly outlined and then followed by an explanation of the sub-themes which generate it in the context of the research question. As noted in Chapter 5, the research method and theoretical positioning, these sub-themes are referred to as factors which are outlined in chapter sections 6.2.1 to 6.2.6 and along with the major theme are elucidated through analysis and discussion with supporting evidence from interviewee verbatim quotes. The chapter concludes with a summary of the analysis of 'University is a serious business these days' establishing its relatedness to the follow-on theme of 'It's good to talk' in the next chapter.

6.2 University is a serious business these days

'University is a serious business these days' explores careers advisers' observations of how students experience university differently today compared to students 5-10 or more years ago and its impacts on how they approach their careers guidance practice in one-to-one appointments. All careers advisers interviewed thought that students today, regardless of university attended, age or socio-economic grouping, appeared to be under more pressure at university than previously. One practitioner's reflection on how students were experiencing university today summed up careers advisers' overall observations.

> *'But you know, I think it's quite a serious business'*
>
> *(Pat, line 246).*

The phrase '*But you know*' implies that it might have gone unnoticed that students treat university more seriously than previous generations. This observation of a possible change in the significance of university to students today, compared to those of 5-10 or more years ago, is supported by four factors outlined in sections 6.2.1-6.2.4 which were identified by careers advisers as influencing and illustrating it. These factors are added to by two others in 6.2.5 and 6.2.6 which describe ways that practitioners have changed their approach to their professional practice in response to an alteration in university strategy towards supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students.

6.2.1 The instrumentalisation of Higher Education.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the notion of instrumentalising Higher Education emerges from the 1990's onwards and denotes a change from the idea of universities purposed to teach universal knowledge through academic rigour and freedom of enquiry on its own (Newman *et al.* 1996), to one which now also equips students with skills to gain enhanced employment prospects (Naidoo and Williams 2015). This change to degrees being increasingly instrumentalised towards improved job prospects is associated with what is known as the 'commodification' of Higher Education (Shumar 2013, p.15) where increasingly the cost of gaining a degree is transferred from the state to the student. This process of commodification was introduced by the New Labour Government

(1997-2010) who directly linked students exchanging their time and money to gain skills to get a good job with the country's economic success (Dolton *et al.* 1997). Gaining skills to give students advantage over others in the labour market is often referred to as enhancing their 'employability', which is broadly defined as the ability to get a good job, maintain it and to move to another one if required (McQuaid and Lindsay 2005). However, the process of the 'commodification' of Higher Education was also accompanied by its 'massification' resulting in many more students attending university than ever before. This requires students to offer something more than their degree in order to stand out from the competition of other graduates in what is viewed as a limited pool of graduate level jobs. This is done by students gaining skills not only from their studies, but work experience, volunteering and participating in university student societies (Tomlinson 2008). One careers adviser explained why they thought the instrumentalised approach to Higher Education appears to place students under more pressure than previously.

> *'But I think there's definitely a pressure on people when they're in uni of what you're going to do with your degree. How are you going to make sure your degree has been a good use of your time and money?'*
>
> *(Steph, line 280)*

Steph is suggesting that the instrumentalist nature of Higher Education directs students to ensure that everything they do throughout their time at university will enhance their career prospects. This points to a change from 5-10 or more years ago when students generally felt some pressure to look for a job towards the end of their degree, to today, when according to careers advisers, they feel under pressure to continually improve their employment prospects throughout it. Popular programmes used by UK university careers services such as Careers Registration (Gilworth *et al.* 2019) simultaneously enrol students in courses which teach them how to enhance their employability when they register for their academic course of study, leaving them in no doubt about the objective of pursuing their degree.

Although improving student employability is considered the responsibility of the university as a whole (Suleman 2018), careers advisers are the professional group most associated with 'employability' and many university careers services have

had their titles changed to include it, e.g., 'Careers and Employability Service'. Some careers advisers like Pat were concerned about the pressure 'employability' seems to place on students.

> *'…it (employability) means you've to perform well but you've also got to participate in everything, you've got to be able to articulate what you're getting out of it. You know, you've got to be able to, you know, make all of that meaningful at the end of the day, you know, I think that's a lot of pressure, rather than just studying something because you're interested in it.'*
>
> *(Pat, lines 248-250)*

In Pat's opinion, employability approaches to undertaking a degree ask more of students than the traditional reason for coming to university to study a subject for its own sake. This repeated use of *'you've'* and *'you've got to'* against *'just……. Interested in…'* counterposes 'employability' as something students feel obliged to do, with *'studying'*, which is here referred to as something they have chosen to do out of interest. As the group of professionals most associated with employability, careers advisers are suggesting that by simply doing their job they may be putting pressure on students.

> *'…you ask (students) have you done any clubs and societies, have you volunteered, or worked over the summer and the answer is "No, I was just really involved in getting my first. I just wanted my first and that's all that I've done."*
>
> *(Bernie, lines 138-139)*

Bernie uses the words *'just' 'no''* and *'that's all'* to express the idea that students might feel at best, inadequate, or at worst, guilt, for studying to the exclusion of their career prospects. Another careers adviser is worried about advising final year students to get what they think might be much needed experience outside of their studies.

> *'…it's very difficult then, to say to them in fourth year, join things now, get work experience now because they've been quite focused on the degree and that's sometimes a bit of a problem……'*
>
> *(Jackie, line 259)*

Here Jackie conveys a certain nervousness *'…it's very difficult….'* that by merely doing their jobs, careers advisers might be placing more pressure on students which they may not be able to cope with. Other careers advisers relate their concern that students are doing *'…so much compared to five years ago.'* (Frankie, line 130) and Sam who is *'astounded'* (Sam, line 179) at the increased range of responsibilities students undertake in addition to their studies and fears for their welfare *'…if they ever sleep*.' (Sam, line 180). This suggests that whilst careers advisers think that 'employability' is good for student career prospects, they are worried about its impacts on their mental health and wellbeing.

As implied by Jess, some careers advisers think that the 'instrumentalisation of Higher Education', where students are treated as consumers, may require them to offer a different service model than previously.

> *'They (students) are looking for and expect that they will have support just for them when they need it. So, they have become more like customers and are a bit entitled and they should be….'*
>
> *(Jess, lines 31-33)*

In describing this new type of service delivery as *'…just for them when they need it.'*, Jess is pointing to a shift away from a model of careers guidance where students request one or two appointments with a careers adviser towards the end of their degree, to another which is tailored to meet individual student requirements on demand throughout the entire period of their studies. To some practitioners like Jess, under this instrumentalised service model, students have a legitimate right '*…entitled and they should be…'* to get careers guidance whenever they think they need it. Other careers advisers think these models may encourage behaviours in students that are incompatible with degree study.

> *'…(education) delivered in quite an instrumentalist way I think has exacerbated behaviours and expectations in a degree of almost slightly learned helplessness, that you will deliver unto me or very didactic.'*
>
> *(Alex, line 99)*

Alex's phrase, *'slightly learned helplessness'* is not a behaviour that was traditionally encouraged in students at university. In fact, it could be argued

that it is the direct opposite of learning 'self-reliance' which is one of the 'Graduate Attributes' commonly understood as a benefit of degree study (Hill *et al.* 2016). To Alex, through being treated as entitled customers, students may adopt a passive approach to their education where they expect to be awarded a degree purely in return for their participation in their course. As also discussed in Chapter 2.4, the idea that instrumentalisation creates some students who are less inclined to intellectual engagement with subject knowledge, instead doing only what is necessary to gain a desired degree classification, is also supported by Williams (2012), Tomlinson (2015) and Bunce *et al.* (2017). This suggests that the consumerist model that is indicative of instrumentalist Higher Education may be less of an intellectual burden on students (Molesworth *et al.* 2010). Despite this, careers advisers in this study thought that students today seemed to be under more pressure and take university more seriously than their counterparts 5-10 or more years ago. One careers adviser observed that unlike previously, some students did not appear to get much enjoyment from university:

> *'I don't know why some of them come to university, I mean, because it's just not the fun it used to be. And it's not all about academic performance, but yeah, I mean I think yes, there's a lot more expectation on them to turn up, engage, participate, and get something out of it.'*
>
> *(Pat, lines 234-235)*

Pat is suggesting that despite university not being as academically onerous as previously, *'…not all about academic performance…'*, the expectations of these instrumentalised notions of Higher Education on students to *'…turn up, engage, participate, and get something out of it.'* may actually result in them feeling under more pressure than previously. In other words, to some careers advisers these transactional, as opposed to scholastic, elements of undertaking a degree may seem more of a burden on students than the pressure associated with previous expectations on them to only exert their best intellectual efforts to master academic subjects. This observation may also indicate a change in student resilience which is further explored in 6.2.2 'Reduced student resilience due to changes in education and parenting' and 6.2.4 'The impact of Covid-19 restrictions on student resilience'.

6.2.2 Reduced student resilience due to changes in education and parenting.

In the last section, Alex suggested that instrumentalist Higher Education, where students expect certain entitlements in return for their time and money, has led to them acting in a more dependent manner *'…learned helplessness…'* compared to previously. Other careers advisers such as Nicky felt that such dependent student behaviour was learned earlier at school and at home.

> *'So, they (students) have been told throughout their lives how marvellous they are and, you know, and all of a sudden, they've not scored 90% and only scored 51%, you know, and that's a big setback for them as they have never had to deal with that kind of setback before.'*
>
> *(Nicky, line 60)*

Nicky's emphatic use of *'all of a sudden', 'big setback'* and *'never had to deal with'* conveys how without the experience of receiving constructive criticism in school, failures and difficulties that are first experienced at university could unexpectedly unnerve and discourage students, undermining their self-assurance. This argument that nowadays schooling favours constant praise over constructive criticism of pupils, which is also analysed in Chapter 2.3, is identified by some as a cause of the perceived lack of resilience in current students. Another careers adviser pondered whether their parenting skills could have influenced the outlook of their own children.

> *'…I've got teenagers at home, you know, and I just do too much for them…You know, there has been a shift in the way I suppose we parent over the years. So, is it that which has a negative impact on their confidence though you spend all your time trying to build their confidence, as well? …Does that impact and actually, I do think so?'*
>
> *(Rae, lines 147-150)*

Rae is suggesting that shifts in how parents in general *'...we…'* overprotect children, may actually have undermined students' sense of self-belief. This view that a tendency by parents to over-support children could have a role to play in lowering student resilience is supported by Rutherford (2011) and Howe and Strauss (2000) who contend that since the 1980's, parenting models have moved away from one of encouraging children's independence towards another which

recommends monitoring and guarding them. Another careers adviser Bernie agreed with this view of parental influence:

> *'I think a lot of their decisions - up to that point - will have been made or at least co- made for them by their parents as influencers so perhaps they haven't had to make those decisions. So again, they don't have the strategies in place.'*
>
> *(Bernie, lines 303-304)*

Bernie thought that over-parenting may result in students lacking the experience of making their own decisions when they arrive at university. According to Haidt and Lukianoff (2018), if university students think of themselves as lacking in these strategies, they may demand that those in authority problem-solve for them. Given the instrumentalist nature of Higher Education today where the student is treated as a customer, it is understood that universities often strive to meet these expectations, resulting in accusations that it is encouraging notions of '*learned helplessness*' (Alex, line 99) or intellectual passivity (Williams 2012; Tomlinson 2015; Bunce 2017) which were referred to in the previous section.

Another careers adviser, Nicky, also agreed with this view, blaming *'helicopter parents' 'the school system'* and *'society in general'* (Nicky line 56), but then added, *'I don't think that has anything to do with us'* (Nicky, line 56), meaning careers advisers themselves. This idea that some groups in society are insulated from notions of lowered student resilience is contested by Furedi (2017) who points out that they are widespread, not confined to particular groups, but promoted by agencies of socialisation and institutions of education (Furedi 2017, p. 23). It is plausible that the views of university careers advisers in this study as well as their careers guidance practice are impacted by such socially prevalent ideas of poorer student resilience which frame their perceptions of what they are capable of coping with at university. The sections entitled 6.2.5 'Change to a whole university approach to student mental health and wellbeing' and 6.2.6 'Changes in careers advisers approaches to careers guidance practice' explore ways that careers guidance has changed to accommodate these perceived changes in students' psychological outlook.

6.2.3 Perceived adverse impacts of social media.

An area which is often cited as not only placing students under increased pressure but also negatively impacting their mental health and wellbeing, is the influence of social media (Elmer *et al.* 2020). Most careers advisers interviewed in this study agreed that the effects of social media use were a major cause of students feeling under increased pressure today, presenting it as indisputably powerful in inducing mindsets of negative self-evaluation and diminished autonomy. Three careers advisers were emphatic when describing the extent of social media's influence. Gerry referred to its '*omnipotence'* (Gerry, line 43), Steph, its *'prevalence'* (Steph, line 123), and Alex, its '*dominance*' (Alex, line 117). The idea of an all-consuming influence conveyed by these words demonstrates that careers advisers believe that social media is irresistible to students, and they are by implication powerless in its face. Furthermore, it is the view of most careers advisers that students' friends and influencers on social media only post one kind of image.

> *'You know, whatever people put on these things, it's always nice stuff, isn't it? Nobody ever puts on them having a terrible weekend, you know.'*
>
> *(Sam, line 242)*

According to Bernie, this posting of only good images has negative effects on students.

> *'And yeah, and I think the cause of that (the growth in student mental health concerns) a lot of the time is social media, that fear and the pressure to keep up and always be displaying good things going on and everything else.'*
>
> *(Bernie, line 357)*

Bernie's use of '*fear' together* with *'pressure to keep up'* suggests that students live in dread of seeing posts of friends displaying achievements and experiences that they cannot match but which at the same time they feel compelled to view, compare themselves to and compete with. Also, Bernie's use of 'always' is a reminder that social media is permanently switched on, which suggests that some careers advisers believe that social media's power of negative self-

appraisal may be unremitting and inescapable. Others like Jess describe social media's influence in another way.

> *'And I think social media has taken the place of some other social references that students used to have….'*
>
> *(Jess, line 46)*

Jess is worried that social media's sway is so strong that it cancels out other reference points such as parents, older experienced friends and relatives.

The views of Sam, Bernie, Jess and others are contested by a body of scholarly literature which suggests that as well as a source of social comparison, students use social media to display their anxiety and that this attracts social reinforcement from friends (Moreno *et al.* 2011; Zhang 2017). According to this argument, this referencing of their experience with others enables students to release pressure which can have positive impacts on them. However, careers advisers such as Bernie sound somewhat resigned when talking about social media's one-sided influence on students when they are applying for jobs:

> *' "…. well, I don't have that, I don't have that, and I haven't done that…" so then that leads to more insecurity, which leads to more worry which again, then I think impacts their confidence to make decisions.'*
>
> *(Bernie, line 335)*

In this view, if students compare themselves to others on social media it is inevitable that their self-assurance will automatically diminish, which compounds the competition that they already feel under to get a graduate job. Other careers advisers like Alex were troubled with the way that social media appears to exert itself on students:

> *'….it (social media) impacts how they present the need to curate themselves and seek approval. And I think it's probably robbed them of some of their ability to think and act independently.'*
>
> *(Alex, lines 118-119)*

The suggestion here is that social media's constant appeal to students to compare themselves with others influences how they shape themselves and gain

recognition. To Alex, this is damaging to students, *'robbed them'* as it deprives them of their autonomy. However, it is also suggested that comparing themselves to others on social media may induce students to actively reflect on their actions and achievements, prompting them to improve themselves. According to Nišić and Plavšić (2017) and Gündüz (2017), nowadays, social networks and social media use play a fundamental role in shaping how individuals understand the many worlds they live in whether virtual, physical, or emotional, and conversely their understandings of their own selfhood. In this context, pressure felt from social media is not inevitably damaging to students but can also act as a catalyst for them to change for the better. This scholarly research suggests that students have agency and interact with social media both to mediate their experience through reaching out to others for support and for self -improvement and therefore not necessarily only a source of negative pressure on them. However, the overwhelming view of careers advisers in this study was that students are social media's defenceless victims, incapable of mediating the experiences that it portrays and a strong reason for them feeling under more pressure at university today compared to 5-10 or more years ago.

6.2.4 The impact of Covid-19 restrictions on student resilience.

Chapter sections 6.2.1-6.2.3 explored careers advisers views of the ways that instrumentalised Higher Education, over-protective parenting and schooling as well as the effects of social media may have led to students being under more pressure leaving them with lower levels of resilience compared to 5-10 or more years ago. The onset of the unique circumstances of a worldwide pandemic during the research period presented an opportunity to further explore this premise. The period set aside for the collection of data informing this study by chance coincided with the UK government's imposition of unprecedented restrictions on human movement to prevent the further spread of infection from the Covid-19 pandemic. These restrictions resulted in graduating students being confined to their homes for months amid media reports that they were one of the groups whose job prospects would be negatively impacted by the curbs on human movement (Jones 2021). The happenstance of these restrictions coinciding with the data collection allowed the researcher to insert an additional searching question into the interview schedule which enabled her to gain further valuable insights into careers adviser views on how graduating students were

dealing with the impacts of these constraints on their job search. Given the negative media reports that these students would find it far harder to get suitable jobs due the likelihood of there being fewer roles for them, it would be reasonable to expect that they would experience the restrictions as a source of increased pressure on them. However, the data emerging from careers adviser responses was more nuanced. Overall, students did not respond to the predicted impact on their job prospects as careers advisers expected and a range of possible reasons for this is explored.

Most careers advisers clearly expected students to be very distressed by the impact of the restrictions on their job-hunting efforts. *'……. I would have expected a bit of an onslaught of kind of panic….'* (Pat, line 197) and '*…. I was expecting initially to get lots and lots more anxiety….'* (Frankie, line 113). Two other careers advisers used words such as '*weirdly'* (Gerry, line 54) *and 'odd'* (Gerry, line 55) and *'strange'* (Charlie, line 129) to show how unexpected they found student responses to the impact of the restrictions on their job prospects. Charlie admitted making an error of judgement about students not having coping mechanisms '*…. because I've actually been quite impressed with the resilience that's been displayed by our students.'* (Charlie, line 108). Careers advisers' genuine surprise at the calmer than expected response from students prompted one to question if they had got it right by seeking reassurance from the researcher, *'I don't know if anyone else has said that. Has anyone else?' (*Pat, line 198). These reactions show that some careers advisers may not have expected students to be able to cope with the predicted negative impacts on their job prospects brought on by the Covid-19 restrictions. It is suggested that these responses may stem from a widespread belief that today's students are more fragile than those of previous generations, resulting in a perception that they may be unable to deal with setbacks on their career prospects from the pandemic's restrictions.

This suggestion that the majority of careers advisers had not expected students to be able to cope, may also be supported by ways that they consoled students with the early pandemic narrative of *'we are all in this* together' (Sobande 2020) with phrases such as *'…all in same boat.,'* (Gerry, line 50) *'…this (pandemic)….is now a collective experience.'* (Alex, line 152) and *'…not just them…'* (Charlie, line 111). Gerry thought that this narrative gave students a sense of relief

'…breathing space especially from comparing themselves to others.' (Gerry, line 51), from the pressure of having to compete with one another for jobs.

