Making career decisions in a fast-changing environment

Dr Charlotte Haberstroh | Lecturer in Education
Morag Walling | Integrating Employability – Senior Careers Consultant

Dr Charlotte Haberstroh: I'm here with Morag Walling, our careers consultant here at King's. And we really want to talk about how career decisions are made and what we know about it and I'm wondering about how the difficult changes in the world of work we're experiencing at the moment might affect how learners are making their decisions. So Morag, what can we do to support learners best in this environment?

Morag Walling: So as a practitioner researcher for about 20 years, I've been observing young people from the age of choices and decisions. And what I've observed is that actually, the models that we expect them to use are less helpful to them than we expect them to be. And then you add in societal and cultural norms and expectations and we find that actually, it is quite problematic, particularly as often that the experiences that they draw on from societal and cultural norms are experiences of previous generations.

CH: What happened with previous generations might look quite different today?

MW: Indeed. In fact, what we're not necessarily always explaining to young people is that people don't work in the same job for as long as previous generations did, or the young people are not picking up on that. For example, people are working longer than they used to, they're not working in the same sectors or in the same jobs for as long, and in fact, the sectors are changing faster than perhaps they did in previous generations. So that leaves the young people at a disadvantage in their understanding if they're using previous generations' experiences to make their own decisions.

And sometimes, well-meaning comments can inadvertently push them in a certain direction and perhaps be harder to counter or redress. So for example, a well-meaning form teacher who asks students when they're making significant choices, who knows what they want to do as a job, is reinforcing the message that actually it's better to know what you want to do than not and particularly if things are

changing that's quite hard because actually it's perfectly okay not to know what you want to do. And actually, you find out, and things are going to evolve over your whole working life.

And then you might have relatives who are making conversation and again, maybe a young person actually makes a comment back, and then that gets reinforced, and they get a bit stuck with that, and the exploration doesn't go any further. And when they arrive at university, maybe they've come with an idea that actually was fine when they were 16 but actually isn't going to work for them, let alone the environment around them when they're 21.

CH: And what do we know about how career exploration looks in practice?

MW: To start us off, so thinking about that, if we think first about some of the processes that go on in the brain, that are really significant in being able to do career development successfully, it turns out that actually part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex that is important in that, is less well developed than we originally thought. There's some neuroscience research that shows that. The prefrontal cortex is actually not fully developed until one's mid-20s and that controls for abstract thinking, planning, decision making and social cognition. And those are all really significant elements to be able to do in order to be successful in career development independently. Some careers research actually shows that often the exploration will start with a concrete job or a concrete thing that is being explored in practice, and then moves on to another one.

CH: And could that be due to this idea that abstract thinking and careers development is harder for young people?

MW: It could be. We don't know for sure, but it certainly seems to come more naturally to explore one thing and then move on having discounted that. But it would be really useful if we could get better at it to support the young people to take some learning from that discarded experience. So what was it that you particularly liked about that? Can you spot those things in other opportunities?

CH: And are there any other factors that affect this?

MW: So different neuroscientists have identified that copying is actually the brain's form of doing fast learning. And in a career development context, if you look at that, often young people will want to know what the right thing to do is or to copy what previous generations have done. They will ask alumni, for example, how did you get in? What should I do? And those things are also going to be much less effective if the

experiences that they are going into are not the same as what the previous generation would have had.

CH: And I think it's also worth noting that it's not only the younger people that are affected by this, but everyone in the workforce might be. So what do you think might be the longer-term impacts?

MW: Well, in relation to what we've been talking about just now, we were all young once so we will all take with us the impact of good and less good career development techniques that we've learned until we learn the new ones. You will also have noticed that some of what I've spoken about is less good and less easy to ensure equality and inclusivity in the space of career development because it's all rooted in what you see and what you experience and that can affect both the opportunities and the decision-making. Inclusive practice techniques in the educational space can help lessen the impact of that.

CH: Well, thank you so much, Morag. And Morag has put together some tips coming from these practice techniques that you can employ or review. And you can find them below the video. And we hope that you enjoyed learning about how to navigate the career development in this context with us today. Thank you.