Developing Decision-making Skills in Students: an *active* learning approach

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1. INTRODUCTION

This booklet provides guidance to lecturers, careers advisers, learning support advisers and others involved in helping students to develop their decision-making skills. Decision-making is seen as a key skill, and as such, is promoted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in its Subject Benchmark Statements.¹ This support for the development of decision-making skills is not surprising given the central role decision-making plays in all our lives. As Hargreaves Heap et al. (1992) have commented, ‘We experience life as a series of choices’ (p. vii).

Many of the decisions we make may seem trivial, although when combined with other decisions, or taken repeatedly, they may result in far reaching consequences we never envisaged. Other decisions, such as career decisions, are more obviously important because they are likely to have a major influence on our lives. For example, career decisions can be expected to have a significant influence on our long-term economic situation and possibly our psychological well-being. Key decisions such as these can cause anxiety because we are often aware of how we may, in time, come to regret the choices we have made. As Robert Frost wrote in his famous poem ‘The Road Not Taken’:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

This booklet makes use of a wide variety of research - from a range of disciplines, such as economics, psychology and sociology - that has been undertaken into different aspects of decision-making. It is a practical guide to decision-making which aims to improve the way students make educational and career decisions whilst at

¹ See http://www.qaa.ac.uk
university. However, the skills and insights developed should also help students to make decisions in other areas of their life.

This booklet is based on an active learning approach. Therefore, students will be asked to reflect on their own decision-making and analyse case studies. It is envisaged that students will carry out most of the activities in small groups because discussion and social interaction provides the opportunity to share experiences, ideas and perspectives which will facilitate a more critical approach. Use will also be made of multiple rather than single cases studies with students being asked to make comparisons between the different cases. The evidence indicates that this approach facilitates a more in-depth understanding of the factors influencing the way people make decisions and helps participants to develop decision-making strategies appropriate to the situations they will face (Gentner et al., 2003).

It must be emphasised that there are no right and wrong answers to the activities included in this booklet. The booklet aims to provide an opportunity for students to reflect on how they make decisions and encourages them to decide for themselves how they are going to approach the process of decision-making in the future.

Following this introduction the booklet is divided into three main sections. In each section there is an introduction which sets out key information that the students need before they engage in the activities they have been set. This could be distributed to students as reading material; it could be uploaded to a virtual learning environment (VLE) as an audio file; or the information could be presented to the students in the form of lecture input. The students will then engage in activities which are followed by a discussion of each group’s observations and insights. In order to help the facilitators, guidelines on what to expect from these discussions is provided.

In the first section the rational decision-making model is introduced. The students are then asked to reflect on their own decision-making and the extent to which they adopt a rational approach to decision-making. It is envisaged that the students will identify different approaches to decision-making. This is followed by a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches to decision-making.
In the second section potential influences on a person’s style of decision-making - such as their personality, mode of reflexivity and social background - are identified. Drawing on their experience the students are then asked to consider how, and the extent to which, such factors influence the way individuals make decisions. This activity will help students become conscious of the factors influencing their own decision-making and how they can overcome barriers to changing their approach to decision-making.

The final section focuses on how students can improve their employment prospects. Research indicates that students need to start the career decision-making process early and engage in activities that enhance their employability if they are going to be successful in obtaining a ‘good’ job (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Many students experience underemployment because of their failure to obtain jobs that match their graduate status. It can be argued that they will eventually move into graduate employment over time. However, this is not always the case and studies suggest that an initial period of underemployment has a negative influence on longer-term employment prospects (Green et al., 2002; Power et al., 2006; Mason et al., 2009). This section of the booklet encourages students to critically evaluate the way they intend to prepare for the transition from education to employment.

This booklet is primarily aimed at first year undergraduates. It is recommended that students are given time to settle into their studies before attempting to develop their decision-making skills, particularly in relation to careers and employability. My own research found that if these topics are introduced too early students are less likely to fully engage with the issues raised because they will still be preoccupied with making the transition to university life. By leaving these sessions until after Christmas there is a much better chance that students will see their relevance and fully engage with the sessions. It is, however, important to start this process with first year undergraduates because students need to start participating in employability enhancing activities at an early stage in their studies.

Finally, this booklet will continually be updated. It would therefore be useful to obtain feedback from anybody making use of these materials. Also, if you register your
details with me I will send subsequent editions of this booklet to you. I can be contacted at the following address:

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2. DECISION-MAKING

Introduction
Decision-making involves the act of making a choice between different alternatives. The literature often sets out how people should go about the process of making decisions. These so-called ‘normative models’ of decision-making usually stress the need to adopt a rational (or logical and comprehensive) approach in order to make effective decisions (see Figure 1 below). This entails a step-by-step process that typically involves - as a starting point - the setting of objectives; this is followed by the rigorous collection of information so that the problem requiring a solution can be fully understood; then different options are generated and systematically evaluated to enable a choice (that meets the objectives set out earlier) to be made.