This notion of students welcoming the respite that the restrictions gave them from the pressures associated with job-hunting might also be related to how some careers advisers drew the conclusion that the pandemic restrictions had a positive effect on student anxiety, *'I saw more stress and anxiety in the pre-Covid period than now. Covid is a leveller.'* (Gerry, lines 11 and 12). Gerry's use of the word *'leveller'* to describe the impact of restrictions on students compared to the period before it conveys the view that in 'normal' times, students are notably anxious and that the restrictions have actually improved this by reducing their overall levels of stress. Put differently, for most careers advisers, Covid-19 restrictions relieved students from the responsibility of applying for work, *'…there's a freedom to that…'* (Frankie, line 105) and that could be the reason they appear to have a *'…philosophical…'* (Pat, line 198) or *'…devil may care…'* (Frankie, line 101) attitude to them. Some careers advisers thought that the curtailments allowed students respite from contesting the graduate labour market by likening their effect to the creation of a safe space, a *'…bubble.'* (Gerry, line 57) offering students protection, not from the disease itself, but from the pressure they associate with competing with other students for work. This suggests that for some careers advisers, students may be in Covid-19s debt as it has offered them temporary respite from pressure. Moreover, when speaking about how universities were expecting careers advisers to support students and new graduates post pandemic, Jess sounded somewhat stoical:

> *'We need to prepare them for the hardship that's ahead and the knockbacks that they're going to get again…. people don't understand they need resilience….'*
>
> *(Jess, lines 100-102)*

These words infer not only that it is a careers adviser's job to furnish students with resilience *'We need to prepare them…'* but also that they may not have had to face difficulties previously *'…people don't understand….'* which might imply that Jess, similar to some other careers advisers, thought that students might not have developed coping mechanisms in the first place.

However, students' somewhat unexpected reactions to these constraints on their job prospects could have other explanations. To Alex and Rowan, the dominant narrative of the pandemic of 'we are all in this together' may have prompted a more rational forbearance from students, *'…they're working through it.'* (Alex, line 134) and *'A lot of students are attempting to minimise the effect Covid has had on their life chances.'* (Rowan, line 116). To Alex and Rowan, students had reasoned that as they, like everyone else, could not control Covid-19 restrictions limiting their job prospects, they should make the best use of their time and energy in preparing themselves for when the labour market improved.

Another group of careers advisers also reported surprise at how students reacted to the restrictions but for different reasons than the previous group. Jess said she was surprised that *'...students actually stopped communicating with the careers service.'* (Jess, line 84). Careers advisers who noticed that their students stopped using their service thought this was a sign of lack of motivation or despondency about their ability to get a job. However, another explanation could be that, like the students reported by the first group of careers advisers, the restrictions relieved them from the pressure they felt to find a job leading to them temporarily discontinuing their relationship with their careers service. On the other hand, it could also suggest that students drew the sensible conclusion that they would be wasting their time and energy working with their careers service to apply for jobs when many of the opportunities which would normally be open to them had dried up. As Rowan pointedly remarked, *'If anything, students I have seen have been quite practical about the situation they find themselves in'* (Rowan, line 117).

Another careers adviser, Lee, sounded genuinely confused *'…seems really strange.'* when relaying an experience of working with a group of students who, despite having become highly employable due to the pandemic, were still very anxious.

> *'…. there were lots of jobs advertised for those with degrees on these courses I deal with…. but students are still worried they will not get work. Seems really strange….'*
>
> *(Lee, lines 120 and 121)*

The reaction of these students might suggest that they, as conveyed by some other careers advisers, lacked resilience when faced with the pressure of job hunting even when their prospects looked good. On the other hand, when faced with being catapulted into a demanding job application round after several weeks forced passivity, students seeming *'…worried…'* (Lee, line 120) might be considered a perfectly normal reaction.

Therefore, due to this overall surprise shown by most careers advisers at the calmer than expected response of students to the negative impact of the Covid 19 restrictions on their career prospects, it is possible that most of this study's participants actually thought that students were less resilient than 5-10 or more years ago. As also argued in Chapter 2.4, this view of students as more vulnerable than previously, requiring protection by their parents, schools, and universities, is often how they are characterised in social and educational narratives.

6.2.5 Change to a whole university approach to student mental health and wellbeing.

The shift referred to in the title, which is also critically analysed in Chapter 3.3, gradually evolved in UK universities from around 2010 and denotes a major transformation in their delivery of mental health support to students. This new approach was the result of a growing number of reports which highlighted a deterioration in student's psychological outlook (Storrie *et al.* 2010; Thorley 2017) and was formally recognised as UK Higher Education's official policy in 2017 (UUK 2017). The policy change itself is chiefly characterised by a move away from the existing strategy where university counselling services alone treated student mental ill health, towards another where all university staff are expected to not only raise student awareness of the importance of safeguarding their psychological health but also detect signs of students in distress and refer them to support if necessary (Barden and Caleb 2019).

To begin to explore how this change in approach may be impacting careers adviser practice, which will also be critically analysed in 6.2.6 and Chapter 8, participants were asked to what extent mental health and wellbeing was formally and informally integrated into their careers advising role. Practitioners'

responses to this question revealed a perception of a growing omnipresence of the subject of students' psychological outlook in their institutions compared to previously. For example, the influence of the issue on the careers adviser's role was summed up by Leslie who remarked '*…there's no getting away from it, it's our job now.'* (Leslie, line 356) which may also imply that some practitioners may not agree that dealing with students' emotions should now be part of their job. Another careers adviser, Rae, used the phrases '*…huge on the agenda in my university.'* (Rae, line 296) and *'…with a whole movement around it.'* (Rae, line 297) to convey the size and momentum of the institutional concern about student mental health and wellbeing. A further comment from Alex described universities changed approach to managing the issue as '*It feels as if all universities have a strategy around this, whereas they used to be about support…'*. (Alex, lines 183-184). In other words, by raising its status from that of a service to a strategy, universities may be implying that student mental health and wellbeing now informs the purpose of the university itself.

By contrast, when the researcher asked careers advisers if they thought that students' mental health had actually deteriorated in the last 5-10 years or more, most were uncertain whether it had or not. For example, Rowan hesitated before replying *'I'm not sure how to answer.'* (Rowan, line 149) and then '*Not sure if the percentage of those with real mental health issues has grown.' (*Rowan, line 152) and '*Gosh, that's a difficult question.'* exclaimed Leslie, (Leslie, line 151). This uncertainty about whether students' mental health had actually got worse contrasted with most participants' convictions that unlike previously, students were now encouraged to be open about their emotions, '*…we are better at talking about how we feel now than before.'* (Rowan, line 151), '…. where *I actually see a change is that we talk much more about mental health…'* (Frankie, line 267) and *'…there's a massive push for people to talk about mental health.'* (Leslie, line 152). This coexistence of doubt about an actual deterioration in the overall condition of student mental health with certainty that everyone is encouraged to talk about their feelings more, is somewhat contradicted by careers advisers' views expressed earlier in this chapter. For example, in 6.2.3 and 6.2.4, most careers advisers not only strongly believed that students were social media's hapless victims, lacking the coping strategies to mediate its influences, but had also expected them to be far more

negatively impacted by the effects of Covid-19's restrictions on their job prospects than their behaviour showed. As also argued in Chapter 2.4, students nowadays are often presented as socially and educationally more fragile than in the past requiring them to be protected by their parents, schools, and universities from a wide range of potential dangers. Moreover, it is also possible that as the whole university policy on mental health and wellbeing expressly invites students to talk about their worries and concerns, this approach itself may well be fuelling these views of the less resilient student which will also be critically examined in Chapter 7.

Another important aspect of the 'all', 'whole' or 'holistic' institutional strategy towards mental health and wellbeing involves all university staff being expected to undertake formal courses designed to raise awareness of not only the importance of good mental health and wellbeing in students, but also in being able to identify those at risk and signpost them to specialist support if appropriate. One example of this, 'safeTalk' training (Turley 2018), instructs participants in how to assess whether someone who they encounter is suicidal and keep them safe until they can be referred to specialist support. Another course, 'First Responder' training (Feuer 2021), aims to equip participants with the skills to listen and reassure those experiencing mental health problems and direct them to relevant professional help. Careers advisers described how these courses and related resources influence their day-to-day practice with students, *'…once a day I will tell students to contact counselling…'* (Gerry, line 71) and *'I've got a safeTalk Training certificate on my wall so that students can see I've had that training.'* (Leslie, Line 138). According to careers advisers like Steph, the training offered by these courses has been useful, *'Here we have done quite a lot of training such as on Suicide Assist…. because you don't know who's going to be in front of you.'* (Steph, line 327). This may be somewhat supported by Jess's exclamation of *'And not knowing which student walking through the door is going to disclose something like that!'* (Jess, line 142). Some careers advisers were quite enthusiastic about the knowledge they had built up to support students.

> *'I have been on 'First Responder' training and know that I can contact a first responder within the university. I know the mental health advisors and all the well-being team, and I know where to go for lots of different things, which I've got from internal training, and I like building up knowledge.'*
>
> *(Lee, line 311 and 312)*

These quotes suggest that the whole institutional policy towards mental health and wellbeing, which includes obligatory awareness raising instruction for staff, may well be priming careers advisers to expect an increase in students displaying symptoms of a poorer emotional outlook. Therefore, this changed approach itself may be influencing careers advisers' perceptions of students as more vulnerable nowadays which could be another reason that they appear to treat university more seriously than 5-10 or more years ago.

6.2.6 Changes in careers adviser approaches to careers guidance practice.

In the previous section it was argued that the whole university approach to supporting mental health and wellbeing may not only have signalled to careers advisers that students were more fragile than previously, but also that to respond effectively they needed to invest in additional training and instruction. Moreover, as pointed out by Thorley (2017), this changed institutional approach also requires universities to highlight possible risk factors which might negatively impact students emotionally which is also discussed in Chapters 2.4, 3.3 and 7.2.4. It is reasonable to expect that university careers advisers regard competing for jobs and transitioning into the labour market as such risk factors, and that this consideration has prompted them to not only gain training and instruction to raise awareness and signpost students appropriately, but to also seek to adapt their approach to their professional careers guidance practice accordingly which will be further analysed in Chapter 8. Regarding this, participants pointed to a number of impacts of this awareness raising approach on their careers guidance practice, one of which was on the process of 'contracting,' where they set student expectations about the limits of what the one-to-one consultation can achieve.

> *'But I think a lot of it is about contracting at the beginning where you explain that if there is something that concerns me, I will have to consult someone else to help.'*
>
> *(Lee, line 302)*

Lee's reply suggests that careers advisers' overall awareness of the importance of their institution's mental health and wellbeing strategy means they are now not only using 'contracting' to set out the limits of the appointment for students, but also to invite them to talk about any emotional concerns. Although careers guidance is not traditionally associated with practitioners instigating discussions with students about their mental health and wellbeing or diagnosing their levels of confidence, according to careers advisers in this study, this is clearly changing. For example, some careers advisers like Pat were keen to stress how they had *'…become more confident in initiating those discussions…'* (Pat, line 130). Similarly, Lee asserted *'…I am becoming more directive….in saying "I think this is a confidence thing."' (*Lee, lines 199 and 200). Pat and Lee's comments suggest that their appreciation of the importance that their university attaches to student mental health and wellbeing encourages them to introduce such issues into their practice. Other careers advisers such as Lou were somewhat enthusiastic in explaining that even if a student is not raising their mental health or wellbeing explicitly in a one-to-one appointment, they raise it with them as a matter of course.

> *'When a student says for example, "I just need this particular piece of advice on how I'm going to find jobs in Spain …. from you." I will always check in to say, how are you feeling now? How confident are you feeling? Even if we haven't talked about well- being, or lack of confidence or lack of resilience or positivity.'*
>
> *(Lou, lines 161 and 162)*

By consciously asking students about how they are feeling whether this is raised by them or not, careers advisers like Lou may be signalling to them that they assume that they are more likely to be vulnerable. It is also possible that these assumptions by professional careers advisers may well influence how students perceive their own ability to cope with the demands associated with looking and competing for work. This suggestion might also be reflected in the way that practitioners such as Rae now approach their work with students.

> *'I think I always did reassure them, but I am more conscious of it now. It is very much at the fore now when I am talking with students.'*
>
> *(Rae, line 193-194)*

Rae seems to be assuming that students need reassurance in careers guidance appointments regardless of whether they show signs of requiring it or not. These overall assumptions that students require more emotional support than previously may manifest themselves in other ways in appointments:

> *'Sometimes they (students) present like they are anxious, and you want to do something about that. But they might say "Well I am anxious, but I'd rather you gave me my CV feedback because that's making me more anxious."'*
>
> *Jackie, line 310)*

Jackie is implying that careers advisers' heightened concern about getting support for student anxiety might lead them to forget that not only is it quite normal to be anxious about getting a CV right, but also that that does not necessarily mean that they require support for their mental health and wellbeing. It is therefore possible that the move to an all-institutional approach to student mental health and wellbeing creates the conditions for the problematisation of what were previously viewed as normal student concerns related to their career prospects.

6.3 Conclusion and discussion.

This thesis explores possible ways that the professional practice of UK Higher Education careers advisers may have been impacted by the reported deterioration in student mental health and wellbeing. The first theme developed from the data of qualitative interviews with 16 university careers advisers, 'University is a serious business these days' contends that students attribute greater significance to going to university today than students of 5-10 or more years ago and identifies six possible reasons for this change.

The first of these 'The instrumentalisation of Higher Education', which is also critically analysed in Chapter 2, encourages students to demand that they gain

improved career prospects in return for an investment in their studies. It is suggested that this change in their status from merely scholars to now also customers with entitlements, although possibly undermining self-reliant behaviours, could also make the experience of being a student easier than it was before. Despite this, students appeared to careers advisers to be under more pressure and to gain less enjoyment from university life than their predecessors. Therefore, it is unclear if students are actually under more pressure than 5-10 or more years ago or that they merely seem so to careers advisers.

A second reason practitioners thought students treated university more seriously than students previously, and as also discussed in Chapters 2.3 and 2.4, was their observation of a decline in student self-reliant behaviours which were a result of changes towards over-protective parenting and schooling pre-university. Some careers advisers thought that these shifts in approach were confined to parenting and teaching, but it is also suggested that they are more widespread and consequently impacting the views and practice of university careers advisers themselves. It is therefore unclear whether changes in parenting and schooling have actually resulted in students having less resilience to pressure or that this is merely a reflection of how careers advisers now see them.

Thirdly, it is suggested that careers advisers perceive that social media can have only adverse impacts on students, compelling them to engage in unrelenting negative social comparison and unable to mediate its influence. On the other hand, some scholarly studies such as Moreno *et al.* (2011,) Zhang (2017) and Gunduz (2017), refute the view that social media has only negative impacts on students arguing that they also mediate their experience through it for support and self-improvement. However, it is the overwhelming view of this study's participants that students are social media's defenceless victims, incapable of mediating the experiences that it portrays and a strong reason for them feeling under more pressure at university today compared to 5-10 or more years ago.

Fourthly, the researcher utilised the coincidence of the imposition of Covid 19 restrictions with the data collection period to compare student resilience to the negative effects from these on their careers prospects with the pressure they would be under from job-hunting in normal circumstances. The majority of

careers advisers expressed surprise at the calmer than expected reactions of students to the impact of such restrictions on their job prospects, indicating that they held the view that they were actually less resilient than 5-10 or more years ago. A minority of careers advisers felt that this relative composure of students conveyed a rational response to a situation over which they had little control, but also saw them seeking to limit its impact on them by deploying their efforts towards preparation for a time when their job prospects would improve. As overall there is no clear indication that students reacted differently to the possible impacts of Covid-19 restrictions on their career prospects compared to how they might cope with looking for work under normal circumstances, their reactions are not necessarily a sign of increased fragility. However, the evidence that most participants expected students to be far more stressed about the restrictions' possible effects on their prospects than their reactions merited, indicates that overall careers advisers may actually believe that nowadays students are more vulnerable than previously.

A fifth reason why today's students may treat university more seriously than their predecessors concerns the shift to a whole university strategy towards supporting their emotional health. A critical analysis of how careers advisers were formally and informally integrating mental health and wellbeing approaches into their practice following this policy change led to a number of suppositions. On the one hand, careers advisers were strongly aware of not only the considerable increase in the strategic significance that their institutions now attached to student emotional health, but also that this reflected wider trends in society encouraging openness about feelings. Moreover, although participants observed university management's expectation that all staff gain the prescribed training to support the new policy, most of them were unsure whether student mental health had actually deteriorated over the past 5-10 years or more. This uncertainty somewhat contrasted with their view in 6.3 of students as social media's hapless victims, as well as their expectation in 6.4 that they would be far more negatively impacted by the effects of Covid-19's restrictions on their job prospects than many of them showed themselves to be. As also argued in Chapter 2.4, this view of students as more vulnerable than previously, requiring protection from a wide range of risks by their parents, schools, and universities, is often how they are characterised in educational and social narratives (Brooks

2018). This contrast between careers adviser doubt that student mental health had actually deteriorated and their view of students being more vulnerable, will be further analysed in Chapter 7, ‘It’s good to talk’.

The sixth reason for students treating university more seriously than before also concerns how this change in university policy on mental health and wellbeing has impacted ways that careers advisers now approach their careers guidance appointments with students. As the policy change not only heightens staff awareness about their institution's strategic concern about student fragility, but also urges them to encourage students to be open about their feelings, this in turn primes practitioners to expect students be more anxious and invite them to talk about their feelings in appointments. It is further argued that this changed approach may also have contributed to careers advisers problematising what were previously viewed as normal student concerns related to their career prospects. Finally, it is concluded that it is possible that these alterations in how careers advisers approach appointments may also influence how students see themselves as capable agents in the job market. These arguments will be expanded and further analysed in Chapter 7, ‘It’s good to talk’ and Chapter 8 ‘We’re all counsellors now.’

Chapter 7 It's good to talk.

7.1 Introduction.

This chapter comprises the analysis of the second of four themes, 'It's good to talk', that emerged from the findings of the fieldwork and was first introduced in Chapter 5 The research method and theoretical positioning, towards addressing the overarching research question:

> **In what ways have university careers advisers evolved their traditionally non- therapeutic practice towards supporting changes in student mental health and wellbeing?**

Based on this qualitative analysis of the data from one-to-one interviews with 16 university careers advisers, 'It's good to talk' examines the contention that due to a number of factors, students today, unlike those of 5-10 or more years ago, are continually encouraged to examine their emotions and speak openly about their mental health and wellbeing in careers guidance appointments. These factors are then elucidated through narration with supporting evidence from interviewee verbatim quotes and analysed in preparation for an exploration of how they have impacted careers guidance practice in the third chapter containing the findings from the fieldwork, 'We're all counsellors now.'

