**The university-to-work transition:
Responses of universities and organizations to the COVID-19 pandemic**

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**Structured Abstract**

*Purpose:* Our purpose is to understand how universities and organizations have responded to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of preparing university students and recent graduates for entry into the global labor market, using the accounting, banking, and finance sector as a case study. The two research questions are: (1) How can university careers services and organizations work individually and collaboratively to best develop early careers talent following the COVID-19 pandemic? (2) What are the challenges that university career services and organizations face when working individually or collaboratively to develop early careers talent following the COVID-19 pandemic?

*Methodology:* The data for thematic analysis comes from 36 semi-structured interviews with Careers Advisors (n=19) and Graduate Recruiters (n=17).

*Findings:* This study offers some of the first findings on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, helping to ensure that organizational behavior and career theory literature reflect the dramatically changing landscape in the university-to-work transition.

*Originality/Value:* Theoretically, our contribution comes from applying a framework of career construction theory within the context of a career ecosystem to understand the views of the intermediary, meso-level actors, which, to-date, have lacked representation within career literature. Practically, we provide an insightful bridge between universities and organizations, offering opportunities for greater collaboration, and enhanced outcomes for all stakeholders.

**Keywords**

Career Construction Theory, Career Ecosystem Theory, Graduate Careers

**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic was first identified in humans in December 2019 in Wuhan City situated in the Hubei province of China (Chen and Li, 2020) and was declared as a pandemic on 11th March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). The pandemic has been one of the most disruptive global events in peacetime and national governments have struggled to control the spread of the virus. Thus, this pandemic has not only caused a public health crisis but has also created an economic crisis (Donald, 2020). Varying levels of restrictions to daily life including lockdowns have required record levels of borrowing, triggering a global recession deeper than the 2007-2008 financial crisis with fears of a repeat of the 1930s Great Depression (Partingdon and Wearden, 2020). Employees, including women and workers under the age of twenty-five, have been the most impacted groups (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020), and unemployment in the UK is expected to reach a peak of 2.6 million, which at 7.5% is the highest rate since the 2007-2008 financial crisis (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2020). What is unclear at present is the impact such a crisis will have on the demand for graduates.

 The challenging labor market conditions place additional emphasis on the interplay between what Holmes (2013) calls the ‘meso-level actors’, referring to university careers services and graduate recruiters, who are responsible for preparing university students and recent graduates for the university-to-work transition. However, career theory literature focusing on a more holistic view of graduate employability to include these meso-level actors remains sparse (Holmes, 2016). This view is supported by Minocha *et al.* (2017, p.235) who after completing a comparative study of 35 HE institutions in the UK, stated that; “*the employer-university interaction theme in the existing literature is not sufficiently addressed*” Where research has been undertaken, it has tended to report on the perceptions of university students and graduates, rather than understanding the views of the meso-level actors themselves. For example, Okay-Somerville and Scholarios (2017) found that graduates perceived guidance seeking and networking aspects of career management as crucial to the graduate employability development process. However, the student perception of university careers advisors and graduate recruiters is that existing provisions are ineffective at enhancing their perceived employability at the individual level (Donald *et al.*, 2019). This view is further supported by Clements and Kamau (2018) who call for careers advisors to take a more active role in preparing students into an ever-changing and challenging labor market.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to understand how universities and organizations have responded to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of preparing university students and recent graduates for entry into the global labor market, using the accounting, banking, and finance sector as a case study. We define a Careers Advisor (CA) as either an employee or external consultant of a centralized university careers service, or another university employee if their remit included providing careers advice and wider careers support. A Graduate Recruiter (GR) is defined as either an employee of a graduate recruitment team within a Human Resources (HR) department of an organization, an employee of a graduate recruitment agency, or an employee of other such organizations specializing in student and graduate talent. Their remit included responsibility for, or support of (e.g., through research and strategic planning), the attraction and selection of current university students and recent graduates for spring week (opportunities for fresher students), summer internship, year-in-industry placement, and, most importantly, graduate roles (Clarke, 2017). The roles of CAs and GRs take on greater importance post-COVID-19 as university studies and life-long learning are a mechanism for a sustainable career (Vanhercke *et al.*, 2014). Thus, our study contributes theoretically by introducing these meso-level actors to the field of career studies in the context of Higher Education (HE). The study acknowledges the views of Clarke (2018) that employability is an antecedent of employment, whereby employability is the ability for an individual to be capable of securing a job, and employment is the physical securing of a job (Rothwell and Arnold, 2007).