Figure 1 Rational Decision-making Model

The educational system, the workplace, and society in general, tend to value rationality. This is seen in the way students are advised to approach course selection in schools, colleges and by the Universities and Colleges Application System (UCAS). A rational approach to career decision-making is also advocated by those involved in the provision of careers education, information and advice. Similarly,
many professions and occupations encourage rationality. This is reflected in the number of decision-making models, similar to the one portrayed in Figure 1, that have been developed by different organisations for their employees.

**Example: Advice from UCAS (http://www.ucas.ac.uk)**

Below is an extract from the UCAS website. As can be seen it is promoting a very rigorous approach to deciding what type of degree to study and where to study. The UCAS website includes a link to how to choose a university or college. This provides further links to university and college websites, but also websites such as the QAA, Unistats, Times Online and the Complete University Guide where more objective information can be obtained. The UCAS website also provides a link to the ‘Stamford Test’ which matches a person’s interests and abilities to particular degree subjects.

Choosing which university or college to go to can be a life-changing decision. Do as much research as possible so that you choose the right course for the right reasons.

You can apply to any course which interests you, but consider the entry requirements first. Some courses require particular qualifications, others require an admissions test.

**Choosing a university or college**
Information about the different universities and colleges and a guide to attending open days.

**Choosing a course**
How to choose the right course and take the Stamford Test to match your interests and abilities to subjects.

**Entry requirements**
Skills and qualifications needed to start a course, and where to check individual entry requirements.

**Specific subjects**
Guidance when applying for specific subjects, such as nursing, medicine, music and art courses.

**Admissions tests**
Details of admissions tests that are used by some universities or colleges for specific courses.

**Books to help you choose**
Useful books to help you get one step ahead when applying and preparing for life at university.

**FAQs**
Choosing courses, course fees and where to find out more.
Activity: Reflecting on a decision from your past
In groups of 4-6 students\(^2\) discuss how you went about making the decision to study for a degree at Edge Hill.

1. To what extent did you follow a rational decision-making model?

2. Identify commonalities and differences in the approaches adopted within your group.

Reflection on the activity: different approaches to decision-making
There are usually a wide variety of responses to this activity. Some students (typically a minority) will have adopted a very rational approach. They have, for example, carried out research into different universities by obtaining prospectuses, they will have visited university websites and made use of independent sources such as newspapers (e.g. ‘The Times Good University Guide’) and websites such as Unistats which provides information on National Student Survey (NSS) results and graduate employability. The students often combine these more formal sources of information with word of mouth recommendations and guidance from people they perceive to be able to offer useful advice such as parents, other family members (particularly older siblings), friends, college lecturers and former teachers. Parents, teachers and college lecturers are often seen as a trusted, and in many cases knowledgeable, source of advice.

The extent to which students rely on formal or informal information varies. However, students often trust information from people they know over more formal sources

\(^2\) It is better to have randomly allocated groups for all these activities in order to increase the chance of obtaining a diverse set of students (in terms of age, gender, background and personality) in them. Alternatively, if facilitators know their class well enough they can select groups themselves. This will ensure each group has a cross-section of students in it.
because they are aware that universities and colleges are trying to sell their institution to them. On the other hand, very few students appear to make use of independent sources such as Unistats. Students often say they are unaware of these sources of information. It may be the case that students are unwilling to invest in the time needed to thoroughly research the different options available to them. On the other hand, they may not have developed the skills that enable them to undertake an effective search for information.

Many of the students do not have clear career objectives to help determine the degree they want to study. For some studying for a degree is a way of delaying having to make a decision. In fact some students just come to university because it is expected (from family and teachers) and this is what their friends are doing.

Students may also miss out, or may not consider, particular stages in the rational decision-making process in much detail. For example, the collecting information stage is not always rigorously carried out (as discussed above this may be because of a lack of motivation or because they do not have the skills to do this effectively). Students may also fail to consider a wide range of alternatives. Many students adopt what the Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon has referred to as ‘satisficing behaviour’, where they consider options (in this case universities and courses) sequentially until they find one that is ‘satisfactory’. This often results in students only considering one or two institutions and a small number of programmes. For some students, of course, the desire to remain close to home - for financial and/or psychological reasons - narrows their choices down, sometimes even to one (the nearest) university.