As also noted in Chapter 6, the qualitative interviews with careers advisers took place in 2020 which coincided with the period after the UUK's 2017 recommendation that universities change to a whole university approach to dealing with student mental health and wellbeing. This shift was announced by Universities UK in 2017 in a document called '#Step Change: Mentally healthy universities' (Universities UK 2017).

> *'Discussions on mental health tend to focus on those experiencing mental illness who need care or support…. But we also have the opportunity to promote good mental health for the whole university population, improving the lives and outcomes of 2.3 million students….'*
>
> *(Universities UK 2017, p.8)*

And

> *'The whole university approach recommends that all aspects of university life promote and support student and staff mental health.'*
>
> *(Universities UK 2017, p.12)*

As these quotes demonstrate, this change in approach, which is also critically analysed in Chapter 3.3, consisted of a move from a policy where university counselling services alone treated students with mental ill health to one where institutions as a whole - 'all aspects of university life' - promote the importance of protecting student mental health and wellbeing and signposting them to support.

As also noted in Chapters 2,3 and 4, one possible result of this policy change is that compared to 5-10 or more years ago, students today were far more likely to disclose their anxieties during careers guidance appointments. However, as also concluded at the end of Chapter 6, careers adviser awareness of the institutional and social encouragement towards openness about personal psychological concerns conflicted with their doubt that student mental health itself had really deteriorated. However, despite these reservations, as also noted in Chapter 6, there was also some evidence from careers advisers' verbatim quotes that they actually thought students were more vulnerable than they were prepared to admit.

7.2 It's good to talk

As a phrase 'It's good to talk' not only expresses the whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing, but also a commonly held belief that talking about feelings assists with the process of mental health recovery (Lieberman *et al*. 2007). Most careers advisers in this study endorsed this view and all claimed that students today, regardless of age or social economic grouping, were far more likely than students of 5-10 or more years ago to disclose their feelings and anxieties in the context of non-therapeutic careers guidance appointments.

The theme 'It's good to talk' is supported by four factors which, as explained in Chapter 5, were originally sub-themes emerging from the data analysis that

careers advisers identified as influencing and illustrating it. These are 7.2.1 Encouraged openness; 7.2.2 Mental health disclosure in careers guidance appointments; 7.2.3 Changes in student self-confidence and 7.2.4 Changes in mental health and wellbeing language. These factors are discussed in turn in the sections below.

7.2.1 Encouraged openness.

This whole institutional approach to supporting mental health and wellbeing is exemplified by campaigns which encourage students to open up about their emotional concerns. This change in approach is described by Rae:

> *'So, is it that students now have permission to feel, that they've got permission to say…, I want support here?'*
>
> *(Rae, line 124)*

To Rae, the new approach is characterised by universities creating environments which positively endorse all students being able to raise their distressed feelings at all times without feeling judged. Previously, individual students were either referred or directed to student counselling or a doctor to have their concerns recognised. This acknowledgement of distress reflects what Talcott Parsons called 'permissive therapeutics' (Parsons 1970, p. 317), which is how he referred to the non-judgemental approach used by doctors towards patients when authorising their time off work for illness and is also discussed in Chapter 5.2. Under the whole university policy towards supporting mental health and wellbeing, this non-judgemental approach moves beyond the confines of the therapeutic relationship between counsellor or doctor and student to be replicated in university-wide campaigns inviting all students to be open about their feelings. By targeting all students, rather than only those who under the old approach sought help from a counsellor or doctor, this policy purportedly seeks to prevent a deterioration in student psychological health. As this strategy is also associated with the contemporary moves to de-stigmatise mental illness (McLaughlin 2021), it is perhaps unsurprising that it is supported by most participants in this study. Moreover, as Lee and Frankie point out, this change is not confined to universities.

> *'… and also, externally lots of well- known people talk about their mental health issues…' (Lee, line 220) and '…when you watch things like Love Island…there are these well-known young people on there talking about their feelings and how they suffered and times when they were down and depressed….' (Frankie, line 164-165)*

To Lee and Frankie, celebrities speaking openly about their feelings is a powerful endorsement of universities adopting a policy which encourages student openness about their mental health and wellbeing. As also noted in Chapter 3.3, in the same year that the shift to a whole university approach was announced, royalty and famous sportsmen and women also talked openly about their emotional struggles in an attempt to get the public talking about their own (Booth 2017). Rowan is somewhat thoughtful about this change:

> *'…we are in a better place today in that we can seek help and say how we feel.'*
>
> *(Rowan, line 96).*

Clearly Rowan thinks that attempts to de-stigmatise mental health concerns are a positive development in and of themselves but other than that, it is difficult to find evidence of how this change in approach has positively impacted the reported deterioration in student mental health and wellbeing. An exploration of the document by Universities UK reveals that other than seeking to 'make mental health a strategic priority' and 'transform the university into a healthy setting' (Universities UK 2017, p.12), there is no mention of either how the change in approach would actually reverse the reported decline in the student outlook or how any improvements might be measured.

> *'Our shared vision is for UK universities to be places that promote mental health and wellbeing, enabling all students…to thrive and succeed to their best potential.'*
>
> *(Universities UK 2017, p.2)*

Conversely, and as also related in Chapter 3.3, during the period following the implementation of the new approach, there were even more reports claiming that student psychological health was getting worse. One of these, a UK parliament briefing paper on student mental health support in England, noted that between 2014/15 and 2018/19 there was an increase of 150% in students

reporting concerns (Hubble and Bolton 2020). A similar report from the Office for Students (OfS), the independent body representing students in England and Wales, found that the percentage of UK students studying at English universities who reported a mental health condition increased from 1.4% in 20212-13 to 3.5% in 2017/18 (Office for Students 2019). A third study, this one by the Mental Health Foundation, stated that of 15,000 students at 19 Scottish universities, 36% reported moderately severe or severe symptoms of depression and 45% thought they had experienced a serious psychological issue which they felt needed professional help (Maguire and Cameron 2021). The first two of these reports contained accounts of students who had reported a mental health concern to their university and the third was a survey of a broad population of students in Scottish universities who were invited to answer some questions about their personal mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, although, as noted in Chapter 3.2, these reports need to be read with caution given their definitional and methodical shortcomings, they strongly suggest that more students reported problems after the implementation of the current policy. In addition, all three reports cited issues which were previously treated as normal impacts of student life such as academic pressures, financial worries and moving away from home as the main factors that were causing the deterioration in their psychological outlook.

Similarly, a survey of 37,500 students at 140 UK universities in 2018 claimed that one in five students reported having a current mental health diagnosis and one in three had experienced serious psychological issues for which they had felt they needed professional help (Pereira *et al*. 2019). Although the report lacked evidence of how much student mental health and wellbeing had deteriorated over any given period, it claimed that it was 2nd and 3rd year students who had the highest rates of concerns. Furthermore, this report suggested that these concerns were associated with academic and job-seeking related pressures mounting towards the final years of university. This claim that concerns raised by students today as signs of poorer mental health and wellbeing were previously treated as normal impacts from university life, is not only consistent with careers advisers' contentions in Chapter 6, but also with arguments in Chapter 3.3. Bernie explains this in relation to issues raised by students in one-to-one careers guidance appointments.

> *'So maybe what was just a touch of anxiety, perhaps 10 years ago, five years ago, now attracts a larger label which carries larger stigmatisation …perhaps it's just a little bit of anxiety around decision-making, around what their graduate options are and whatever it is…gets that label…'*
>
> *(Bernie, lines 344-347)*

To Bernie, the current approach which aims to de-stigmatise and improve mental ill health, could actually be having the opposite effect of encouraging students to think that impacts of student life are making them psychologically unwell.

7.2.2 Mental health disclosure in careers guidance appointments.

In the last section it was argued that by moving to a whole institutional approach to managing mental health and wellbeing in an effort to improve the emotional outlook of students, universities may have unintentionally contributed to an increase in the numbers of them reporting concerns. As also noted in Chapter 6, although careers advisers thought this new approach was positive, at the same time, they lacked conviction that there had been an actual deterioration in student mental health over the past 5-10 or more years. However, it was also observed that this claim somewhat contradicted their verbatim evidence which suggested that they actually thought that students were indeed more fragile nowadays. To further explore this disconnection with university policy as well as its possible inadvertent effect of increasing the numbers of students reporting concerns, the researcher critically analysed participants' quotes regarding the ways that mental health and wellbeing were raised in their careers guidance appointments. One example given was the way that students sometimes find it difficult to make decisions:

> *'They (students) may have difficulty moving on' or 'issues thinking about the next steps' or 'paralysed by fear'*
>
> *(Bernie, lines 224-227).'*
>
> *'Even if a student is like crazy employable, they are just stuck at what to do because they don't want to get it wrong.'*
>
> *(Frankie, lines 89-90)*

Here Bernie and Frankie appear to be associating student indecisiveness over their career prospects with their emotional health. Although students have always used careers guidance appointments to discuss the challenges that they felt in choosing jobs, careers advisers have not always associated these with concerns of a psychological nature. Moreover, it was also mainly terms like 'anxiety, stress and worry' which careers advisers used to describe how students conveyed their concerns, but 5-10 or more years ago, these would not have been treated as a sign of their poor psychological health. Therefore, it may well be due to the change in university policy to support student emotional health, amidst a social culture which also encourages disclosure of feelings, that careers advisers now describe these formerly 'normal' impacts from student life as 'mental health and wellbeing' concerns. Moreover, careers advisers reported that students were raising these issues far more frequently than previously, but this could well be because these whole university polices that urge openness about worries invites them to do so. Sam somewhat summed this up:

> *'I think for the majority it is probably what we would term run of the mill things. I just think we're much more aware of it'.*
>
> *(Sam, line 173).*

By '*more aware of it'* Sam may be referring to careers advisers' recognition of the growth in significance of safeguarding their students' feelings that is emphasised by the holistic nature of the new approach which was also discussed in Chapter 6.2.5. As noted in this chapter's introduction and in Chapter 3.3, before the current approach was introduced, universities' support for students with mental health concerns was typically managed by student counselling departments which stood apart from the academic and administrative operation of the rest of the university. According to Caleb (2019), this shift in policy required universities to make the mental health and wellbeing of students a key priority for not only counselling services but all departments that come into contact with them. Brewster and Cox (2022) go further by arguing that by raising mental health and wellbeing to the status of a key institutional strategy, all university departments regardless of their role, are also now required to make it integral to how they function. This view was supported by Universities UK (UUK), the official body representing Higher Education institutions, when it asserted that in order to effectively implement a whole institutional approach to student

mental health and wellbeing, universities needed to become ‘health settings’ (Universities UK 2017).

> *‘Whether we like it or not, universities are health settings, with positive and negative effects on all students and staff.’*
>
> *(Universities UK 2017, p.9)*

By requiring them to become ‘health settings’, it is suggested that universities are obliged to prioritise the psychological health of students over their education. This responsibility was underscored in a letter to university vice-chancellors in England by the then University Minister, Sam Gyimah.

> *'Collectively, we must prioritise the wellbeing and mental health of our students – there is no negotiation on this. To make this happen, leadership from the top is essential.’*
>
> *(The UK Government 2018)*

The use of the words ‘no negotiation’ might suggest that there may be sanctions should universities fail to make the mental health and wellbeing of their students their number one priority. If so, it may be understandable to some that universities now adopt an approach which warns students that what were previously normal impacts of undertaking a degree, such as pressure from exams and getting a job, could now threaten their mental health and wellbeing. However, others claim that there are better ways to support students with the pressure from university life. In a study of the ways that university libraries were implementing this whole institutional approach, Brewster and Cox (2022) claim that as it is often at exam times that students are more stressed than normal, then it may be more effective for them to be offered tuition in study techniques rather than referred to counselling for their mental health. This view is supported by Furedi (2017) and Streatfield (2019) who argue that as it is common for some students to be anxious that they lack study and other academic skills, universities should focus on equipping them with these rather than advocate an approach which invites them to express their anxieties and seek help for their mental health. However, given that universities now offer all students extra support to help them improve their study and writing abilities, it could be suggested that it is not a lack of these that is causing them to be

anxious. This assumption is questioned by Streatfield (2019), who argues that students may not be able to determine the cause of their anxiety and given the institutional prominence of campaigns aimed at safeguarding their psychological health they may well conclude that only mental health support can help them. Moreover, although university staff may understand that these whole institutional approaches expect them to detect signs of student distress (Caleb 2019), it is also recognised that they may not be qualified to judge either the seriousness of concerns or what is causing them (Barden 2019). Therefore, it is likely that the change to the whole university approach actually increases student referrals to mental health services by staff as understandably they wish to avoid making incorrect assessments of student distress. This suggestion is supported by Leslie who explains:

> *'…colleagues have made referrals to the counselling services but in my experience… the counselling service will get in touch with me and say they're working with a student and that they think would benefit from having a careers appointment'.*
>
> *(Leslie, lines 142-144)*

To Leslie, although it is usual for careers advisers to refer students for counselling support, it is the counselling service who are considered best able to judge the cause of student distress, which in this case was the need for a discussion about career prospects. This point was echoed by Jackie's example in Chapter 6.2.5:

> *'Sometimes they (students) present like they are anxious, and you want to do something about that. But they might say 'Well I am anxious, but I'd rather you gave me my CV feedback because that's making me more anxious.'*
>
> *(Jackie, line 310)*

Due to the institutional importance attached to safeguarding student mental health and wellbeing, Jackie's initial impulse was to refer the student to counselling *'…want to do something about that.'* In this case, it was the student pointing out that the cause of his anxiety may well be the reason he had come to see a careers adviser in the first place that changed Jackie's reaction.

In addressing the theme of this section of exploring ways that students disclose mental health and wellbeing concerns in careers guidance appointments, the evidence outlined so far suggests three conclusions. Firstly, that under the whole university approach to supporting student psychological health, most of the concerns that are labelled as signifying their poorer outlook were previously treated as normal impacts from student life. Secondly, as these whole university approaches do not equip staff or students with the ability to distinguish between which concerns require professional mental health support and which do not, this may result in them all being treated as potentially harmful to students. Thirdly, as also suggested in Chapter 3.3, it is possible that these unintended impacts from the changed policy approach may not only be responsible for an inflation in the numbers of students who are perceived to have emotional problems, but also providing a framework for the continuity of such claims. For example, according to a 2020 UK Parliament Briefing Paper on mental health support for students in England, 94% of student counselling and disability services reported an increase in demand for counselling and in some institutions up to 25% of students were using or waiting to use these services (Hubble and Bolton 2020).

At the same time, as also noted in Chapter 3.3, there is some evidence that UK educational policymakers themselves might be concerned about the impact of these whole institutional approaches on students. In this regard, a quote by the Office for Students (OfS) representing student affairs in England and Wales may be insightful:

> *'While there has undoubtedly been an increase in students seeking out help, this is not necessarily evidence that the current generation of young people (who make up the majority of entrants to higher education) is more prone to mental ill health.'*
>
> *(Office for Students 2019, p.2)*

This quote shows that the Office for Students might actually realise that the current recommended policy for supporting student mental health and wellbeing may bear some responsibility for more and more students thinking that they might be unwell when they are not. Despite this, the Office for Students, universities, and all official bodies concerned with UK Higher Education,

continue to advocate for this approach. In other words, organisations which are tasked with the guardianship of UK universities continue to support an approach to student mental health and wellbeing which they may well understand could be partly responsible for unintentionally harming some students.

Moreover, as also noted in Chapter 6.2.5, these repeated claims of student psychological fragility which underpin this whole university policy, may prime careers advisers to expect students to exhibit a poorer emotional outlook in careers guidance appointments. As also suggested in Chapter 6.2.5 and at the start of this section, this expectation appears to contradict careers advisers' overall doubt that student mental health had actually deteriorated over the past 5-10 years or more. Despite this reservation, careers advisers supported the whole university approach to student mental health and wellbeing as they felt that student openness about their feelings helped de-stigmatise mental illness. This suggests that despite voicing doubts to the contrary, careers advisers may have been influenced by the current approach to believe that there has been a deterioration in student psychological health and that this is reinforced by changes they have made to how they conduct their careers guidance appointments. Practitioners like Jess reflected on these changes:

> *'I would say what maybe what has changed is how you're dealing with the issues that brought them through the door that day.'*
>
> *(Jess, line 128)*

Jess appears to imply that although in previous years students might have had worries, it is only now that careers advisers feel they need to manage them in their careers guidance practice. This is somewhat supported by Gerry who remarks:

> *'A lot more of a person is brought into the careers guidance discussion including health and wellbeing. Careers advisers are bound to help someone sitting in front of them with issues regardless of what they may well be.'*
>
> *(Gerry, line 119-120)*

To Gerry, taking students' wider emotional concerns on board has now become integral to how careers advisers' practice. In other words, as the whole

institutional approach makes safeguarding student psychological health the responsibility of all staff, this may make it difficult for practitioners to separate advising students about their career prospects from helping them with what the current policy tells them might be signs of a deterioration in their mental health. Alex notices the impact of this conflation on careers advisers.

> *'…and certainly, I experienced from a number of the careers consultants (advisers) that sense of concern and their own anxiety about the boundaries shifting…'*
>
> *(Alex, line 157)*

To Alex, concerns for student fragility which are informed by these whole university approaches means that what were formerly strict boundaries between careers guidance and student counselling may now have become blurred. The possible impacts on careers guidance practice from this elision of what were formerly two distinct kinds of professional practice will be explored separately in the next chapter 'We're all counsellors now'.

7.2.3 Changes in student self-confidence.

Section 7.2.2 examined ways that the university's increased emphasis on openness about mental health and wellbeing had encouraged students to disclose their concerns in careers guidance appointments. This development may also be reflected by the fact that most careers advisers in this study reported that students were overall less confident than 5-10 or more years ago. One careers adviser signalled that this under-confidence might be a result of something else changing.

> *'Like, you know, maybe there's something about the fact that they are kind of allowed to be under-confident.'*
>
> *(Rae, line 119)*

Rae's use of *'allowed'* relates this apparent under-confidence to the discussion in Chapter 6.2.1 regarding how, unlike previously, students are now positively invited to talk about how they feel. Rowan expands this somewhat by suggesting that what has really changed is how students feel about themselves.

> *'I am not sure whether students are actually less confident now or they just feel that way.'*
>
> *(Rowan, line 92)*

Rowan contrasts a lack of conviction about an actual deterioration in student self-belief with a hunch that perhaps that's just what they believe themselves to be. When encouraged to think of an example of this view, Rowan elaborated with:

> *When I point out that students from their course in previous years have got good jobs and they should feel confident, they often say, "That's fine for them but how can I get confidence for myself?"*
>
> *(Rowan, lines 83-84)*

The phrase *'…how do I get confidence for myself?'* implies that not only do students feel that they lack confidence, but also that they may treat it as something that they 'acquire' rather than build themselves through their experience. As the key feature of the whole institutional approach to student mental health and wellbeing is, as in schools, positive affirmation of students' feelings, then it follows that they may well expect self-confidence to also be given in this way. This is somewhat reflected in Frankie's point:

> *'…students are using careers appointments more for a bit of confidence …as opposed to (previously) here's what I want to do, how do I get there?'*
>
> *(Frankie, line 42)*

Frankie is contrasting the way that students used to use careers guidance appointments to access a careers adviser's specialist knowledge of occupations, *'…here's what…how…?'* with that of today when they book them to gain confidence in themselves, *'…a bit of confidence….'*. Frankie then goes on to suggest that this lack of self-belief may have altered careers guidance practice.

> *So, it just feels a bit more like a motivational confidence building approach.'*
>
> *(Frankie, line 43)*

To Frankie, careers advisers have moved away from practising traditional careers guidance towards the utilisation of techniques which are designed to help students gain more confidence in themselves ahead of contesting the labour market. Rae's view goes further:

> *'So, I think it (student's lack of self-confidence) absolutely has changed what we think our job is.'*
>
> *(Rae, line 100)*

To Rae, a perceived lack of student self-confidence has transformed what careers advisers believe is expected of them as practitioners. Rae's view may also echo the idea raised by Rowan and others that students feel that they need to *'get'* confidence from others rather than build it through their own experience, which was also raised by Lou.

> *'…she (a student) was saying, I'm going to keep going until somebody says that's a perfect CV.'*
>
> *(Lou, line 71)*

The phrase '*somebody says'* implies that the student believes that it is someone other than herself who gives her self-belief. Rae and Lou express some exasperation when they point to the recurrent nature of this feature of student expectations of how they acquire self-confidence.

> *'Students are looking for that constant confirmation that they are right…' (Lou, line 82) and '… (I say) "there's no right way to present this, (CV) you know", and they want the right answer.' (Rae, line 88)*

Lou's use of the word 'constant' implies students may not be able to feel self-confident after having their efforts affirmed only once. Rae's view may confirm the idea that some students might only have the confidence in an answer if it is given by an expert. Lee offers another example of students understanding of gaining confidence relating to their practice for job interviews:

> *'And…discuss with them, you know, what makes them a good candidate. You can see that has an impact.' (Lee, line 65) and 'Even if it's just for like a practice interview or anything like that. You can get quite a big difference.'*

(Lee, line 70).

According to Lee, offering students affirmation appears to make a notable difference to their outlook which may suggest that this is what they understand as acquiring confidence not only from their experience at school but also university. Students expecting to be affirmed in this way may also support one of the arguments in Chapters 2.4 and 6.2.1 on instrumentalising Higher Education where they might expect to gain certain outcomes in return for their investment in their studies instead of through their own efforts alone. As Rowan noted earlier, students attending careers guidance appointments want to be shown how to acquire self-belief *'get confidence for myself.'* (Rowan, line 84) meaning self-confidence may well be one of the outcomes that students expect to attain from their degree. Therefore, by changing their practice in order to bolster their self-belief, careers advisers may have also unintentionally reinforced in students this notion that confidence is acquired rather than grown through their own endeavour.

7.2.4 Changes in mental health and wellbeing language.

In the last three sections it was suggested that the recommendation that universities become health settings has created a framework which allows for the continuous reporting of poorer student mental health, wellbeing, and self-confidence due to their educational experiences. This section explores how changes in the language that students use to convey their emotional outlook may also impact this framework which in turn has changed careers advisers' professional practice. As also noted, although careers advisers admit that their practice has altered due to changes in how students present psychologically in careers guidance appointments, they are generally supportive of the move to a whole-institutional approach to student mental health and wellbeing. In 7.2.1 Rowan summed up this positivity:

> *'…we are in a better place today in that we can seek help and say how we feel.' (Rowan, line 96).*

This use of *'better place'* shows that Rowan thinks that the policy change is a welcome development as it encourages students to be open about their feelings and this may help to destigmatise mental illness. Rowan then goes further by

pointing to a change not only in how we think about our emotions but also in the language we use to describe them.

> *'We are all much more psychologically aware today. We are more aware personally how we feel, and it is easier to explain today. Students have more of the vocabulary to talk about these things than before making it easier for us to talk to them.*
>
> *(Rowan, lines 97-99)*

It is Rowan's view that the social and institutional campaigns urging openness about our emotions have resulted in all of us *'We…'* monitoring our feelings, *'more psychologically aware today'*. Rowan not only further suggests that these campaigns have fostered a shared language *'vocabulary'* which allows students to explain more clearly what they mean by these feelings, but also followed this with an example of how it works in practice.

> *'I had a student who had spent a lot of money on a course that was unsuitable for her, and I just mentioned the word 'mental health' and it drew out how the student was really feeling.*
>
> *(Rowan, lines 102-103)*

Citing *'mental health'* enabled Rowan to quickly empathise with the student and gain her trust *'…and it drew out…'*. Rowan then followed this up by suggesting that when it comes to raising mental health in such conversations, things may have changed:

> *'Whereas saying this in years gone past, students would have said "What do you mean?"'*
>
> *(Rowan, line 104)*

Whereas in the past the use of *'mental health'* to describe a student's remorse over an unfortunate error would not have been understood by them, *'what do you mean?'*, today its use conveys a shared appreciation of what Furedi (2016) refers to as our shared human fragility which is also reflected in universities whole institutional policies towards supporting students psychological health.

This definition or re-definition of outlooks such as 'worried', 'stressed' or 'anxious' as 'mental health' related issues is associated with 'concept creep'

(Haslam 2016, p.1), a process whereby formerly clinically bound psychological concepts are expanded to confer meaning on dispositions that were once outside it. For example, the medical term 'disorder' has been extended by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to include anxiety, which is re-labelled 'general anxiety disorder'(Crocq 2017), and in doing so rendered an emotion experienced by most students in the course of their studies as a medical condition. This medicalisation of human emotions was criticised by Horwitz and Wakefield (2007) who argue that emotions such as worry, anxiety and sadness are normal responses to human circumstances and are only pathological if there is a clinical detection of dysfunction such as those associated with biology. According to this view, and as also discussed in Chapter 3.3, what are today described as student mental health problems such as worry about getting a job or pre-exam nerves are normal and should not be diagnosed as disordered unless done so by a clinician. For example, although students have always had worries about starting in a new job, this is now referred to as a psychological problem by some careers advisers such as Rae and Lee: *'…and imposter syndrome is a big thing with them.'* (Rae, line 220) *'…and I say, that's imposter syndrome.'* (Lee, line 200). In the same way, Rowan's earlier use of *'mental health'* unintentionally turned an experience that would previously have been treated as an unfortunate error of judgement, *'a course that was unsuitable for her'* into something potentially damaging to the student's mental health. Furedi (2016) refers to this use of 'mental health' as 'diagnosis expansion' which he employs to describe a process whereby non-medical forms of authority and expertise, such as careers advisers, utilise therapeutic or medicalised terms as a form of explanation. In universities, this is characterised by the shift from an approach where previously only professional counsellors treated student mental ill-health to the current whole-university responsibility for it. Under this current policy, and as also discussed in Chapter 3.3, all staff, regardless of expertise, are expected to detect student mental health and wellbeing concerns and promote support seeking behaviour, whilst the former approach confined these tasks to those trained specifically to do so.

On the one hand, Rowan's use of *'mental health'* to encourage the student to speak about how she felt could reflect careers adviser positivity towards the institutional invitation to openness about feelings, which was also reported in

chapter 6. On the other hand, as also reported in Chapter 6, although careers advisers felt that students today presented themselves as feeling less able to cope than students of 5-10 or more years ago, they did not think this meant that they were necessarily more likely to have poorer mental health. Despite this, it is argued that overall, not only do careers advisers agree that students talking about their mental health and wellbeing is a positive development but also, as testified by Rowan, they support the changes in language which accompany this as it enables them to empathise with students in careers guidance appointments.

At the same time, a few careers advisers, such as Bernie, were concerned about the possible negative impacts of describing student worries and emotions as mental health issues:

> *'…perhaps it's just a little bit of anxiety around decision making, around what they're graduate options are …but once it gets that label, I feel that that's all so self- perpetuating… so if a student thinks, well, that's me, I now have anxiety, I think they will feel like that for a long time…'*
>
> *(Bernie, lines 344-348)*

Bernie use of 'self-perpetuating' shows a concern that due to anxiety now being associated with a medical condition, once a student thinks they have it, they might think that it is the reason they feel unable to cope with future challenges that they encounter at university. This view is also supported by Foulkes and Andrews (2023), also discussed in Chapter 3.3, whose study concluded that awareness raising policies used to treat mental health and wellbeing may well encourage some of those who think they are unwell to have a heightened sensitivity to further symptoms and avoid engaging with experiences which they are concerned might worsen their condition. This view of students believing that the tribulations of university life could induce a continuous medical condition corresponds with that of Furedi (2017):

> *'If young people are constantly told that life on campus is very, very stressful, it is not surprising that some of them will experience life through the prism of psychological distress.'*
>
> *(Furedi 2017, p.27)*

By ‘constantly told’ Furedi is referring not only to the fact that recently most universities have developed websites and apps to inform students of the possible threats to their mental and physical safety, but also the rise of overprotective parenting and schooling approaches which were also examined in Chapters 3.3, 2.3 and 2.4 respectively. According to Furedi (2017), these combined impacts on students may leave them in no doubt about the potential harms they will encounter at university. In a review of a single page entitled ‘Safety, Health & Wellbeing’ on one university’s website, there is a lengthy list of potential threats to students and advice on staying safe in a number of environments https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/students/safetyhealth/ (University of Glasgow 2018). These were: threats to life, physical threats, threats from bullying and harassment, sexual violence and harassment and to dignity, equality and diversity; advice on staying safe living in student halls, at parties, at home, on campus, on the road and on-line. Another university dedicates a page entitled the ‘A-Z of Wellbeing’ to alerting students to the dangers they may encounter at their institution https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/students/advice/personal/ (University of St Andrews 2018). The webpage lists 20 possible issues that can ‘effect student wellbeing’ including alcohol and drugs, bullying, imposter syndrome, insomnia, perfectionism, worries about mental health and suicide. Furthermore, by ‘it is not surprising’ Furedi is arguing that universities should not be shocked that their policy has resulted in more and more students reporting poorer psychological health because at the same time as it warns them about how university harms them, it encourages openness about negative feelings.

> *‘It is likely that…the current disposition to promote therapeutic interventions, the reporting of emotional distress and mental health problems…will continue to expand.’*
>
> *(Furedi 2017, p.27)*

Furedi is arguing that by promoting risks to students from university life at the same time as encouraging openness and help seeking behaviours ‘therapeutic interventions’ in an effort to improve their mental health and wellbeing, universities may actually be contributing to more students reporting themselves as unwell ‘*…continue to expand*.’

Rowan also suggests that students may also be worried about what work holds for them post-graduation.

> *'They (students) are generally a bit scared as they think the work world is worse than it is.'*
>
> *(Rowan, line 52)*

Rowan thinks students are afraid that they will not be able to cope with the pressure that they associate with work post-graduation. According to a report 'Graduate Mental Wellbeing in the Workplace' compiled by Reino and Byrom (2017), university careers advisers should be helping students transition into the workplace due to the dangers to their mental health and wellbeing awaiting them there.

> *'The cost of stress to the workplace is substantive. The 2016 Labour Force Survey identified that 11.7 million days are lost to work related stress, depression, or anxiety (Health and Safety Executive 2016). Stress accounts for 45% of all working days lost due to ill health (Health and Safety Executive 2016). While there are many steps that employers can take to reduce workplace stress, the transition into the workplace may require particular attention.'*
>
> *(Reino and Byrom 2017, p. 4)*

Apart from the paragraph quoted which forewarns of the workplace's potential danger to their mental health '*…may require particular attention.*', this report does not explain what is meant by helping students prepare for work. Moreover, this advice that careers advisers need to warn students about moving into employment does not seem to consider the fact that as most of them already work during their studies, they may well be used to some of the stresses of the workplace. Nevertheless, this report suggests that careers advisers need to caution students that not only are they now at risk from the negative impacts of university life but also from work itself. Furthermore, as argued earlier in this section, these warnings are accompanied by a process understood as the 'medicalisation' of what used to be thought of as 'normal' emotions, which may change how students think about, monitor, and explain their feelings which in turn impacts how careers advisers support them in careers guidance appointments.

Conversely, it could be argued that as this pathologisation of formerly normal emotions implies that they are damaging to student psychological health, it would be more logical to refer to them as ‘mental illness’ rather than ‘mental health’. One possible reason for the widespread use of ‘mental health’ to describe the full range of psychological outlooks are the well-intentioned attempts to de-stigmatise ‘mental illness’. However, as suggested by Frankie, this could result in mental illness being indistinguishable from everyday emotions.

> *‘I hear the words anxiety and depression much more together now. I often think, do you know what that means? Because I don't think the two necessarily go together.’*
>
> *(Frankie, lines 262-263)*

Frankie is querying the routine elision of our common responses to life’s challenges such as ‘anxiety ‘with what were previously considered to be clinically diagnosed mental illnesses, such as ‘depression’. Barkham *et al. (*2019) also points out how the blurring of these concepts has made it difficult to establish what has actually changed in how students are coping with university life (Barkham *et al.* 2019). As also discussed in Chapter 3.3, in his study of student mental health and wellbeing in UK Higher education, Thorley (2017) states that anxiety, like depression, bi-polar disorder and psychosis, is a mental illness. Thorley follows this argument by claiming that these conditions do not need to be diagnosed by an expert and only experienced as ‘symptoms which meet the threshold for a diagnosis’ (Thorley 2017, p. 9). However, he does not list the symptoms he refers to or outline the nature of the threshold by which they are measured. In relation to this, Student Minds, which calls itself ‘the universities mental health charity’ also avoids citing symptoms and thresholds for sickness diagnosis but pairs anxiety with depression which it also refers to as ‘mental illness’ (Student Minds 2019).

It follows from this that students’ use of the terms ‘anxiety’ and ‘depression’ together could indicate that they consider them to have equal seriousness. This normalised pairing of anxiety with depression may be a result of the medicalisation process referred to earlier, where what were previously viewed as everyday impacts of life are now grouped together with what were clinically

diagnosed psychological conditions under the collective term of 'mental health', denoting a marked change in how we view mental health and mental illness today. This change is conveyed by Thorley (2017) and Student Minds (2019) through the application of the term 'continuum' to the full range of psychological outlooks.

> *'…mental health is something that is experienced by everyone, all of the time. It exists along a continuum and can, therefore, be positive or negative to different degrees…We are all somewhere on this continuum…where exactly we fall…'*
>
> *(Thorley 2017, p.8)*

According to the continuum view, regardless of our psychological state, we are all together on the same scale 'mental health' whereas previously, those diagnosed with mental illness would have been treated separately. By minimising the differences between mental ill health and wellness to a matter of 'degrees', the continuum idea suggests that students lack resilience as it is easy for them to slip from mental health into mental illness. From this it follows that, as noted in Chapters 6.2.2 and 6.2.3, given that careers advisers actually believe that students are more fragile and less confident than students previously, it is likely that they are applying this continuum approach to them in their practice. Since this interpretation presents the differences between mental illness and wellness as a matter of points on a scale, careers advisers may be concerned how easily worry about job prospects or other concerns might tip fragile students into mental illness. In addition, given that according to the continuum definition it is not necessary to have a clinical diagnosis of mental illness, merely to have its associated symptoms, it may be easier to understand why many students use anxiety and depression together or believe that they may be suffering from a damaging psychological condition (Baber *et al*. 2021). In addition, Thorley's (2017) view of lowered student fragility implies that it is a matter of chance *'…we fall…'* where students could find themselves on the continuum and not something that is in their power to manage themselves. In other words, the continuum view implies that today, unlike previously, students may not be capable of dealing with the sometimes-stressful impacts of student life without expert intervention. One careers adviser is perhaps drawing attention to this change when they remark:

> *'…things we might have felt frustrated by, you'd have a coffee or drink in the pub with friends now that's become pathologised into a problem that needs to be solved and I think that hasn't helped students in terms of self- management, self- regulation.*
>
> *(Alex, lines 159-160)*

Alex's use of '*pathologised*' describes the process whereby everyday concerns are now treated as conditions that can only be remedied by experts which in turn might undermine students' self-belief that they can deal with these matters themselves. This assumption of increased student fragility is what Furedi calls 'the cultural script of vulnerability' (Furedi 2017, p.19), a key feature of which he argues is that students and pupils in schools are educated to understand the centrality of human frailty to their personhood. Another important aspect of this 'cultural script' is an encouragement for students to experience everyday challenges as inducing psychological harm which are then communicated through the language of mental health (Furedi 2017). Employing this view, Rowan's earlier use of 'mental health' to help a student, could also be understood as a careers adviser acknowledging her fragility as a precursor to supporting her. Although the majority of careers advisers' verbatim quotes indicated that they shared the view that students appeared to be more fragile than previously, a few, such as Alex, were more critical of the university's approach of treating students as less self-reliant than previously.

> *'...we're (university careers services) about raising aspirations and ambitions for all of our students.' (Alex, line 285) and '…. that's quite difficult because I do feel quite strongly that we are disabling not empowering our students currently.' and 'And that's what we're collectively contributing to the situation that we are now faced with.'*
>
> *(Alex, lines 357-360)*

Alex's view is that the university's institutional policy which endorses a view of students which is *'…disabling…'* runs counter to the traditional objectives of university careers services *'…raising aspirations and ambitions…'* and *'…empowering…'*. To Alex, for students to reach their potential, they need to believe they are self-reliant agents who are capable of the independent pursuit of their career goals. However, when careers advisers comply with an

institutional approach *'…collectively contributing…'* which promotes student fragility, they could be unintentionally undermining students themselves.

On the other hand, it could be argued that reports of more students seeking help for their mental health and wellbeing is a sign that they are actually acting independently to alleviate their concerns. This is the view of Haidt and Lukianoff (2018), who contend that at least some of the upward trend of students seeking such help is a result of encouraged openness campaigns in universities. Furedi (2017) disagrees with this by arguing that most students seeking mental health support nowadays do so because what were once viewed as normal impacts from student life which they used to deal with themselves, are now interpreted by them as psychologically damaging requiring expert support to help them cope. This idea relates to Alex's view that universities now 'pathologise' everyday student concerns. Nicky points to how students earlier experience may support this view of fragility.

> *'…this positive affirmation all the time from the cradle…does not do them any favours.' (Nicky, lines 185-186) and '…students don't recognise that you've got coping mechanisms for stress and anxiety…and if you develop these you can deal with stress and anxiety.'*
>
> *(Nicky, line 203)*

To Nicky, continued 'positive affirmation', such as that exemplified by the shift to over-protective parenting and schooling that is discussed in Chapter 6.2.2, has resulted in students who not only lack mechanisms but also do not realise that they have the potential to develop them. According to Alex, universities have endorsed this defensive approach by pathologising student concerns and in doing so have also denied students the ability to develop their self-reliance.