Where students have no idea what they want to do they may adopt imitative behaviour, which means they simply follow their friends to a particular university and course. Such actions may arise because students lack the motivation to make a decision. Alternatively, students may feel overwhelmed by the options open to them. This creates stress, which in turn seriously inhibits their ability to even begin the process of decision-making. The evidence also suggests that in stress situations people may act on impulse. As Helga Drummond (1996) states the ‘desire to end the pain of indecision – ‘Sod it, we'll do it’ – is risky if the decision is made without proper evaluation of the consequences. (p. 129)
Impulsive actions may on the surface look like intuition, but intuition (or ‘gut instinct’) is an instinctive response to a situation not an irrational impulse to do something (anything!) that will end the dissonance created by procrastination. My own research indicates that students make extensive use of their intuition when making decisions. Typically, students said that when they visited Edge Hill University they ‘had a good feeling about Edge Hill’ or they ‘just knew’ Edge Hill was the right university for them. It is argued that these feelings are based on the unconscious retrieval, synthesis and analysis of information from a person’s past experiences. There are, therefore, particular indicators that provide positive and negative responses that are linked to past experiences. Mark Lythgoe, a neuroscientist, provides a good example of intuition in operation when he visits a speed dating session. Those participating in this event have very little time to evaluate the people they meet, but do it very quickly based on indicators such as appearance, facial expressions and what they say – with judgements based on their experience of the connection between certain characteristic and the way people behave.

Some commentators are very positive about the effectiveness of intuitive decision-making. For example, in his influential book ‘Blink: the power of thinking without thinking’ Malcolm Gladwell states that intuition often delivers a better answer than more deliberative and exhaustive ways of thinking’ (p. 34). However, research suggests that intuition is only effective when it is used by experienced decision-makers who are able to draw upon similar situations they have faced in the past (Henry, 2001). In my own research (Greenbank, 2010) I found that students were overconfident of their ability to utilise intuition in their decision-making and were often unaware of the disadvantages of such approaches.

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Activity: Advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to decision-making

As a class discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches to decision-making. These would include a discussion of:

- Impulse
- Imitative behaviour
- Intuition
- Rational decision-making
- Satisficing behaviour
Guidance on activity

**Table 1 Advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to decision-making**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Impulse</th>
<th>Disadvantage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advantage</td>
<td>Only useful when a decision has to be made instantaneously and the consequences of not doing something are dire.</td>
<td>A decision based on nothing is just leaving the outcome to chance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Imitative behaviour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advantage</td>
<td>Based on the assumption that others know the best course of action. Could be seen as a risk avoiding strategy</td>
<td>What is beneficial for others (even a majority) may not be beneficial to an individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intuition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advantage</td>
<td>There is evidence to suggest that intuition is ‘smarter’ than more rational approaches because the unconscious can synthesise and make sense of complex information</td>
<td>May not accurately recall all the information available - the so-called ‘availability bias’ where people remember more recent, or out of the ordinary, events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relies on experience to be effective (something students may not have)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intuition can be adversely affected by emotions, fatigue and illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intuition may work in one situation but not another</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational decision-making</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advantage</td>
<td>Promotes a systematic and comprehensive approach to decision-making</td>
<td>Unreliable information and the problem of identifying which information can be trusted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What Herbert Simon refers to as ‘bounded rationality’. This arises because of the amount of information available and the inability of people (because of cognitive limitations) to effectively process all this information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Decision-maker may already have decided (often unconsciously) what they are going to do and they look for confirmatory evidence to support their decision (the so-called ‘confirmation bias’).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Satisficing behaviour</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advantage</strong></td>
<td><strong>Disadvantage</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Choosing the first option that is 'satisfactory' reduces the stress of decision-making</td>
<td>▪ Further search may uncover a much better option</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In practice decision-makers often use a combination of different approaches. For example, they may have positive feelings about a particular option, but they will choose to confirm it by also applying more rational approaches. On the other hand, it can be argued that because of the amount of information and complexity of many decisions you can never be completely rational. As a result, there is inevitably an intuitive element to all decisions.
3. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE WAY DECISIONS ARE MADE

There are a range of factors that have the potential to shape the way people make decisions. An individual's personality may, for example, influence somebody's approach to decision-making. Therefore, characteristics such as sociability, confidence, maturity and attitude to risk may influence the way a person makes decisions. There is, for example, evidence to indicate that people who have confidence in their ability to determine their destiny (i.e. they have what is referred to as an 'internal locus of control') are more likely to adopt a rational approach to decision-making (Thunholm, 2004). In contrast, those who feel that their destiny depends upon fate (i.e. they have what is referred to as an 'external locus of control') tend to have a dependent style of decision-making where they rely on the direction of others (ibid.). It is also suggested that extroverts are more likely to seek advice from others. As Di Fabio (2006) argues:

[Ex]troverts have greater self-confidence and social competence and are able to solicit and receive advice and other forms of support that facilitate making decisions. (p. 119)

My own research into career decision-making found that many students were reluctant to use the careers service because they did not personally know the careers advisers and were intimidated by the prospect of talking to someone who they felt might ask them awkward questions or even humiliate them. As one student commented of careers advisers, ‘They're probably nice people, they're probably okay like, but I just don’t know anything about them, I’m not aware of them, I’m not familiar with them’ (Greenbank, 2009a, pp.163-164). The students who felt this way tended to be the more introverted and less outgoing students.