7.3 Conclusion and discussion

This thesis examines ways that the professional practice of university careers advisers may have been impacted by changes in student mental health and wellbeing. The second theme developed from the data of the qualitative one-to-one interviews with 16 university careers advisers, 'It's good to talk', argues that compared to 5-10 or more years ago, students are continually encouraged

to examine their emotions and speak openly about their mental health and wellbeing in careers guidance appointments. It is further contended that this theme is supported by four factors also emerging from the data that are identified as driving these changes in student behaviour which results in changes to careers advisers' professional practice.

Through an analysis of the first of these factors at 7.2.1 ‘Encouraged Openness’, it is argued that by labelling what were previously thought of as normal impacts of life at university as matters of mental health and wellbeing, the change to the whole university approach has led to a widespread perception that undertaking a degree can be damaging to a student’s psychological health. It is further suggested that rather than improving student mental health and wellbeing, evidence shows that the policy change, through treating universities as first and foremost ‘health’ as opposed to ‘educational’ settings, may have actually provided a framework for the current continuous claims of its deterioration.

Following this, in the second factor at 7.2.2 ‘Mental health disclosure in careers guidance appointments’, careers advisers confirmed that the majority of the mental health and wellbeing concerns raised by students in careers guidance appointments are what were previously treated as normal impacts from university life. Despite some acknowledgement of this by public bodies tasked with safeguarding universities, there has been no admission that the whole institutional policy aimed at improving the student psychological outlook may have backfired and is having the opposite effect than the one intended. In other words, it is suggested that the current policy of supporting student mental health and wellbeing could actually be creating the problem it set out to solve and therefore there is an obligation on those who lead Higher Education policy to address the evidence for this.

Although in Chapter 6 careers advisers voiced some doubt that student mental health had actually deteriorated, it would appear that they have been influenced by the move to a whole university approach to believe that it has. In short, as the policy itself results in continuous reports of poorer student psychological health, this and wider mental health awareness raising campaigns may have negatively impacted careers advisers’ perceptions of student fragility

which in turn has necessitated them incorporating coaching and counselling approaches into their careers guidance practice accordingly.

This view of increased student frailty due to the policy change is further evidenced in the third section at 7.2.3, where careers advisers claimed that students today suffered from a lack of self-confidence compared to students 5-10 or more years ago. To careers advisers, this change in student self-belief has necessitated them directly replacing their traditional careers guidance practice with motivational confidence coaching which will be further examined in the next chapter 'We're all counsellors now'.

Finally, in the fourth section, 'Changes in mental health and wellbeing language', it is argued that in the context of universities as health settings, the medicalisation of formerly normal impacts of university life under the term 'mental health' exacerbates the tendency for students to consider themselves mentally unwell, which further inflates the numbers reporting themselves as such to their universities. Following their support for the whole university approach to student mental health and wellbeing, most careers advisers did not question the medicalisation of students' everyday concerns. However, a few careers advisers expressed disquiet at how it can lead students to mistakenly believe they may be unwell and one claiming that the pathologisation of students' normal emotions may lead to the undermining of the purpose of careers services themselves. In short, the current view of student frailty is the antithesis of careers guidance which relies on a view of students as independent, self-reliant agents who are capable of pursuing their career ambitions. It is further suggested that by adapting their practice to accommodate such a diminished view of students, careers advisers may be unintentionally effectively undermining not only careers guidance but students themselves. These two impacts from the change in universities approach to student mental health and wellbeing will be further investigated in the next chapter, 'We're all counsellors now'.

Chapter 8 We're all counsellors now

8.1 Introduction

In the last chapter it was argued that the adoption of a whole university approach towards improving students' emotional outlook may not only have fuelled more reports of its deterioration, but also altered the ways that students and careers advisers approach careers guidance appointments. In the context of these findings, the theme 'We're all counsellors now,' shows how careers advisers have responded to these changes by adapting their practice in one-to-one appointments with students away from careers guidance towards more counselling and coaching approaches. This is achieved through a critical analysis of the data gathered from careers adviser responses to a range of qualitative questions which were designed to explore these alterations in practice. The examination is further supported and illustrated with careers advisers' verbatim quotes which resulted in the emergence of four factors that support the overall theme and chapter title of 'We're all counsellors now'. These four factors are then outlined and analysed in sections towards a proposition of a need for not only a review of the training and role of university careers advisers, but also the suitability of the current institutional policy which claims to support student mental health and wellbeing. These proposals are further analysed towards a summation of final conclusions, contribution to knowledge and recommendations for future research in Chapter 9.4.

8.2 We're all counsellors now

The first of these four factors, 8.2.1 'Counselling comparisons', explores the ways in which careers advisers acknowledge that by using therapeutic techniques to support student mental health and wellbeing concerns they may be transgressing the professional boundaries between careers advisers and counsellors. This admission is investigated in more detail in the second section, 8.2.2 'More counselling and coaching techniques in careers guidance', which examines the process whereby careers advisers' appointments have become more focused on the student emotional outlook than was usual in the past. These therapeutic approaches are further interrogated in section three, 8.2.3 'Self-sourced and evolved training and practice', to show that careers advisers

have proactively of their own accord developed their practice in response to the expectations of whole institutional approaches to student mental health and wellbeing. This change in practice, which raises the possibility of a gap between careers advisers professional training and the current requirements made of their role, is analysed in the fourth section, 8.2.4 ‘Does the training of professional careers advisers require a review?’

8.2.1 Counselling comparisons.

‘Counselling comparisons’ briefly outlines the similarities and differences between careers guidance and personal counselling as practised by student counsellors. This is followed by an exploration of how careers advisers, in an effort to continue to support students, have increased their use of counselling techniques in their practice but in doing so may also have accidently contravened the boundaries between what were traditionally two distinct professional practices.

In considering the similarity between the two practices, on the one hand, like personal counselling, careers guidance - sometimes also known as careers counselling - involves employing techniques such as listening, probing, challenging and summarising to help students to identify their skills and interests ahead of helping them set careers goals and an action plan to achieve them (Egan 1990). On the other hand, as also noted in Chapter 4.2, these same techniques are also employed by student counsellors, but in this case to encourage students to reflect on their experiences and feelings in order to alleviate their emotional distress (Geldard *et al*. 2017). Moreover, whereas careers guidance relies on the notion of students being capable of pursuing careers goals, personal counselling is based on the idea that their current psychological outlook may be acting as a barrier to them exercising such self-sufficiency.

In addition, careers advisers, like counsellors, also utilise the ‘contracting’ technique with students at the outset of the careers guidance appointment. Contracting is employed to manage student expectations of what can be achieved in the appointment, but it also sets out the limits of the professional’s expertise. Within this, it is normal practice for careers advisers to explain that

whatever the student tells them is protected by confidentiality unless they think it could endanger their mental health or wellbeing, in which case they are obliged to contact other specialist departments at the university for support.

In relation to this comparison of the two practices, as discussed previously in Chapters 6.2.5 and 7.2.1, careers advisers thought that in the last five years - following the recommendation of institutional policy change on mental health and wellbeing in 2017 (UUK 2017) - students were more likely to talk about their anxieties in careers guidance appointments. This was demonstrated by Jess who explained:

> *'But I think a lot more disclosure goes on now of things in careers guidance interactions you know, like people say they are lonely or are troubled in some way.'*
>
> *(Jess, line 135)*

This was echoed by Charlie who said:

> *'But...I have been quite aware, recently, students actually mentioning their mental health and anxiety levels…'*
>
> *(Charlie, line 66)*

These views that recently students are more likely to talk about their feelings were also commented on by Nicky:

> *'(careers advisers) have all seen a big increase in people displaying mental health problems.'*
>
> *Nicky, line 147).*

As Nicky appears to be speaking on behalf of 'all' practitioners, this might well indicate that careers advisers are sharing these experiences with their colleagues. In other words, Jess, Charlie, and Nicky's views suggest that it is common knowledge amongst careers advisers that students' emotional outlook has become a much bigger feature of careers guidance appointments overall. In other words, in the context of the whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing urging student openness about their feelings, it is possible that careers guidance appointments themselves may have become an opportunity for

students to talk about their feelings. Given that, as noted earlier in this section, each careers guidance appointment starts with careers advisers informing students of their obligation to report any concerning psychological issues, this may well be viewed by them as an invitation to raise how they are feeling at that time. As this offer normally occurs at the outset of the appointment, it also may well sometimes lay the foundation for the student's emotional outlook, rather than their careers prospects, to become the focus of the conversation with the careers adviser. Furthermore, as ventured by Alex, when confronted with a student's feelings and emotions in an appointment, careers advisers might question their use of traditional careers guidance approaches.

> *'…dare I say it more of a counselling approach that maybe is coming to the fore here? Where it's less about moving forward in terms of career development and more about what the present issue is here which is about how you're feeling?'*
>
> *(Alex, line 233-236).*

As Alex implies, traditional careers guidance approaches based on supporting students to identify and pursue their careers goals might be inadequate, *'…less about moving forward…,'* when how the student is feeling becomes the subject of the conversation in the appointment. As Alex also suggests, managing student feelings might compel careers advisers to increase the use of their counselling techniques which could result in an overall more therapeutic approach being employed by careers advisers *'…a counselling approach…'*. These points by Jess, Charlie, Nicky, and Alex present strong support for the assertion that the significant growth in careers advisers using their counselling skills therapeutically in one-to-one careers guidance appointments stems at least partly from the recently implemented whole university policy on mental health and wellbeing which invites students to talk about their feelings. Further to Alex's s point, the way that some careers advisers explained the way their practice had changed was to compare it with that of counsellors. Lou and Pat may also be inferring this when they say:

> *'…we don't have any informal supervision. …it's, it's that space to offload and that I feel is really, really important and missing…. And sometimes you can be dealing with quite distressing health or well-being issues.'*

(Lou, line 188).

'…we should have access to supervision to kind of debrief …after certain appointments that maybe are quite distressing.'

(Pat, line 360).

Lou and Pat seem to be disgruntled because despite dealing with students' feelings in the same way as counsellors, they are not offered the professional support to manage the impacts of this on themselves and their practice. Meanwhile, other careers advisers such as Jess feel strongly about the different treatment of the two professions by their institutions:

'And... they (counsellors) have their one-to-one sessions …after their counselling. So, there's a lot more invested in their professional development than there is in ours.'

(Jess, line 232).

Jess is complaining that despite careers advisers supporting students' emotional health as required by their institutions, they are not given the same professional recognition as counsellors for doing so. These thinly veiled criticisms barely disguise careers advisers' resentment that their universities are failing in their duty of care to them by expecting them to manage student emotions without training or professional support, such as supervision, to do so. In addition, as further explained by Jess, another way that careers advisers demonstrate how their practice has become more like that of counsellors concerns the sort of practitioner their services will consider recruiting.

'My service does not employ inexperienced careers advisers because…oh my god, the things that potentially walk through your door and you have to unpack…'

(Jess, line 148-149)

The exclamation, *'oh my god'* expresses Jess's disquiet at how inexperienced careers advisers might react to some of the personal issues that are raised by students in careers guidance appointments. However, as also noted in Chapters 6.3 and 7.2.2, the whole university approach to student mental health and wellbeing may well prime careers advisers to expect students to display

emotional fragility in their careers guidance appointments, and some of them, such as Lou, appear to be somewhat pre-empting this expectation.

> *'If a student says … "I just need this particular piece of advice on how I'm going to find out about jobs… in Spain for this summer…." I will always check in to say, how are you feeling now? How confident are you feeling? Even if we haven't talked about well- being, or lack of confidence or lack of resilience or positivity.'*
>
> *(Lou, line 161-162)*

On the one hand, by inviting students to talk about their feelings, *'…how are you feeling…?'*, careers advisers like Lou could be accused of actively blurring the distinction between their role as a careers adviser and that of a student counsellor. On the other hand, as careers advisers are primed by their institutional mental health and wellbeing policy to expect students to have a poorer emotional outlook and be prepared to support them with it, they may feel compelled in their contracting and counselling approaches to enable a student's current feelings to become the focus of their appointments. However, as Alex points out, by doing so, careers advisers could then be incapable of following through with the appropriate support required by the student.

> *'…and I wondered, for the careers professional if they now feel that their training is insufficient to allow them to manage that conversation, particularly with for the most part our students are coming for a 20-minute interaction. So, the risk of exploring quite difficult topics and then opening a Pandora's box and then potentially left with a situation, you can't really respond appropriately. I think can be quite challenging for them, actually.*
>
> *(Alex, lines 185-187)*

Alex is explaining that given that the typical careers guidance appointment is usually only 20 minutes long, when careers advisers invite students to talk about their anxieties, *'…exploring quite difficult topics…'*they may be unintentionally encouraging them to embark on a conversation *'…opening a Pandora's box…'* which they are ill-equipped training wise *'…their training is insufficient…'* to deal with properly in such a short space of time. Furthermore, as Alex further adds, this situation risks negatively impacting the student *'...can't really respond to appropriately'* and the careers adviser *'…challenging for them….'*. As noted earlier in this section, these potential adverse emotional impacts raise the

question of the university's duty of care towards not only students, but also staff. In other words, by expecting careers advisers to support student mental health and wellbeing without the appropriate training to do so, the university may well be risking their psychological health too. This perceived lack of duty of care by universities will be discussed in 8.2.4 'Does careers adviser training require a review?'.

8.2.2 More counselling and coaching techniques in careers guidance appointments.

In 8.2.1 and also in Chapter 4.2, it was explained that unlike counsellors, careers advisers are trained to use basic counselling techniques only for the purpose of encouraging students to talk about their personal qualities in preparation for discussing career prospects. Section 8.2.1 also explored careers adviser perceptions that poorer student resilience in careers guidance appointments had impelled them to expand their use of these therapeutic techniques in their practice, leading them to liken their work to that of student counselling. In agreement with this view, The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), the professional body representing university careers advisers, claimed that increasingly practitioners felt the need to employ counselling-based approaches in their practice in an effort to improve students' emotional outlook and confidence before they could work with them to set and pursue career goals (AGCAS 2017). In this section, 'More counselling and coaching techniques employed in careers guidance appointments', the process whereby careers adviser professional practice has changed from one focused on the development of student career goals, to another which is more focused on their emotions, is explored in more detail. In this regard, when asked about what was different about careers guidance now compared to 5 or more years ago, Gerry had clear ideas about what had changed.

> *'Five years ago, my careers guidance was more 'transactional' with students turning up with a set of interests and aptitudes expecting to have them matched to jobs. Since then, my role is what I call more 'pure guidance' where I have to unpack student concerns, worries about the world of work with more stress and crying than ever before.'*
>
> *(Gerry, line 12)*

By *'pure guidance'* Gerry is referring to careers advisers use of their counselling skills, such as contracting, listening, probing etc., which they now appear to utilise to encourage students to talk about their worries, *'to unpack student concerns,'* compared to previously when they would only have been used to explore their qualities towards identifying suitable career options. In other words, according to Gerry, the focus of the careers guidance appointment has shifted from helping students identify suitable jobs to unearthing reasons for their anxiety instead. Furthermore, Gerry's use of the word 'unpack' was also echoed in 8.2.1 by Jess in '*…oh my god, the things that potentially walk through your door and you have to unpack…'* as well as Alex's use of *'…opening a pandoras box…'* implying that students are approaching appointments bearing a heavy load of concerns. For some careers advisers, these concerns may be deflecting them from the careers guidance process as they may feel compelled to use their counselling skills to resolve them either instead of, or as a pretext to being able to discuss a student's careers prospects. This point corresponds to those of Lou and Bernie which highlight their understanding of the role they now play:

> *'It's, how am I going to support you and guide you to feel better, if you like.' (Lou, line 157) and 'I think it's our role to make students feel positive and empowered about what they have rather than focusing on what they can have or don't have.' (Bernie, line 177)*

Lou and Bernie's perception of their role is different from the one normally associated with careers advisers which is to apply their skills and knowledge to guide students with their career prospects. In some cases, this process may well mean practitioners guiding students to deduce for themselves that they currently lack the suitable qualities or experience for their chosen careers. In other words, if practitioners now see it as their main objective to '*make the student feel positive'* or '*better*, they may avoid giving student careers advice which might distress them. However, as also argued in Chapters 3.3 and 7.2.2, since the whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing places safeguarding students' emotions ahead of all other objectives, it might be difficult for careers advisers to fulfil the responsibilities normally associated with their primary role. This claim corresponds with a point made by Alex:

> *'…what I'm conscious of is a tension for us in respect of adhering to, you know, the kind of ethical boundaries of our profession versus being employed by a university, which has or will have certain agendas, particularly around mental health and well-being.'*
>
> *(Alex, line 353-354)*

Alex's use of *'tension'* and *'certain agendas'* implies that careers advisers might be too afraid to practise normal careers guidance which they fear might negatively impact the student's emotional outlook. However, by not doing so, practitioners may also risk transgressing their *'ethical boundaries'* into counselling practice.

Another way that careers advisers may have sought to observe the whole institutional approach to student mental health and wellbeing is through the integration of coaching approaches into their careers guidance practice. As noted in Chapter 7.2.3, practitioners partly adopted these approaches in order to improve a perceived decline in self-confidence which was thought to be one of the main reasons for student anxiety about their career prospects. This suggestion is supported by Yates (2013) who claims that coaching techniques can improve students' sense of self-belief in preparation for setting career goals. Rae conveys how the issue of student under-confidence has gained importance in careers adviser practice:

> *'It is very much at the fore now when I am talking with students. I am explicitly thinking about how I build their confidence…'*
>
> *(Rae, line 109)*

The words *'…very much at the fore now….'*imply that nowadays, careers advisers like Rae are habitually concerned about student under-confidence in their appointments. Later on, Rae further adds:

> *'Before I was …giving them some ideas to explore their career and I'm thinking now that building confidence…helps them feel better about themselves.'*
>
> *(Rae, line 379)*

Rae's use of *'…helps them feel better about themselves…'* reveals that some careers advisers may be more concerned about building student self-belief than developing their career goals with them. In a similar vein, Rowan exclaims:

> *'Instilling self-belief is very important rather than just getting them to do stuff.'*
>
> *(Rowan, line 169)*

The phrase '*…getting them to do stuff.,* refers to advice that traditionally careers advisers gave students to help them research suitable careers. By Rowan's own admission, '*…rather than just …*', instilling students with self-confidence is now more important than practising traditional careers guidance. From this it could be suggested that Rowan supports the contention that students are less resilient than previously, which is implicit in the change to a whole university approach to student mental health and wellbeing, and therefore may justify these changes that careers advisers have made to their practice. In addition, another conceivable way that practitioners divulge their belief that students may be less capable than previously may be how some of them, such as Lee, admit that their practice has become more directive.

> *'I think I am becoming more directive as I think it is merited and will help the student. I am…going in and saying, "I think this is a confidence thing." I might do that earlier on instead of waiting for the student to say it.*
>
> *(Lee, lines 198-199)*

Here, Lee is making a judgement about a student's confidence on their behalf in the belief that it is in the best interests of their mental health and wellbeing to do so '*...as I think it is merited…*'. As careers advisers are trained to use their skills to assess a student's suitability for certain jobs and not their psychological outlook, by voicing their opinions about student behaviour, they not only risk their professional integrity but also students bringing complaints against them if they disagree with such judgements. In addition, by saying *'…instead of waiting for the student to say it.'*, Lee may be alluding to the fact that strictly speaking, being so directive goes against careers advisers training to always exercise professional impartiality in their practice (AGCAS 2022). Other careers advisers, such as Rae, also implied that they too may be transgressing these impartiality

rules in the interests of boosting what they perceive as poorer student confidence

> *'…usually careers advisers sit on the fence in their practice in that effort to be impartial… Our training has always taught us to shy away from being definite about anything like that. …to build confidence, we are being more absolute at that…you've built some really nice skills here. And so, you know, I'm making that decision… Rather than just letting them come to these conclusions themselves...'*
>
> *(Rae, lines 250-254)*

Rae clearly understands that it is not a careers adviser's job to make judgements about a student's qualities but to use their skills to get them to make sense of them themselves. After all, if careers advisers like Rae can pronounce that a student has '*…a nice set of skills…*', then there may be nothing to stop them from informing a student that they have a poor set of skills too. Moreover, as Rae further explains, this loss of impartiality may be widespread amongst fellow careers advisers.

> *'…conversations we are having…with other colleagues…we're almost whispering about it, "well, actually I do tell them." We're not doing what we're supposed to be doing, but…what we're doing is good for the student.'*
>
> *(Rae, line 280-281)*

Rae's colleagues express their uneasiness '*…almost whispering about…', '…not doing what we're supposed to be…'* about their lapses of impartiality at the same time as feeling compelled to do so as in their opinion, it is '*…good for the student*.' In other words, to these careers advisers, some students need their confidence boosted more than they need help with their career prospects.

However, if, as it is also argued in Chapter 7.3, these whole university policies which urge openness about anxieties may be unintentionally fuelling reports about students' deteriorating psychological health (Storrie *et al*. 2010; UUK 2017; Thorley 2017; Baber *et al*. 2021), then how should this formally impact the role of university careers advisers? In other words, if this policy itself is dysfunctional, this begs the question about whether careers advisers ought to be adapting their practice to accommodate changes in the emotional outlook of

students instead of guiding them with their career prospects. These questions will be further addressed and analysed in Chapter 9.

8.2.3 Self-sourced and evolved training and practice.

The previous section revealed how through unplanned adaptations of their counselling skills, careers advisers were no longer practising traditional careers guidance on its own. This section explores the ways in which careers advisers have self-initiated this revision to their practice either through teaching themselves new techniques and/or seeking out relevant training. Frankie, Jess, and Rae are clear about where the initiative to get suitably trained to support students comes from.

> *'I think you have to work on yourself'*
>
> *(Frankie, line 290)*

The words '*you have to…'* infer that the onus is on Frankie alone to get appropriately trained to support students. This is confirmed by Jess:

> *'The thing about all of them, I've had to train myself in all of these I've had to read books and attend courses…'*
>
> *(Jess, line 219).*

Jess's repetition of ''*I've had to…*' implies that if careers advisers don't teach themselves how to support students, no one else will. This is somewhat bolstered by Rae:

> *'Yeah, I certainly feel like it's something we've evolved ourselves.'*
>
> *(Rae, line 246)*

Together with Rae's use of *'We've evolved ourselves'*, these three quotes infer that careers advisers may be 'on their own' when it comes to progressing their practice which further implies that their training needs might well have been either overlooked or ignored by their employers. However, given the professed seriousness with which universities now treat the reported decline in student psychological health (Pollard 2021), it is arguably incumbent on them to provide

bespoke training for careers advisers in order to manage the impacts of this on their practice. This suggested lack of duty of care to university careers advisers and its effects on their future role and training will be discussed in the conclusions Chapter 9.

In relation to careers advisers accessing knowledge and training for themselves in order to keep supporting students, some participants explained how this had helped their practice.

> *'…coaching training which enabled me to develop my practice better.' (Gerry line 102); '…I am not CBT trained person but use bits of that.' (Jess, line 201) 'I'm training in something called Transactional Analysis….' (Frankie, line 203); 'My…coaching training has given me more confidence to deal with uncertainty in students, I have less fear of this…' (Rowan, line 180); '… but now I feel that the coaching approach is most useful, and I did do an additional coaching course…' (Leslie, line 193).*

These views imply that the additional instruction in counselling and coaching techniques which careers advisers have accessed themselves may be more effective for managing their one-to- one appointments with students than their original training in careers guidance. Moreover, as Frankie explains, not only do careers advisers have to find the training themselves, but it is also not aimed specifically at them:

> *'I have sourced training myself. So, I wouldn't say something specific has been put in place for careers advisers…'*
>
> *(Frankie, line 292-293)*

By *'something specific'* Frankie is implying that neither universities nor the university careers adviser's professional body AGCAS may have appreciated the impact that poorer student resilience has had on careers adviser practice. This is echoed by other practitioners when comparing the requirement for tailored training for careers advisers with the mental health training offered by their institutions:

> *'…it is different from mental health training that is specific to careers guidance, which…is more bespoke than mental health generally that's for everyone in the institution.'*

(Sam, line 284-285)

By *'different'* Sam is inferring that the basic mental health training for all university staff is inadequate for careers advisers as it is not designed to enhance their existing professional practice to enable them to effectively support students. However, this lack of customised training could also be an indication that neither universities nor AGCAS consider that careers advisers need such provision as it appears that to help them manage changes in the student outlook, they have proactively adapted their practice by themselves. Given that, as also noted in Chapters 3.3 and 7.2.2, the whole institutional approach to mental health and wellbeing places students' emotional health at the centre of their education, it is possible that some careers advisers may feel duty bound to check with students about how they are feeling at the start of an appointment. However, in doing so, practitioners might accidently make the student's emotions or concerns, rather than their career prospects, the focal point of the discussion. Moreover, as was also discussed in Chapters 4.2 and 7.2.2, given careers advisers are already trained to use personal counselling techniques such as contracting, listening, probing, and challenging to help students to identify the skills and interests relevant to possible careers, the process whereby they are now deploying these to improve students' psychological outlook may have gone unnoticed by some of them. On the other hand, the evidence that other practitioners have actively sought more therapeutic-based training to support students might also indicate that they are aware that sometimes they may be transgressing the ethical boundaries of their practice. This suggestion of careers advisers appearing to naturally evolve their practice to manage their consultations with students may be reflected by Gerry who exclaims:

'Careers advisers are bound to help someone sitting in front of them with issues regardless of what they may well be.'

(Gerry, line 132)

Gerry's use of *'bound to'* expresses the view that careers advisers' training in counselling techniques compels them to support students irrespective of what they need the help for. A few seconds later Gerry shrugs whilst remarking:

'But in some ways, we are not careers advisers anymore.'

(Gerry, line 135)

By *'not careers advisers anymore,'* Gerry implies that by observing the whole university approach to supporting mental health and wellbeing (Office for Students 2019), which treats the safeguarding of students' emotional outlook as central to institutional objectives, some careers advisers may have unintentionally assumed the role of substitute student counsellors. This compliance with university policy may not only have led practitioners to unintentionally change the nature of their role, but also neglect the parts of their professional practice which acknowledge and support the student as an active agent who is capable of pursuing career goals independently. This relegation of the key aspects of careers adviser practice is mentioned by Alex:

'…I do feel quite strongly that we are disabling not empowering our students currently. …because we are telling them that they are inept that they are fragile that they can't cope that they can't manage and think and act independently. And that's what we're collectively contributing to, the situation that we are now faced with, which is a real shame.'

(Alex, lines 357-360)

According to Alex, by extending their counselling skills in ways discussed earlier, careers advisers may well be '*contributing to'* a whole university effort *'collectively'* which inadvertently signals to students that they cannot be relied upon to function as autonomous adults in pursuit of their ambitions. In other words, by changing their practice in the ways described in order to conform to these all-encompassing institutional approaches to mental health and wellbeing, careers advisers may not only be affirming students' sense of fragility but also signalling to them that they are incapable of pursuing a successful career which is opposite the goal of traditional careers guidance practice.

Moreover, Gerry's point *'…. we are not careers advisers anymore.',* also begs the question that if careers advisers are no longer practising traditional careers guidance, what is their formal role and what changes if any need to be made to their training to ensure they are properly equipped to manage their work with students?

8.2.4 Does the training of professional careers advisers require a review?

The previous sections demonstrated how careers advisers had proactively adapted their practice in response to increased student openness about their emotions in careers guidance appointments. Despite some awareness of how this alteration may have led them to cross professional boundaries with counselling and risk invalidating the impartiality of their practice, it is possible that overall practitioners may have underestimated how far their practice has moved away from traditional careers guidance. To further examine this gap in careers advisers' understanding of the role they now play, this section explores their views on the aspects of their current practice that they think should be added to their training to support students. This investigation will be followed by a discussion of what such changes could mean for university careers advisers and students in the context of the whole institutional policy to support student mental health and wellbeing.

In section 8.2.1 'Counselling comparisons', it was noted that one way that careers advisers described the blurring of their practice with that of counsellors was their repeated references to the latter's 'supervision' support which is a compulsory part of their professional practice. Several careers advisers felt that they also needed this type of support.

> *'…we should have access to supervision to kind of debrief after certain appointments...'*
>
> *(Pat, line 360)*

Careers advisers like Pat would prefer to discuss their handling of some of their appointments with another practitioner. Another careers adviser thought such a debrief was about more than just how they managed the consultation:

> *'…have supervision where they can talk with their supervisor about what's happened and how they feel about it.'*
>
> *(Lee, line 397)*

Some careers advisers like Lee would like supervision not only to have their approach to the appointment verified by another professional, but also to get

the opportunity to talk about how it might have affected them personally. Lou builds on Lee's point by implying that supervision would provide a kind of relief for careers advisers.

> *'…it's that space to offload and that I feel is really, really important and missing.'*
>
> *(Lou, line 187).*

By *'…offload…'* Lou implies that supervision might help careers advisers unburden themselves about how it has affected them, which may also signify a concern that it could negatively impact their own psychological health. Most careers advisers in this study thought that they would benefit from supervision mentoring from another professional, not only to discuss the approach they took in the appointment, but also to talk about how it impacted them emotionally.

> *'And that supported reflection (supervision) I think is so crucial to keep ourselves safe…'*
>
> *(Lou, line 209).*

By 'safety' Lou is referring to protection from emotional harms. This notion of one-to-one appointments risking careers advisers' mental health and wellbeing is also mentioned by Gerry.

> *'Sometimes the professional will not feel they can allow the client to bring their emotion into the discussion depending on how the professional is feeling themselves, in consideration of their own self-care.'*
>
> *(Gerry, line 95)*

Gerry appears to imply that depending on how they are feeling at the time, some practitioners may not always permit students to express how they feel in appointments. Lou and Gerry's views beg the question as to whether careers advisers should be dealing with such a level of student '…*emotion*…' in the first place. This perception by some careers advisers that in supporting students they may be exposing themselves to emotional harm recalls universities' responsibilities towards their staff which was also cited in the document which

launched the whole institutional approach to mental health and wellbeing (Universities UK, 2017).

> *'The whole university approach recommends that all aspects of university life promote and support student and staff mental health.'*
>
> *(UUK 2017, p. 12).*

Careers adviser responses to changes in their institutions mental health and wellbeing approach suggests that although they understand that it is now their responsibility to support students, they may be unaware that the policy also expects their university to protect them from any emotional harm which might be incurred through this obligation. Therefore, it is suggested that despite extolling the virtues of a whole university approach to supporting students' emotional health, universities may have neglected to acknowledge how this could adversely affect the mental health of staff and promote support for them. As well as raising the possible requirement for careers advisers to receive therapeutic support because of their dealings with students, Gerry and Lou's views also recalls observations made by Sam and Leslie in Chapter 6.2.5:

> *'…. where I actually see a change is that we talk much more about mental health…'*
>
> *(Frankie, line 267)*

and

> *'…there's a massive push for people to talk about mental health'*
>
> *(Leslie, line 152).*

Sam's use of *'we'* and Leslie's of *'people'* shows that it is not only students but the wider public who are encouraged to *'talk much more'* and *'pushed'* to be open about their emotional struggles. This is also re-enforced by Lee in Chapter 7.2.1:

> *'… and also, externally lots of well- known people talk about their mental health issues…'*
>
> *(Lee, line 220)*

These views imply that the wider social invitation to openness about emotional struggles could well be encouraging careers advisers themselves to present student emotions in careers guidance appointments as a risk to their own psychological health. However, regardless of the reasons why careers advisers raised the issue of their personal safety in careers guidance appointments, this does not exonerate universities from their duty of care to ensure they are properly trained to support students. Such a responsibility would require a UK wide review of the current role of university careers advisers which may well expose disparities between the job they were employed to do and the one that, due to the change in student mental health and wellbeing policy, they are obliged to undertake. It follows that such an important review would also require universities to not only decide what support they now wish careers advisers to offer students, but also make recommendations about the kind of training needed for them to do this effectively. In connection with this issue of the kinds of training that careers advisers might now require to offer students appropriate support, Rae offered an insightful example.

> *'We (careers advisers) were trained to unpick their (*student's*) experience and getting them to talk about it.' (Rae, line 229) and 'The (*that*) training was more about helping clients to clarify and understand what they are saying rather than reflection per se to build confidence and reassure which is what we do now' (Rae, line 234)*

Rae is counterposing the reflection technique that careers advisers are trained to undertake as part of their traditional careers guidance practice with the one they now use in order to build student confidence in careers guidance appointments. Careers advisers training in reflection involves learning how to probe students' responses to questions they ask them about their interests and skills in order to help them identify suitable career options. However, as Rae claims, the kind of reflection she uses in her practice is different as it encourages students to think about and practice positive behaviours in order to build their self-belief.

It follows from this that on the one hand, if careers advisers are to be equipped to deal with the range of student emotions that they may encounter, then they may require training in reflection skills to build student confidence. On the other hand, if coaching student self-belief is recognised through its inclusion in their

training, then they may no longer practising careers guidance. These suggestions are reinforced not only by practitioners such as Rae judging that nowadays their role is to coach student self-confidence, but also their expanded use of counselling techniques and requests for supervision and professional parity with counsellors. These suggestions are further reinforced by the evidence in 8.2.2 and 8.2.3, where traditional careers guidance approaches were deemed inadequate for the effective management of some one-to-one appointments with students, and also by the view of careers advisers such as Leslie that to do their job effectively, they require a wide range of skills.

> *'I think it would be good idea to have that (coaching) in the toolkit of being a careers professional.'*
>
> *(Leslie, line 316)*

Leslie's use of the word *'toolkit'* recalls comments made by careers advisers in 8.2.3 where they mention an array of techniques such as Transactional Analysis and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) that they have voluntarily trained in to manage the kinds of student consultations they are now faced with. This also echoes the discussion in Chapter 6.2.5 where careers advisers are primed to expect students to be less resilient than previously, presenting with a range of behaviours and issues requiring them to have a variety of counselling and coaching based techniques at their disposal. This point evokes a remark made by Steph also in Chapter 6.2.5:

> *'…because you don't know who's going to be in front of you. You don't know what they're going to say'*
>
> *(Steph, line 327)*

By *'you don't know who's…'* and *'you don't know what…'* Steph is implying that careers guidance appointments have become unpredictable and therefore possibly approached by careers advisers with a degree of apprehension. This notable transformation in appointments was also raised by other careers advisers including Bernie and Lou.

> *'So, there was almost straightforward conversations that we would have had maybe five years ago. I don't think they exist.*

(Bernie, line 70-80).

By *'straightforward,'* Bernie infers that five years ago careers advisers knew what to expect from students in appointments. Bernie's view is reinforced by Lou:

> *'So, some of it is very much that sort of information and education, however, I would say that's pretty limited. Now, I very rarely get that.'*
>
> *(Lou, line 38)*

Lou's use of '*pretty limited*' to describe these approaches signals their inadequacy for the kinds of issues that students bring to appointments. By following this up with *'…very rarely get that.'* Lou further conveys the possible distance between how careers advisers currently practice and traditional careers guidance.

These comments not only suggest that careers guidance appointments bear little resemblance to those conducted five or more years ago, but also that careers advisers favour the utilisation of the widest possible range of tools to enable them to manage their student appointments effectively. On the one hand, it could be argued that as it is normal for all professions to evolve their practice in response to the changes in demand from their clientele, then it is incumbent on university careers advisers to do the same. However, as evidenced throughout this chapter, some careers advisers have proactively attempted to equip themselves with the tools to manage the change in student outlook, but by doing so without planning or support from their employers or professional body, they risk not only transgressing their ethical boundaries with counselling but also exposing themselves to claims of personal bias.

8.3 Conclusion and discussion

The overall research question of this study concerns ways that university careers advisers may have adapted their non-therapeutic careers guidance practice towards supporting changes in student mental health and wellbeing. In support of this enquiry, Chapter 6 examined practitioners views of not only what factors may be influencing these changes in students emotional outlook, but also ways

that they may be accommodating these in their careers guidance practice. This critical analysis led to the conclusion that despite some uncertainty as to whether student mental health had actually got worse, careers advisers had altered their practice in response to changes in their behaviour in careers guidance appointments. Chapter 7 builds on these arguments by analysing whether the changes in institutional expectations of how university staff support poorer student mental health and wellbeing may also have influenced how careers advisers support students in careers guidance appointments. These analyses lead to the conclusion that it is possible that the adoption of a whole university approach towards improving the student emotional outlook may not only have fuelled more reports of a deterioration in their psychological health, but at the same time altered the ways that students and careers advisers approach careers guidance appointments.

This chapter further develops these arguments by examining practitioner views of how these changes in institutional policy and student behaviour in appointments has required them to make changes in their careers guidance practice which in turn raises questions about the suitability of their current role and training going forward.

In section 8.2.1, the suggestion that careers advisers were changing their practice to support students was analysed by examining their increased use of contracting and counselling skills to support students' feelings rather than their career prospects in appointments. This intensification of the use of their therapeutic skills for a different purpose than the one for which they were trained was highlighted when some careers advisers complained that despite working with students in a comparable way to student counsellors, they had not been afforded the same professional recognition for doing so. This employment of counselling-based approaches to unpack student worries was further evidenced when although unintentional, some careers advisers actively pre-empted their expectation of more fragile students by inviting them to make their feelings rather than their careers prospects the focus of the careers guidance appointment. Furthermore, the analysis also concluded that the increased level of engagement with student emotional worries was in danger of negatively impacting careers advisers own psychological health, which raised the possibility of a failure of their university's duty of care towards them.