Research by Margaret Archer found that the way people reflect (which includes the conversations people have with themselves – what she refers to as their ‘internal conversations’) also influences the decisions they make. She identified four ‘modes of reflexivity’ (summarised in Table 2 below).
Table 2 Modes of reflexivity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Communicative reflexives</strong></th>
<th>Those whose internal conversations require completion and confirmation by others before resulting in courses of action.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Autonomous reflexives</strong></td>
<td>Those who sustain self-contained internal conversations, leading directly to action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meta-reflexives</strong></td>
<td>Those who are critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and critical about effective action in society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fractured reflexives</strong></td>
<td>Those whose internal conversations intensify their distress and disorientation rather than leading to purposeful courses of action.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Archer (2007) Table 1, p. 93.

The two most important for our purposes are what Archer refers to as ‘autonomous reflexives’ and ‘communicative reflexives’. Autonomous reflexives tend to make decisions on their own with little reference to the opinion of others. In contrast, ‘communicative reflexives’ are more likely to be dependent on the views of friends and relatives. Similarly, Hardin and Leong (2004) regard perceptions of self as important:

>[P]eople with independent self-construals see the self as autonomous and separate from [their] interpersonal context, whereas people with interdependent self-construals see the self as intertwined with ... [their] social context. (p. 53)

Archer’s four-fold taxonomy of how individuals make decisions did not correlate to age, gender or social class. However, it seems reasonable to suppose that communicative reflexives (or those with interdependent self-construals) are likely to be heavily influenced by the people they mix with (i.e. family and friends). The decision-makers social context, or what Bourdieu (1979) refers to as their ‘habitus’, can therefore be expected to heavily influence these decision-makers. As such, a
person’s social class may be particularly influential. Table 3 (below) summarises the type of values that are said to influence the behaviour of people from different social backgrounds.

Table 3 A selection of working class and middle class values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working class values</th>
<th>Middle class values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack a future orientation. They therefore live for today and do not want to defer gratification. Fatalistic (and pessimistic) attitude to life.</td>
<td>Willing to make sacrifices in order to secure benefits at a future date. A belief that they have control over their destiny and an optimistic attitude to life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of ambition and low aspiration levels.</td>
<td>Driven by a need for achievement. Therefore, highly competitive with a strong work ethic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value informal (hot) information rather than (formal) cold information.</td>
<td>Value rationality and formal sources of information.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Greenbank (2006) Table 1, p. 641.*

However, research I carried out at a later date with Sue Hepworth found there was no simple relationship between social class and students values (Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008). In this study students from working class backgrounds exhibited values and behaviour that were not compatible with the assumptions set out in Table 3. This is not to say that a student’s social class will not influence the way they make decisions, but there are different ways of growing up and being working or middle class. Students are also influenced by other habituses: for example, the university habitus. In addition, other factors such as personality and mode of reflexivity are likely to be interacting with social class to influence the style of decision-making adopted by an individual.

As mentioned above Margaret Archer did not find any relationship between gender and mode of reflexivity. However, Hardin and Leong (2004) found that females had a tendency to interdependent self-construal. Other writers have suggested that females make more use of their intuition and are better at this form of decision-making than males (the phenomenon of ‘female intuition’). Yet, the evidence for this is mixed (see ‘Men guessed right on women’s intuition’ below).
Men guessed right on women’s intuition

Tim Radford, Science Editor
The Guardian, Tuesday 12 April 2005

Women are not more intuitive than men: they just think they are. A national internet experiment involving more than 15,000 people has confirmed that women are no better than men at spotting which smile is a fake, which sincere.

Richard Wiseman, a psychologist at the University of Hertfordshire, challenged Britons to log on to a website, (www.sciencefestival.co.uk), study a series of partly masked photographs, and decide which smiles were from the heart, which ones calculated.

Asked before the challenge, 77% of women classified themselves as "highly intuitive". Only 58% of men made the same claim. But performance did not match self-perception. Men spotted 72% of the genuine smiles, women 71%.

Feminine intuition failed even more signally when it came to reading men’s faces. Men, it turned out, could correctly detect 76% of the fake female smiles.

Women spotted only 67% of the dissembled smirks by the opposite sex.

"These findings question the notion that women really are more intuitive than men. Some previous research has found evidence for female intuition, but perhaps over time men have become more in touch with their intuitive side," Prof Wiseman said.

The participants found it hardest to unmask fake smiles when the mouth was covered.

Finally, a person’s cognitive style may influence the way they make decisions. As Scott and Bruce (1995) argue individuals can be ‘data-sensitive’ and logical which means they will naturally be orientated to rational approaches to decision-making involving the rigorous collection of information and a detailed evaluation of different options. In contrast, ‘data-filterers’ are more ‘holistic’ and make intuitive decisions based on overall feelings and hunches.
Activity: What influences the way you make decisions?

Working on your own make a list of the most important factors influencing the way you make decisions?

Activity: Structure versus Agency

It is argued by some commentators that we are the product of our background (the so-called structuralist perspective).

In contrast, others would argue that we have control (or agency) over the decisions that we make and therefore our future. This is the underlying rationale behind the employability agenda which emphasises the need for individuals to be proactive enough to engage in the type of activities that develop the skills and values that graduate employers demand of their employees.

Working in small groups (4-6 students) consider the extent to which we have control over the way we make decisions. Is there anything we can do to overcome the influence of our background, our cognitive style, or the way our personality or mode of reflexivity influences our decision-making?
4. FOCUS: EMPLOYABILITY AND CAREER DECISION-MAKING

Whilst it is not the only motivation for entering higher education, research suggests that the main reason many students want to go to university is to enhance their employability (Watts, 2006). It is therefore surprising to find that many undergraduates do not engage in the type of activities that would enable them to compete better in the graduate labour market. Students are advised by careers advisers and other involved in developing student employability to start researching the type of career they want to enter at an early stage in their degree programmes so that they can develop the ‘right’ attributes or ‘soft currencies’ (i.e. skills, values and dispositions) that graduate recruiters are seeking. It is also recommended that students begin accumulating evidence to demonstrate they have these attributes (often referred to as ‘hard currencies’) by engaging in extra-curricular activities and relevant work experience. As Brown and Hesketh (2004, p. 36) argue students need to be able to present their:

experience, character and accomplishments in ways that conform to the competence profiles scrutinized by employers ... The self has to be packaged as a life story full of productive promise.

In this final section of this booklet we want students to analyse a number of case studies which describe how their peers have approached career decision-making and the transition from education to employment. These case studies are based on interviews carried out with students at Edge Hill. Following this it would be useful for students to reflect on how they plan to approach preparing for the transition into employment.
Activity: Case studies in career decision-making

_Imran_

Imran was in his final year and still had no idea what he wanted to do after he graduated. He was considering studying for a master’s degree so that he could delay the decision for another year. Imran also felt that gaining another qualification would give him an advantage in the graduate labour market. At a family get-together during the Easter vacation he met up with his cousin Sam, who was a fire-fighter. Sam did not go to university after his A-levels but instead went to work on the production line in a factory. However, since Imran had last seen him he had joined the fire service and had just completed his training. Sam told Imran stories about his training and took him for a drive in his new car. Imran also went to Sam’s passing out parade and was very impressed by the ceremony:

They marched past with the band playing. It just looked like the Army with the band playing and everybody marching in step. They looked really good, really smart – I was very impressed. I could see it was the sort of thing I’d like to do.

After this, Imran decided that he also wanted to apply for the fire-service. He thought being a fire-fighter would be prestigious and something his friends would be impressed by. He also thought that the job would be far more exciting than working in an office. Imran said:

There was something about being a fire-fighter that just appealed to me.
Call it gut instinct or whatever – it just FELT that this was the job for me.

Imran’s mother did not feel that fire fighting would be a suitable job for him. Imran responded by telling her that it paid just as well as so-called graduate jobs. She suggested he talked to somebody such as one of his lecturers or a careers adviser before making a final decision. Imran said he would, but he never got around to it. In the end he went with his gut instinct and applied to join the fire service, but was unsuccessful. His cousin told him they had fire-fighters in the Royal Air Force (RAF)
and Imran successfully applied to join the RAF. This, however, proved to be a poor decision. He hated military life and only lasted four weeks before asking to leave.

Susan

From childhood Susan had always wanted to be a teacher. This ambition arose from the influence of a very charismatic teacher who taught her in her final year at primary school. When she saw this person teach she just knew intuitively that she also wanted to be a teacher. Susan kept in contact with this teacher and she acted as a role model for her. She was also able to advise her about how to go about becoming a teacher.

In order to fulfil her ambition Susan, on the advice of her role model, made a conscious attempt to work with children. This involved coaching youngsters at her local athletics club and helping out at a youth club. She also worked with a local amateur theatre, becoming the production manager. She felt this would demonstrate she had leadership, communication and organisational skills – the type of skills she was told would be useful for a career in teaching.

In the second year of her degree she was given the opportunity of a work placement in a local secondary school. She would be working in the office, but she felt it would give her some useful insights into the working environment of a school. Susan had been to a very small school and college and she found the noise and hustle and bustle of this very large school quite disorientating. Also, some of the children (especially the boys) looked very aggressive and quite intimidating. She had to admit she found it very scary. However, Susan felt that she would get used to it. When she told one of the teachers that her ambition was to become a teacher he told her to forget it:

There are better careers than trying to control the type of kids we've got here. Take my advice get a nice little job in a bank or a building society – keep as far away from kids as you can.
Susan took no notice of him - as she told her mother that night, ‘He’s just a disillusioned old man’. Her mother said why not talk to other teachers about their experience of teaching. Susan said:

There’s no need to I KNOW what I want to do. If I talk to other people it’s just their experience. Everybody’s different and because one person likes teaching or dislikes teaching doesn’t mean it has any relevance to me.