Following this, the aim in 8.2.2 was to scrutinise practitioners use of these counselling- based techniques in more detail in order to clarify the process whereby their practice now sometimes focuses more on student feelings and emotions than it does on their career goals. The analysis of practitioner responses concluded that because students were bringing more worries, anxieties and poorer self-belief into careers guidance appointments, careers advisers felt compelled to focus their counselling-based practice towards unpacking these concerns and building confidence instead of discussing career prospects. In other words, despite not being trained to use counselling approaches for therapeutic purposes, practitioners had felt that due to the whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing, it was their responsibility to help students in this way. Therefore, it is argued that the aim of careers adviser professional practice had changed from one which was concerned to support students reaching their career goals to another which sought to improve their emotional outlook. As these two objectives are not comparable, it is deduced that the whole university approach to supporting student psychological health, which encourages the openness and safeguarding of feelings, has compelled careers advisers to not only take responsibility to adapt their practice but in doing so risk transgressing their professional impartiality and the boundaries of their role. Moreover, it is also concluded that as careers guidance depends on the notion of the student acting as an autonomous adult with the ability to independently pursue careers goals, careers advisers' substitution of this with counselling or coaching approaches to support worries or lack of self-belief risks them undermining this idea. In other words, through the utilisation of some of their therapeutic techniques for different purposes, practitioners could be signalling to students that they consider them incapable of getting and keeping a career, which is the opposite aim of the practice of careers guidance.

In 8.2.3 it is argued that as neither their professional body AGCAS nor universities themselves have offered careers advisers specific professional training to support students who have a poorer emotional outlook, practitioners have taken it upon themselves to both alter their practice and gain additional instruction. As the only training offered to careers advisers were those that raised all university staff awareness about student distress and risk of suicide,

these have influenced practitioners to not only get more training on their own accord, but also adapt their own practice accordingly. In other words, these courses that form part of the whole institutional approach to protecting students' mental health and wellbeing, which place student's emotional health at the forefront of their education, have led practitioners to not only pre-judge student fragility but also feel obliged to evolve their practice to continue to assist students. This notion of careers advisers instinctively changing their practice could indicate that they may have underestimated how far their role has moved away from traditional careers guidance and may also be a reason why neither AGCAS nor universities have sought to offer them formal training to continue to support students.

A further examination of these disparities in practice at 8.2.4 analysed careers advisers' views on which aspects they consider needed to be added to their training in order to adequately equip them to manage the changes in the student outlook. Through unearthing broad evidence which included requests for supervision support, admissions of risking impartiality and emotional health, and personal sourcing of a range of coaching and counselling training, careers advisers are clearly demonstrating that they do not consider their current formal training to be adequate for the kinds of student demands placed on them. On the one hand, it is possible that careers advisers raising concerns about threats to their own emotional health may also be a result of the impact of institutional mental health awareness raising policies on practitioners themselves. On the other hand, it is also evident that given that universities appear to expect careers advisers to support student concerns, they may have failed in their duty of care to them as they have not offered them adequate training to do so effectively. Moreover, although careers advisers understand that the whole institutional mental health and wellbeing strategy expects them to support students, they do not seem to realise that as this policy also applies to staff, their university is expected to protect them from emotional harm incurred through their practice.

From this summation, it is clear that there needs to be a review of not only the kinds of support universities wish careers advisers to offer students, but also the whole institutional approach to mental health and wellbeing. With these conclusions and the accompanying evidence, Higher Education Institutions and

AGCAS should be better equipped to re-consider not only the future training and practice of those engaged in the professional field of university careers guidance, but also all institutional approaches to supporting student mental health and wellbeing.

Chapter 9 Conclusions, contribution to knowledge and recommendations.

9.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to answer the research questions which were posed in Chapter 1 and explore the contribution that they make to the fields of university careers guidance and UK Higher Education's support for student mental health and wellbeing. This aim will be pursued firstly by a critical analysis of the combined conclusions from both the views of participant careers advisers in Chapters 6,7 and 8 and those of the background documentary and literature-based Chapters 2, 3 and 4 in light of the study's research questions. These outcomes will then form the basis of the study's contribution to existing knowledge which concern the need to reconsider not only the professional training and practice of careers advisers but also the way that UK universities support student mental health and wellbeing. The chapter then concludes with an acknowledgement of its limitations and suggested areas for further research.

9.2 Aims of Study

The broad objective of this study is to contribute to a shared understanding of ways that university careers advisers have changed their careers guidance practice in order to support the reported deterioration in student mental health and wellbeing (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2017; UUK 2018; Baber *et al*. 2021). In informing this objective, the enquiry seeks to critically analyse how social, economic, and educational developments have not only impacted the historical evolution of university careers guidance, but also the student experience of Higher Education itself. Furthermore, it is intended that insights from these, viewed together with key findings from the primary fieldwork designed to capture the views of 16 experienced university careers advisers, will form evidence for a need to review not only careers advisers training and practice but also how UK Higher Education as a whole supports student mental health and wellbeing.

9.3 The research question and research sub-questions with related conclusions.

The overarching research question:

> In what ways have university careers advisers evolved their traditionally non-therapeutic practice towards supporting changes in student mental health and wellbeing?

This broad ranging question was designed with the objective of examining any alterations that careers advisers may have made to their practice to enable them to continue to assist students amid what has been referred to as a 'crisis' in their mental health (Baber *et al*. 2021, p.1). Furthermore, in order to assist her in evaluating whether this overall research question has been fully addressed, the researcher formed three further objectives in the form of research sub-questions around individual careers adviser perspectives, institutional expectations, and ways any conclusions from these might be put into practice.

Objective 1 *Individual perspectives of careers advisers.*

The first group of research sub-questions (1.1 and 1.2) were designed to help elucidate not only careers advisers' observations of alterations in student behaviour but also the meanings that they ascribed to these in the hope that this might further unearth their views of what forces may be driving such changes. Thereafter, the group's second sub-question sought to determine what modifications practitioners had made to their practice to keep supporting students and whether these were merely adaptations to their current careers guidance approaches or the adoption of entirely new techniques. Furthermore, as the overall aim of the research was also to examine the broader impacts of changes in UK educational policy on not only students but also careers advisers themselves, participants were asked whether they felt that these changes to their practice were made of their own volition or obliged by their institutions.

> 1.1 Do careers advisers perceive any changes in how students utilise careers guidance appointments and if so, what are these and some of the reasons provided for any change?

Not only did careers advisers observe that students were far more open about their stress and anxieties in one-to one appointments than they had been previously, but also that this was a direct result of awareness raising campaigns about the dangers to mental health and wellbeing from not only their institution but the media more broadly. It is also argued that these expressions of the importance of being open about one's vulnerability may also have influenced careers advisers' own views of the extent of student fragility as they have others who work with students (Furedi 2017; Haidt and Lukianoff 2018; Brooks 2018). This notion is supported by practitioners' somewhat one-sided view that social media has only malign impacts on students, as well as their expectations that they would be more stressed about the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on their career prospects than they actually turned out to be. These wider views that students today are more fragile than previous generations, are also expressed not only in the way that they are depicted as vulnerable or 'put upon' by their universities who are blamed for taking their time and money in return for years of student debt and underemployment (Office for Students 2019; Brooks 2018) but also by the notion that some of them require more support from their lecturers than before (Molesworth *et al*. 2010; Nixon and Scullion 2021). Although students demanding more attention from academics could likewise be a sign of the degree of importance that they now attach to getting a good degree to secure enhanced employment prospects, it may equally endorse careers advisers' observations that students appear to be under more pressure from university life than previously. Some careers advisers also pointed out that changes in parenting and schooling approaches might also have made some students more reliant on support than their predecessors. These notions are supported by views that moves to more protective parenting (Haidt and Lukianoff 2018; Jones 2007), despite children being safer than they ever were (Furedi 2001), urges students to expect more protection at university than their predecessors (Haidt and Lukianoff 2018; Twenge 2017). It is further argued that these representations of fragility have been projected to students earlier through their schooling experience. The early 21st century alterations to the school curriculum, which attest to the essential role of emotions in the learning process, encourages pupils and students to focus more on their feelings than their thoughts which could sometimes be at the expense of engaging with ideas especially if these make them feel uncomfortable (Craig 2007; Spratt 2017,

Furedi 2017; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2019). This notion also recalls the growth of calls for ‘trigger warnings’ (Vatz 2016, p.51) and ‘safe spaces’ (Furedi 2017, p.70) and the widespread promotion of safety in universities which is also discussed in Chapters 2.4 and 3.3. It follows that through being taught the primacy of feelings at school, some students may find it harder to rationalise that their stress and anxiety are normal impacts from student life, concluding instead that they are more fragile than they actually are. These protective approaches are also mirrored by universities’ adoption of ‘all’, ‘whole’ or ‘holistic’ institutional policies to supporting students’ psychological outlook which claim that in order to prevent their mental health deteriorating, they not only need to be educated in the risks that university poses to them, but also encouraged to be open about how this makes them feel. This policy’s advocacy of openness as a remedy for poorer mental health and wellbeing is also reflected by careers advisers' insistence that students are far more likely than previously to talk about how stressed and anxious they are in careers guidance appointments.

> 1.2 How do careers advisers revise their practice to accommodate perceived changes in student use of careers guidance appointments? Are these revisions imposed or self-adapted?

These whole institutional approaches to supporting student mental health and wellbeing combined with wider social and educational changes in the significance given to emotions, has changed how careers advisers approach their one-to-one careers guidance appointments with students. Not only have these developments heightened practitioners' awareness of the importance that their institution attaches to safeguarding students, but they have also primed them to expect students to be more anxious in appointments and even in some cases invite them to talk about how they are feeling. Moreover, as one of the Graduate Attributes desired by employers is good personal and interpersonal skills, sometimes referred to as Emotional Intelligence (Salovey and Mayer 1990; Goleman 1995), this could be another reason why careers advisers not only consider student openness about their emotions to be a positive development, but also possibly encourage it. In this context, careers advisers might not consider it a problem that they are now using their careers-based counselling skills to encourage students to open up about their emotional concerns. Therefore, given their counselling-based training and also their role in

supporting the development of Graduate Attributes, it is argued that practitioners have somewhat imperceptibly adapted their counselling-based approaches in appointments in response to student worries. Furthermore, these alterations in their practice also support institutional expectations that it is now the responsibility of all university staff to safeguard student mental health and wellbeing which likewise addresses the research sub-questions 2.1 and 2.2:

> 2.1 To what extent is student mental health and wellbeing formally and informally integrated into the advising role of HE careers advisers?
>
> 2.2 How much is it expected that careers advisers will be able to deal with changes in student mental health and wellbeing within their current practice?

In other words, given that they are trained in the use of these therapeutic techniques to guide student career choices, practitioners have surmised that the whole university approach actually expects them to use these to support students with their stress and anxiety. However, as careers advisers also reported that they have felt compelled to access additional training themselves in order to continue to assist students, this indicates that universities have not adequately equipped staff to manage changes in student behaviour which addresses research sub-questions 2.1 and 2.2 regarding institutional expectations and responsibilities.

Moreover, given the now broader range of demands that students now seem to require of the one-to-one careers guidance appointment, most careers advisers now practice a hybrid model of careers guidance, one that includes not only their original brief of matching students to suitable occupations but now also counselling and motivational coaching, sometimes known as ‘career coaching’ (Frigerio *et al*. 2021). This model is quite different from the one that university careers advisers traditionally practiced, and which is also still used to train them today. Furthermore, this conclusion also addresses research sub-questions 3.1 and 3.2 regarding careers advisers future training needs.

> 3.1 Is current careers adviser training and CPD adequate for dealing with student mental health and wellbeing?

> 3.2 If there are agreed changes in how students utilise careers guidance appointments, in what ways should these be reflected in careers adviser training and on-going professional development?

Put differently, before there can be any recommendations made about the future training requirements for university careers advisers, there needs to be a recognition that their current training and CPD provision is inadequate for the range of student queries that they now have to address in the careers guidance appointment.

Objective 2 *Institutional demands and expectations.*

This issue of the nature of institutional expectations of careers advisers is further pursued in the second group of research sub-questions (2.1 and 2.2) which attempt to uncover the overall impact of the university's changed strategy towards student psychological health on careers adviser practice. The first sub-question in this group seeks to understand not only the nature of the formal mental health and wellbeing training offered to careers advisers, but also whether it was adequate to support the range of behavioural changes in students seeking careers guidance support. Subsequently, the second research sub-question attempts to understand whether, if there were deficiencies in the formal training and support offered, careers advisers had done anything to bridge this gap and had this been acknowledged by their institution.

> 2.1 To what extent is student mental health and wellbeing formally and informally integrated into the advising role of HE careers advisers?

> 2.2 How much is it expected that careers advisers will be able to deal with changes in student mental health and wellbeing within their current practice?

Despite these whole institutional policies expecting all staff, rather than just counselling, to safeguard students' emotions, the only formal training courses offered to them are those which give instruction in how to detect signs of suicide ideation or severe mental illness. As these institutionally holistic strategies are also associated with wider social moves to de-stigmatise mental illness, like most staff, careers advisers were very supportive of their approaches which urge students to speak openly about their worries and anxieties. At the same time, as the terms used to describe mental health and wellbeing have also

become medicalised (Conrad 2005; Horowitz and Wakefield 2007), this has resulted in students tending to conflate everyday anxieties with more severe mental health concerns (Barkham *et al*. 2019; Baber *et al*. 2021), resulting in an elision of what were formally considered as normal impacts from university life with what were also previously clinically diagnosed mental illnesses. Careers advisers confirmed this when they claimed that the majority of mental health and wellbeing concerns that students raised in appointments were what they previously would have treated as normal impacts from university life. At the same time, practitioners also insisted that what they were seeing in students in appointments was not necessarily an actual growth in mental ill health, but an increase in their propensity to talk about their feelings. Therefore, despite this scepticism that students were more prone to mental illness than previously, and possibly also due to the prominence and regularity of reports of a deterioration in their mental health and wellbeing (Storrie *et al*. 2010; Thorley 2017; UUK 2018; Pereira *et al*. 2019; Baber *et al*. 2021), careers advisers appear to have adopted a 'better safe than sorry' approach by adapting their practice to support them with their stress and anxiety in appointments.

> 2.2 How much is it expected that careers advisers will be able to deal with changes in student mental health and wellbeing within their current practice?

This compromise in practice is also reinforced not only by careers advisers' overall understanding that it was now part of their job to support their students' mental health and wellbeing, but also by their strongly held view that students exhibited less self-confidence than previously. This notion of lower self-belief in students has also compelled careers advisers to replace traditional careers guidance practices with motivational confidence coaching approaches which addresses research sub-question 2.2 as well as 1.1 and 1.2. respectively.

> 1.1 Do careers advisers perceive any changes in how students utilise careers guidance appointments and if so, what are these and some of the reasons provided for any change?

> 1.2 How do careers advisers revise their practice to accommodate perceived changes in student use of careers guidance appointments? Are these revisions imposed or self-adapted?

Despite their broad support for these whole institutional strategies, some careers advisers complained that even though they were now giving students therapeutic assistance, unlike counsellors, they were not afforded any professional recognition for doing so. Other practitioners also claimed that even though they had not been formally trained to deal with emotional concerns, as students were raising these and also exhibiting poor levels of confidence, they felt impelled to re-focus the conversation in appointments away from careers prospects towards unpacking worries and building self-belief. Moreover, the influence of these institutional campaigns which urge openness about concerns have encouraged some practitioners to pre-empt such talk by inviting students to make their feelings rather than their careers prospects the first thing they discuss in the careers guidance appointment. This change of emphasis also means that sometimes a careers adviser's primary professional objective of supporting students towards reaching their career goals is being supplanted by one which seeks to improve their emotional outlook or build their confidence. As these two objectives are not directly comparable, the whole institutional strategies which compel careers advisers to adapt their practice also risks them transgressing the boundaries of their role. In other words, as traditional careers guidance depends on the notion of students being capable of independently pursuing their own career goals, by utilising therapeutic techniques to support them emotionally, careers advisers could be inadvertently signalling to them that they consider them to be incapable of the self-reliance required to secure these.

Therefore, these policies, which not only problematise normal concerns but also encourage openness about them, have impelled careers advisers to intensify their use of therapeutic-based skills to support students but without adequate institutional support to do so. However, by inadvertently undermining students' sense of their personal potential for good career prospects, careers advisers may be sometimes also unintentionally contributing to the problem of students considering themselves to be more fragile than they actually may be. As also argued in Chapter 3.3, despite some recognition by public bodies that these whole institutional awareness raising policies might be leading some students to think that they are less capable than they are or unwell when they are not, there has as yet been no call for their review. In other words, as there are signs

that the current approach to supporting student mental health and wellbeing could be creating the problem it set out to solve, then there is an obligation on those who lead Higher Education policy to address the evidence for this.

Objective 3 *Theory into practice*.

The final group of research sub-questions (3.1 and 3.2) used the chief findings from the first two to help determine whether given the reported changes in students mental health and wellbeing, the current training and CPD for university careers advisers is sufficient in enabling them to continue to support students.

> 3.1 Is current careers adviser training and CPD adequate for dealing with student mental health and wellbeing?
>
> 3.2 If there are agreed changes in how students utilise careers guidance appointments, in what ways should these be reflected in careers adviser training and on-going professional development?

The argument that careers advisers have unintentionally moved away from the original objectives of careers guidance implies that either they require additional training to support students as suggested by research sub-question 3.2, or that traditional university careers guidance is no longer required by universities in its current form. This possible need for additional training is evidenced by careers advisers themselves when they not only instinctively adapt their counselling skills to support student concerns in appointments, but also take personal responsibility to gain instruction in wider therapeutic and coaching techniques. These testimonies, and also practitioner requests to receive the professional supervision support that is afforded to counsellors when working with troubled students, begins to address sub-research questions in section 3, but also 2.1 and 2.2.

> 2.1 To what extent is student mental health and wellbeing formally and informally integrated into the advising role of HE careers advisers?
>
> 2.2 How much is it expected that careers advisers will be able to deal with changes in student mental health and wellbeing within their current practice?

However, these arguments also beg the question as to whether university careers advisers should be supporting such students in the first place and therefore whether the current role of careers guidance practitioners themselves, as currently constituted, is fit for purpose.

This need for a review of the current practice of university careers guidance and for additional training is further evidenced by practitioners not only risking their impartiality but also by possibly endangering their own psychological health in order to continue to support students. Given that the whole institutional approach to mental health and wellbeing is staff inclusive, this implies that universities may have failed in their duty of care to careers advisers. This conclusion also enlightens sub-research question 2.2 regarding institutional expectations of practitioners being expected to cope with changes in student emotional behaviour in careers guidance appointments and reveals inadequacies in support for careers advisers to do so effectively.

> 2.2 How much is it expected that careers advisers will be able to deal with changes in student mental health and wellbeing within their current practice?

However, as noted in Chapter 8.2.4, since this whole institutional approach invites not only students but also staff to open up about their feelings, it may be that like students, what careers professionals consider to be dangers to their mental health are actually normal stresses and anxieties associated with the kinds of work that they do. Put differently, as also noted in Chapter 7.2.1, since these holistic approaches are simultaneously emulated in public mental health awareness raising campaigns, then it is unlikely that careers advisers are completely immune from the effects of these on their own views of their mental health (Furedi 2017). As also noted in Chapter 7.2.2, this view accords with that of the Office for Students (OfS):

> *'While there has undoubtedly been an increase in students seeking out help, this is not necessarily evidence that the current generation of young people (who make up the majority of entrants to higher education) is more prone to mental ill health.'*
>
> *(Office for Students 2019, p.2)*

Despite some acknowledgement among UK Higher Education policymakers that this whole institutional strategy may well be contributing to the problem it was set up to improve (Office for Students 2019, p.2), there has been little attempt to review its effects on either students or on all university staff who are responsible for its delivery. Moreover, given that this way of managing mental health and wellbeing in universities does not appear to be reducing the numbers of students who are reporting themselves to have mental health problems or concerns (Baber *et al*. 2021), it is timeous to recommend its urgent review. This proposal is further bolstered by the conclusions of the most recent scholarly research which offers some support to the claims that these awareness raising policies may be unintentionally fuelling the problem that they were set up to improve (Foulkes and Andrews 2023).

9.4 Contribution to current knowledge and recommendations

9.4.1 The whole university approach to student mental health and wellbeing requires a review.

Apart from a few exceptions (Furedi 2017; Hayes and Ecclestone 2019; Barkham *et al*. 2019; Baber *et al*. 2021), this change to a whole university approach to managing mental health and wellbeing has been widely endorsed. This support may be due to its claims that speaking openly about feelings not only prevents a further deterioration in emotional distress but also de-stigmatises mental illness itself. Backing for such views is widespread as evidenced by the number of mental health and wellbeing related campaigns across the UK which remind everyone to be aware of the risks to their psychological health. According to Mental Health UK (2023), throughout the calendar year there are no fewer than thirteen occasions where the public are reminded of their potential fragility, from Children's Mental Health Week in February to Stress Awareness Month in April and Mental Health Awareness Week in May. At the same time, the numbers of young workers (non-students) from across the UK who cite mental ill health as a reason for not being able to work continues to grow. According to the Office for National Statistics (Office for National Statistics 2023), between 2019 and 2022 there was a 24% (20,000) increase in 16-34 years olds citing mental illness, phobias, and nervous disorders as reasons for them being unable to work long

term. Not only was this growth the biggest across workers of all age groups, but as it was part of a trend whose biggest increase occurred in 2019 before the Covid 19 pandemic, it cannot be solely attributable to the impacts from the disease itself (Office for National Statistics 2023). These reports of deteriorating mental health in young workers should add to public concern that these holistic awareness raising approaches, which are not confined to university but society wide, may be unintentionally aggravating the problem they were set up to improve

As also noted in Chapters 3.3 and 7.2.4, it is only recently that the possible downsides to this strategy, such as leading some to consider that they are more seriously ill than they are, has begun to become the focus of some academic research (Foulkes and Andrews 2023; Foulkes and Stringaris 2023). However, as also reported in Chapters 3.3 and 7.2.2, UK educational policy makers may already have had some inkling that the prevention claims of this policy approach might not be borne out when the numbers of students who reported themselves as unable to cope continued to rise or did not abate (Baber *et al*. 2021).

Recommendation: The effectiveness of the whole university approach to supporting student mental health and wellbeing requires urgent re-consideration.

9.4.2 The current role of university careers advisers may no longer be fit for purpose.

As noted in Chapter 4.4, careers advisers now play a hybrid role in universities. Originally, they supported students to choose careers which suited their individual personal preferences, but since the early 21st century, they have also, along with academic colleagues, delivered instruction to groups of students on how to develop Graduate Attributes including personal and interpersonal skills to enhance their employability. However, over the past ten years, careers advisers have not only integrated coaching-based approaches into their role to increase student self-confidence, but some also now employ a wide range of counselling-based techniques to support their wider mental health and wellbeing. Moreover, practitioners have conveyed that they themselves took the initiative to access further training, albeit untailored to their role, in order for them to continue to

support students. These changes raise some issues about the current role occupied by careers advisers in universities.

To begin with, as universities have not formally acknowledged these changes in careers adviser practice, it is possible that they are either unaware of them or that they merely expect their practitioners to equip themselves with the necessary training required to enable them to continue to assist students. Moreover, although there has been some acknowledgment that university careers advisers have felt compelled to develop their practice to continue to support students both by their professional body AGCAS (AGCAS 2017) and some academic comment (Frigerio and Rix 2021; Yates 2022), these have not as yet led to a call for a review of their role.

Furthermore, this hybrid role that university careers advisers now inhabit, may also change how they are recognised as professionals. As argued in Chapter 5.3, originally this professionalism was constituted through the recognition of their superior technical competence in the defined sphere of careers guidance. If careers advisers now also deliver coaching and counselling, as well as employability-based instruction, there is a question over which of these, if any, constitute the basis for their professional conduct? In other words, as careers advisers are no longer defined by their technical competency in one sphere, careers guidance, but by their ability to perform a mixture of functions, this may dilute them being recognised as professionals in their own right.

For all these reasons, universities need to consider whether they wish careers advisers to guide students to achieve their career goals or to continue with the hybrid role which could be more accurately described as a therapeutic careers coach. If the latter, this has implications not only for their initial training but also their Continued Professional Development (CPD) and their status as professionals. Neither the post-graduate training to qualify as a careers adviser nor any training for current practitioners contains any significant instruction or practice in coaching or in the use of counselling-based approaches to alleviate distress. As this study's participants testified, not only have they had to seek out coaching and further therapeutic based training for themselves, but also these courses have not been tailored to meet their specific requirements as practising careers advisers.

Recommendation: Universities and the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) need to consider what kind of support they require careers advisers to deliver to students. Once this is established then it may be possible to review the current 'hybrid' role of practitioners with a view to making recommendations for its future development.

9.4.3 Review the impact of the whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing on all university staff.

Given that these whole institutional approaches involve everyone working in universities educating themselves about the risks to student mental health and wellbeing (Universities UK 2017; Universities UK 2018; Caleb 2019), it is likely that it is not only careers advisers who have changed how they approach students but other staff too. For example, academics sometimes claim that nowadays they are spending increased amounts of their working day providing students with personal support (Nixon and Scullion 2021). Also, in their concern to adequately support students amid the media-influenced public gaze of student suicide ideation (Barkham *et al*. 2019), some academics worry that they do not have the necessary knowledge to assess whether a student's concerns need referring for more specialised support or not (Barden 2019). However, as academics, like careers advisers, are unlikely to be immune from the influences of these institutional awareness raising approaches to mental health and wellbeing which highlight student vulnerability, it is possible that some of them have also adopted a 'better safe than sorry' approach by judging students to be more fragile than they are. The example of how careers advisers in this study underestimated student resilience in the face of Covid-19's restrictions on their career prospects attests to the influence of social and institutional awareness raising approaches on those working with students in universities. Therefore, the requirement for a review of the role of careers advisers may also inadvertently throw light on a need to also examine how other professional groups, particularly academics, have attempted to integrate therapeutic support for students into their working relationships with them. However, such an examination needs to be accompanied by a review of the whole university approach to supporting student mental health and wellbeing itself.

Recommendation: There is a need to review how the whole university approach to supporting student mental health and wellbeing has impacted how other groups of staff, especially academics, work with students.

9.5 Limitations of the research and avenues of future research.

As there were only 16 participants in this study, the researcher makes no claims that the data gathered and analysed provides a representative and systematic account of careers advisers beyond those involved. However, it is suggested that the strength of some of the themes that emerged combined with the comments from participants as well as the researcher's own academic investigation and experience in university careers guidance have provided more than a snapshot of how careers advisers have evolved their practice to support changes in student behaviour. That said, a larger number of practitioners may have widened the range of opinion and therefore helped strengthen or weaken some of the themes that arose and eventually the overall outcomes of the research. Given that for most of the study the researcher was also holding down a full-time job, it was not possible to interview a larger group of participants.

As the recommendation at 9.4.1 advised a review of whole institutional approaches to supporting student mental health and wellbeing, these would also benefit from further research. As this study argues that these approaches actually fuel the problem that they are set up to address, it would be useful to explore their effects on pupils and students in other educational settings such as schools and Further Education colleges in the UK where they are also widely used. It is the researchers understanding from the quantitative and qualitative research undertaken by Foulkes and Andrews (2023) and Foulkes and Stringaris (2023) that this work is already underway, but more investigations are needed. Given that this study also contends that these all-institutional approaches have been partly responsible for careers advisers adapting their practice to support students, it would be beneficial to conduct a similar investigation with careers guidance practitioners working in schools and Further Education colleges in the UK where these approaches are also widely deployed. To further explore the contention that these policies unintentionally encourage some to think they may have mental health problems instead of everyday anxiety from coping with

university life, it would also be advantageous to explore the condition of the psychological outlook of university students in countries whose Higher Educational Institutions do not adopt these all-institutional awareness raising approaches.

In 9.4.2 it was recommended that given the ways that careers advisers have evolved their practice to continue to support students, the role of university careers advisers needs to be reviewed. In other words, it is essential that universities and the professional body for Higher Education careers advisers AGCAS, appraise the current role of the careers adviser with a view to ensuring that it not only corresponds with student requirements but also that the training for practitioners is fit for purpose. One supposition that has emerged from this study is that many students now require motivational coaching or counselling more than advice about making informed choices about what careers would suit them, which is the traditional basis for the practice of careers guidance. Further research is required to explore whether this is indeed the case especially given that the relative size of the profession of approximately 3,500 careers advisers (AGCAS 2023) for 2.4 million students (Bolton 2022) means it is unlikely that all students who wanted advice of this nature, could actually gain access to a practitioner.

Another area for further research concerns the recommendation at 9.4.3 for a review of how these all-institutional awareness raising policies have also impacted other university staff, particularly academics. According to Ecclestone and Hayes (2019) and Furedi (2017), these policies may not only foster views amongst lecturers that students are more fragile than previously, but also compel them to work differently with them (Nixon and Scullion 2021). In other words, as a follow up to this study, it would be useful to conduct a similar one which seeks academics' views on any changes in how students cope with university life over the past 5-10 years or more, what reasons they think might account for these differences and whether this has required them to alter how they work with them.

Appendix 1.

College of Social Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

Researcher details

Linda Murdoch, Director of Careers, Student Enterprise and Study Abroad, University of Glasgow. linda.murdochg@glasgow.ac.uk

PhD Title

A sociological study of the practitioner response to student wellbeing, through a case study of the University Careers Service

Principal research question

To what extent have traditionally 'non-therapeutic' student services in HE such as the careers service evolved their student- centred approach to integrate wellbeing and mental health within their provision to support onward professional development?

Dear Name

You are being invited to take part in the research study outlined above.

Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Aim of the research

The aim of the research is to find out what careers advisers think about student wellbeing and if in their opinion and experience it is having an impact on their careers guidance practice. The interview discussion is designed around some loose questions to explore with you what you think about this.

This research activity takes place at a time of unprecedented public health concern. As you are aware, the UK is currently in a 'lock-down' phase with social distancing measures being reinforced to contain and level the transmission of Coronavirus. At this time, it is inevitable that individuals are adjusting and adapting to these social distancing measures and many individuals are facing emotional as well as financial hardship. Please feel assured that this situation is

acknowledged as an influencing factor in how participants in the study may respond in the interviewing process.

Your participation

- If you agree to participate, this will involve an interview with myself of between 40 and 60 minutes at a time convenient to you remotely via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. If you chose the latter, I would issue a protected password for your security.

- I will seek your consent to audio-record - not video record - the interview. This is entirely at your discretion, and I will offer note taking as an alternative.

- Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without explanation.

- You can withdraw even if you have already answered some of the questions and you will be given the option of having any answers you have given destroyed.

- You can ask me for a copy of your interview transcript in case you want to check your answers, change anything, reflect on what you said and/or add anything.

- You can request a written summary of the results of the data collection.

- It is hoped that data from interviews with careers advisers will inform the research question posed and enable recommendations to be made regarding HE careers advisers ongoing professional development, if appropriate.

- The research could also inform policy and strategy both for university careers services and student support services; it may give us the opportunity to reflect on careers guidance approaches and how they might be changed to improve student wellbeing.

- Only anonymised material from the interviews may be shared with other researchers, used in future publications, in print and on-line.

- Agreeing to participate will not in any way affect any prior professional relationship with me.

Confidentiality

- Your personal details such as your name and university will be kept under password protected computer files accessible by me only.

- Your personal details and your university are de-identified using pseudonyms for your name and an id number for your university.

- These precautions hold for the storage of data collected at interviews and in the written PhD thesis and in any associated publications.

- Due to a possibility that the data will be collected from a small number of universities, there is a chance that some participants may be identifiable.

- **Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.**

Data Usage

- The data collected will be used to inform the research question posed at the start of this information sheet and published as a PhD thesis. After that, it will be retained by the University of Glasgow for 10 years and governed by the University's Retention of Research Data Policy. https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/dpfoioffice/rims/a-ztopics/retentionofresearchdata/This policy governs how university researchers store and retain data for others use if necessary. The data that is stored is de-identified using pseudonyms for participants and id numbers for universities.

Your Head of Service has been informed of the nature of this research and has given me full permission to issue this invitation to you.

Thank you very much for reading this.

Linda

Confirmation Statement

The data collection associated with this thesis has been considered and approved by the College of Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of Glasgow.

For further information on the research please contact Linda Murdoch, **linda.murdoch@glasgow.ac.uk**. Concerns and complaints should be directed to the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: **Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk**

Appendix 2.

Consent Form

PhD Title: A sociological study of the practitioner response to student wellbeing, through a case study of the University Careers Service

Name of researcher: Linda Murdoch, linda.murdoch@glasgow.ac.uk

Participation in the research

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I consent/do not consent (delete as applicable) to interviews being audio-recorded.

I acknowledge that copies of transcripts will be returned to participants for verification on request.

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.

I acknowledge that universities will be referred to by id number.

I acknowledge that the researcher may know me as a colleague or line manager.

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my employment arising from my participation in this research.

Data usage and storage

All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be changed to protect confidentiality such as names of people, places and organisations.

Written permission from interviewee will be required for the use of any direct quotes in the thesis or any other related publications.

The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.

The material will be retained in secure storage for 10 years for use in future academic research.

The material may be used in future publications, for print and online.

I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.

I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

I understand that other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

I agree/do not agree (please delete as applicable) to take part in the above study.

Name of participant……

Signature……
.

Date …….

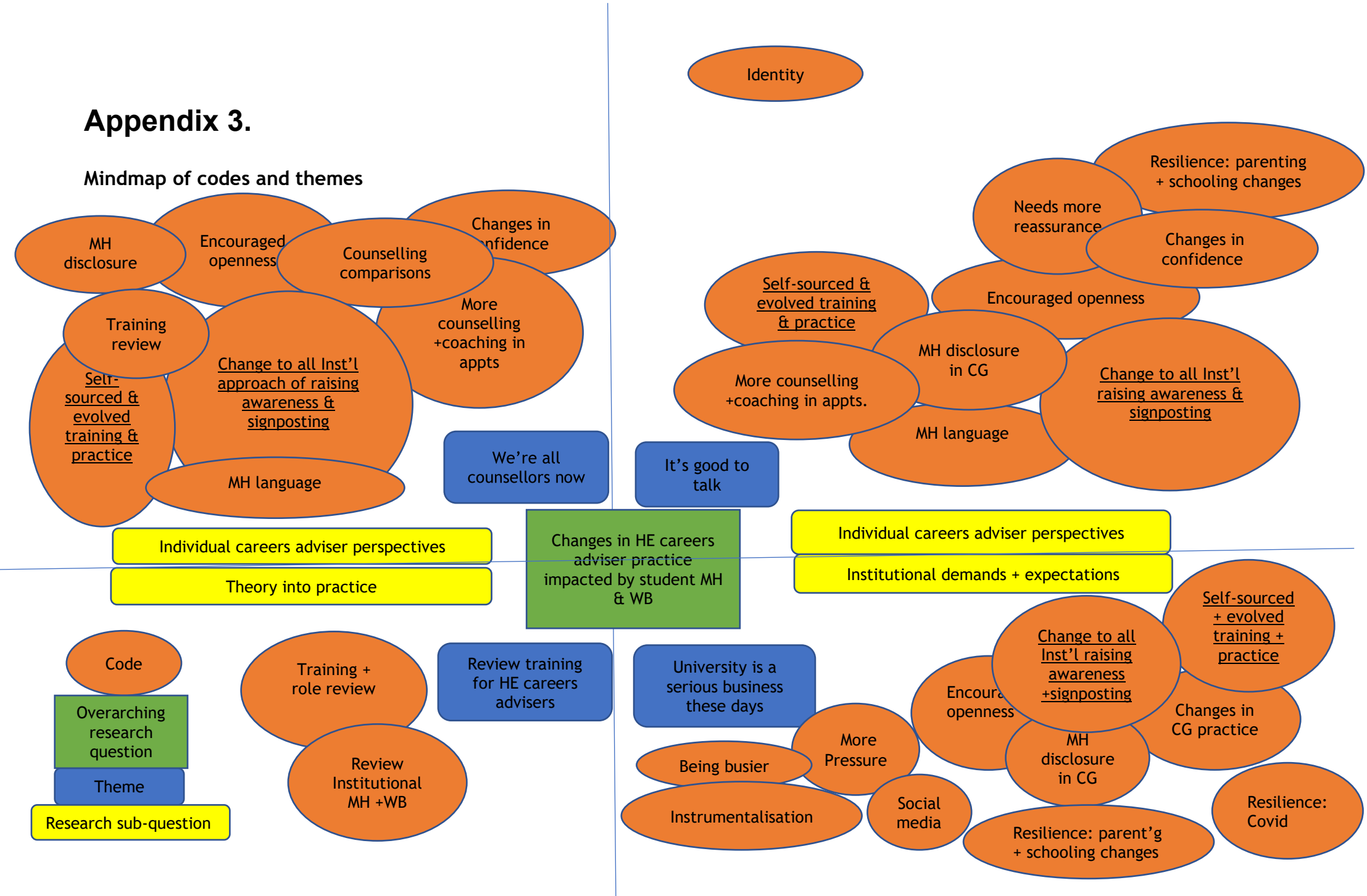
Name of researcher: Linda Murdoch

Signature
…….

Date…….

Appendix 3.

Mindmap of codes and themes



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