After completing her degree Susan went on to study for her Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). She thoroughly enjoyed this, especially her teaching practice, and she is now looking forward to taking up a teaching post in a local school.

**David**

David was a keen sportsman and had lots of other outside interests, e.g. working with children with disabilities, playing bass guitar in a band and helping out at the local youth theatre. However, when he went to university he decided he wanted to obtain a First Class Honours degree like his older brother. He therefore gave up all of his interests so that he could concentrate on his studies. David’s brother now has a fairly senior position in a bank and David hoped to follow a similar career path.

David’s parents told him that he should continue with his outside interests because employers valued this sort of thing and it would look good on his CV. But David did not feel it was morally right to just do something because it would look good on a CV. David also wanted to focus on obtaining a First class Honours degree. He did, however, continue to go out with his friends on a Friday and Saturday night and to pay for this he worked in a warehouse at weekends. David did get the opportunity (through his brother) to work in a bank on a Saturday morning. This would, however, have meant he would have to take a wage cut so he decided against it. When David entered his final year he gave his job at the warehouse so that he could concentrate on his studies. This meant he could not afford to go out, but he thought it would be worth the sacrifice.
David did obtain a First Class Honours degree. Everybody told him he would have no problem obtaining a job because of this. He had, however, missed many of the deadlines for applying for graduate jobs in the banking sector. When he started to apply for jobs he was also surprised to find he was not obtaining interviews. Moreover, the two interviews he did get did not result in him being offered a job. He said:

I couldn’t understand why I wasn’t getting job interviews. I mean I have a First Class Honours degree – you can’t do better than that. And when I went on the job interviews the questions were really aggressive – they were like asking me what I had learnt on my degree and what skills had I developed. Well to me it’s pretty obvious that I have learnt a lot and had the skills.

David spent a frustrating six months without a job. He eventually talked to one of his friends from university on the telephone. She had obtained a position as a management trainee at Argos. She said she had received advice on completing application forms from a careers adviser her mother knew. She had then gone back to her for advice on how to approach the selection process (interviews, selection tests, etc.). David did not, however, know any careers advisers. He also did not like to go for advice from people - he said he preferred to make his own decisions. After a further three months without a job David did visit one of the lecturers he got on with. He did not, however, feel that this lecturer was able to provide him with any useful advice. Eventually David obtained a job as a wages clerk in the National Health Service.

Kim

Kim talked to one of her lecturers (her personal tutor) about careers. However, he said he was not really qualified to give her advice and suggested that she visit the university careers service. She did not know any of the careers advisers and was also intimidated by the way the careers centre looked – she felt it looked imposing. Also, when she was at school Kim found the careers adviser was not much help, which had put her off talking to them ever since. In addition, none of her friends had
been to see a careers adviser so she decided it was not something that was important to do.

Kim looked at the local paper for jobs, especially on a Thursday when there were a lot of jobs advertised. One night there was a small advert asking for a young person with ambition to join a high growth company as a trainee management accountant. No experience was necessary as training would be given. It did, however, ask for A-levels or a degree.

Kim applied for the job. It was a small firm (with just ten employees) involved in import and export. She had always wanted to work in a small business since studying small business modules on her degree. Kim had also been on a work placement in a large retailer. This had put her off working in a large organisation because the employees were not very friendly and the managers seemed very authoritarian and distant.

Kim was asked to attend a job interview. She was interviewed by the owner-manager who was only in his early-thirties. He outlined his plans to grow the business and told Kim there were tremendous opportunities in a small firm such as this because a major expansion was planned. She also met the staff. Many were not much older than her and they were all very friendly. Kim had positive feelings about this business as soon as she went into the building. This was reinforced by the interview and meeting the staff. When she was offered the job she had no hesitation in accepting it. It was only when Kim got home she realised she had not idea what her conditions of employment were!

Kim rang the owner-manager the following day and he told her she would start on £13,000 a year and work a 39 hour week. She was disappointed at the salary but believed the job would lead to much better things. Indeed, she remembered a case study from her small business module where a person had started as a trainee accountant and as the company grew they were promoted into a managerial position - they eventually became a director. Kim was also told by her new boss that her degree classification did not really matter. She intended to continue to try and obtain good grades on her degree but she found she now lacked the motivation to study.
Kim was looking forward to starting her new job and doing assignments and revising for exams seemed to be irrelevant.

**Hannah**

At the end of her second year Hannah did not really know what she wanted to do. She talked to her parents but they knew nothing about graduate employment. She therefore decided to visit her university’s careers centre. After talking to a careers adviser she decided she would like to go into management. There were a lot of management jobs in the retail sector so Hannah worked in a retail outlet over the summer because she thought this would give her some useful experience.

Hannah had worked closely with a careers adviser when applying for two management trainee jobs (one she saw in the Guardian newspaper, the other in the Prospects directory). Hannah had not put anything on her application form about her Duke of Edinburgh Gold award and the fact that she had played netball for Lancashire – thinking such information was irrelevant. However, the careers adviser said it was very relevant, because it showed she was an ‘achiever’. Hannah was also the captain of her school and college netball teams which again the careers adviser said were important to put on her application form because it demonstrated she had leadership skills and was able to take on responsibility.

Hannah was successful at the application stage for both jobs. She went back to the careers adviser for advice on the selection process she was likely to face. Hannah was particularly concerned about being interviewed – but the careers adviser was able to give her some very useful tips. In both interviews they actually asked her about netball and how she responded to being the captain of a team. This was one of the questions the careers adviser had said might be asked and Hannah was able to provide a good answer about the need to lead by example and motivate different people in different ways.

Hannah had applied for two positions: one as management trainee with a large retailer; the other as a management trainee in the National Health Service (NHS) - and she was offered both jobs! This meant she had to decide which one to take.
Hannah had a number of friends and family who worked in the NHS and they all said it was a great place to work. However, when she went for her interview at the retailer she had a good feeling about the place. As she said, 'It just felt right'. In contrast the hospital she visited for her interview with the NHS just ‘felt depressing’. She talked to the careers adviser at her university about her predicament. As it happened the careers adviser knew several students from the university who had joined the NHS. Hannah was able to talk to two of them over the telephone and visited one where she worked. They were all very enthusiastic about their jobs. However, Hannah decided to go with her gut instinct and accepted the job with the large retailer. Unfortunately, this proved to be a bad decision. She hated the job and the people she was working with. She eventually resigned and now works as a receptionist in a hospital. This is not a graduate level job and there is little chance of progressing into management, but Hannah maintains that she is happy with what she is doing and now has no ambition to go into management.

Tasks

1. Working in groups of 4-6 identify commonalities and differences in the approaches to career decision-making and planning adopted by the students portrayed in these case studies.

2. As a class discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches to career decision-making and planning adopted by the students in these case studies.
Reflection on the activity: factors influencing career decision-making

Research by the author of this booklet has identified three key factors influencing the way students approach career decision-making and planning. This is a summary of the research (for more detail see Greenbank, 2010).

Future orientation: According to Fried et al. (2007) we live in a future orientated culture with people planning for the long-term and exhibiting a willingness to make sacrifices in order to reap future benefits. Yet the vast majority of students in this study were not considering life after university in a detailed or comprehensive way. A key factor was that many students did not have clear career aspirations. When they were asked about their career intentions the students often responded by saying they had ‘no idea’ what they ultimately wanted to do; and if they did, it was usually imprecisely articulated with comments such as ‘I want to be a manager of some sort’. This lack of clarity about career intentions appears to have its roots in the way educational decisions were made prior to university. The students indicated that their choice of subjects at school and college were based on very little research, especially in terms of future career aspirations. This is important because these decisions often determined the degree they would subsequently study, and then the career they would follow. For example, one student described how she decided to study accountancy at A-level because she was ‘good at maths’. As she enjoyed this subject she enrolled on an accountancy degree with the objective of entering the accounting profession. However, she admitted she knew very little about accountancy and the type of jobs accountants could do. This demonstrates how decisions made early in a student’s life can influence a person’s educational and career trajectory.

In the interviews the students also often expressed the view that their immediate futures were resolved now that they were at university. In fact, many students seemed to regard going to university as a means of avoiding having to make difficult decisions about careers. For example, one student acknowledged that university was just a way of delaying having to make decisions about the future:
I think the biggest problem with people my age is indecisiveness and a lot of people come to university because they just don't know what else to do. It like gives you another three years to think about what you want to do with your life. And it’s just kind of plod along – oh yes I’m at uni, I’m doing something with myself, but I’m not really.

Another student talked about being able to relax now the ‘next three years are sorted out’. This sense of having ‘sorted out’ the next three years is also influenced by a lack of knowledge and understanding of what students need to do in order to be able to compete in the graduate labour market. In this respect, many of the students believed that all they needed to do in order to obtain a ‘good’ job was achieve an upper second class honours degree or above – what Pitcher and Purcell (1998, p. 194) refer to as the ‘essential 2:1’.

Yet, even when students are aware of the need to prepare for the transition from education to employment, many of them still resist the advice to engage in career decision-making and planning at an early stage in their degree programme. One reason for this seems to be because of what Bazerman (2006) refers to as ‘bounded willpower’. According to Bazerman (2006) this occurs when individuals prioritise present concerns over future concerns, even when this is inconsistent with meeting longer-term objectives (such as obtaining a ‘good’ job). This lack of a focus on the future is of course exacerbated by the fact that the students do not have clear long-term objectives. However, the interviews revealed that what Bazerman (2006, p. 65) calls the ‘vividness of the present’ is more important. This refers to the fact that immediate concerns - such as completing assignments and revising for examinations - take precedence over less immediate and therefore less vivid concerns.

**Rational decision-making:** As we have seen students do not tend to adopt very rigorous approaches to their educational decision-making. This more intuitive approach, which relies on informally absorbed information, rather than the active and rigorous collection of information on the different options available, continues once the students are at university. Moreover, the students were confident of their ability to make decisions in this way. For example, one student commented on how he trusted his intuition and went on to say, ‘I think intuition is very valuable and I think
it’s very accurate as well a lot of the time’. Similarly, another student said, ‘I can’t think of where I have used my intuition and it hasn’t worked’.

‘Players’: Brown and Hesketh (2004) characterise the way in which undergraduates approach and represent themselves in the labour market as ‘players’ and ‘purists’. These can be conceptualised as extreme types along a continuum, with undergraduates generally leaning towards one or the other, rather than being able to be unequivocally classified as a player or a purist. Both players and purists recognise the competitive nature of the graduate labour market and are aware of the type of attributes and experience graduate employers are seeking in job applicants. However, players will engage in extra-curricular and other activities in order to enhance their employability. In contrast, purists believe they should simply be themselves. According to Brown and Hesketh (2004) purists present the ‘authentic self’ to employers, whilst players present the ‘competent/packaged self’ to employers – and it is the latter who tend to be the most successful in the graduate labour market.

The majority of students in this study adopted a purist orientation. Many of them were purists because they were morally opposed to packaging themselves in a way they did not regard as authentic, rather than because they thought this was the most effective way to present themselves to graduate employers. For example, one student believed that engaging in activities in order to enhance your curriculum vitae ‘was like lying on your CV’. Another student said, ‘I'd feel uncomfortable making myself look good for others. It’s like I would be putting someone else out of a job who really wants it and me taking it off them’.

There were also students who had a predisposition towards being players, but who were not prepared to engage in the type of activities required to gain a positional advantage in the labour market because of what Zeelenberg (1999) refers to as ‘anticipatory regret’. This meant that the students did not want to invest time in activities that were not guaranteed to benefit them. Similarly, Tomlinson (2007, p. 299) found that students in his study were apprehensive about trying to obtain a positional advantage in the graduate labour market because they had doubts over whether the ‘personal and emotional investment’ in developing their employability
would pay-off. Tomlinson (2007) argues that this occurs because the students do not feel they possess ‘sufficient levels of social, cultural and personal capital ... to access, and succeed in, elite and tough-entry jobs’ (p. 299). Similar sentiments were expressed by some students in this study.

This research suggests that these three factors lead to a lack of proactivity amongst students. If students tend to live for today, utilise more intuitive approaches to decision-making and adopt a purist orientation (see Figure 2) then they are less likely to engage in career decision-making and planning activities.

**Figure 2 Factors influencing the level of proactivity amongst students**

![Diagram showing factors influencing proactivity: Living for today, Reliance on informal information/intuition, Purist orientation, leading to Lack of proactivity.]

The challenge, through the use of the type of exercises, case studies and feedback provided in this booklet, is to encourage the students to critically evaluate the values underpinning their approaches to decision-making and careers. This is what this booklet has attempted to achieve.
Final Activity: Action Plan

Reflect on what you intend to do over the remaining period of your degree to ensure you meet your objectives when making the transition from education to work.

*Questions you might want to ask yourself include:*

- What do you want from employment?
- Where are you going to look for information and advice?
- What career opportunities would meet your objectives and be appropriate for you (in terms of your personality, strengths, etc.)?
- How can you ensure you meet the requirements of the type of career you would like to pursue?

It is worth drawing up an action plan which summarises the actions you need to carry out and sets target dates for completing these actions. You may be provided with actions plans as part of your Personal Development Planning (PDP). There are also different examples of how you can set out action plans on the internet (just Google ‘action plans’). A typical example is illustrated below.
### Focus area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall target date</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Target dates for individual actions</th>
<th>Date actions completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Decide on the type of career I would like to pursue** | By end of first year | *Visit Prospects web site*  
*Visit university careers centre*  
*Arrange interview with careers adviser* | End of December  
End of December  
January |
| **Enhance my CV** | Continually throughout degree | *Visit Edge Hill’s careers website to look at opportunities for volunteering*  
*Engage in volunteering* | End of February  
By end of first year |
| **Etc.** | | | |

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Bibliography


Gentner, D., Loewenstein, J. & Thompson, L. (2003), ‘Learning and transfer: a general role for analogical encoding’, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 95, No. 2, pp. 393-408.


**Useful websites**

*Edge Hill University Careers Centre:* [http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/careers/](http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/careers/)

This includes:
- A Guide for All Staff
- Information for Academic Tutors

*Higher Education Careers Service Unit:* [http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/](http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/)

HECSU provides information about research and developments in career-related learning and career guidance in higher education.