The contribution of this study comes from applying a framework of career construction theory (Savickas, 2002, 2005) within the context of a career ecosystem (Baruch, 2015; Baruch and Rousseau, 2019; Gribling and Duberley, 2021) to understand the views of the intermediary, meso-level actors, which, to-date have lacked representation within career theory literature (Holmes, 2013, 2016; Minocha *et al*., 2017). Furthermore, the study offers some of the first findings on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, helping to ensure that organizational behavior and career theory literature reflect the dramatically changing landscape in the university-to-work transition.

 Practically, the findings provide an insightful bridge between graduate recruitment and the work of careers professions to understand how a global pandemic influences the way that university careers services and graduate recruitment teams can work individually and collaboratively to best prepare students for the graduate labor market, resulting in enhanced outcomes for all stakeholders. Careers Advisors can gain more insights into how to prepare current university students and future graduates, as well as providing new opportunities for working collaboratively with GRs via a new psychological contract (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019), addressing existing expectations between actors (Jackson, 2020). This will benefit universities in terms of employability and employment outcomes of their graduates, as well as benefiting the individual students/graduates as they transition from university into an extremely competitive graduate labor market (Terzaroli, 2018). GRs can help organizations to benefit from a stronger talent pool and by understanding the views of other organizations, enabling them to plan strategically in terms of the recruitment and retention of graduates to gain competitive advantage (Donald *et al.*, 2020).

**Literature Review and** **Theoretical Framework**

 Career Construction Theory (CCT) (Savickas, 2002, 2005) within the context of Career Ecosystem Theory (CET) (Baruch, 2013, 2015) forms the theoretical framework for this research to understand the views of the intermediary, meso-level actors, which, to-date have lacked representation within career theory literature (Holmes, 2013, 2016; Minocha *et al*., 2017).

The CCT states that careers are individually constructed by people attempting to successfully adapt to the changing environment (Savickas, 2002, 2005), the aim being to achieve person-environment integration (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). In a meta-analysis, Rudolph *et al.* (2017) found that highly adaptable people tend to express greater adaptivity (e.g., self-esteem), adapting (e.g., career planning), and adaption (e.g., employability). CCT offers relevance because our work and social environments are constantly changing, particularly in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, and so people will have to be more proactive in constructing their vocational self-concept through their careers (Rudolph *et al.*, 2019).

The CET was applied to study sustainable graduate careers and employability (Bridgstock, 2017) and captures how the macro-, meso-, and micro-level actors interact with each other all working as one dynamic, interconnected, and single entity (Baruch, 2013, 2015). Macro-level actors refer to government and agencies at both national and regional level, micro-level actors refer to students and their families, employers, academics, administrative staff, and educational institutions, and the meso-level actors refer to the CAs and GRs (Holmes, 2013). Career theory literature tends to focus on a two-sided analysis: the employer, on one side, and the employee, or potential employees on the other one. Although eventually the relationship between these parties is the focus of career studies, such an employment relationship is first induced and directed by other agencies, which are mostly missing from the literature. This study, therefore, addresses calls by Baruch (2015) to widen understanding of labor markets by looking at the multiple players and their related roles in the process. Thus, our study, add to the literature of both career studies and the study of higher education through the framework of CCT within the context of CET.

*Development of Research Questions*

We now develop the two research questions, a summary of which can be found in Appendix I along with the associated interview questions.

In a recent Australian study discussing the nature of graduate roles and the value of the degree, Jackson (2020) interviewed 21 industry representatives involved in either the recruitment or supervision of graduates, predominantly from the sectors of Finance, Hospitality, and Business Services. She found that efforts to improve graduates’ job prospects are becoming more difficult as there is a mismatch between employer and graduate expectations. The impact of an ever-evolving labor market, due to ongoing employment projections, changes in demography, and the way that occupations have changed due to increased reliance and changes in technology are all challenges that need to be considered for both graduates and employers. Although researched in Australia, one UK participant commented that in the UK, Accounting companies were finding that graduates were not always competent to deal with the evolving nature of the job. Indeed, in today’s highly competitive job market, graduates in the financial sectors, not only have to be digitally literate, but they also need to have flexibility and resilience to an ever-changing environment. The QS Employer Insights Report (2020) calls on employers and universities to work together to provide opportunities for students and recent graduates to meet these requirements.

Hora (2020) argues that employment is not simply about having an appropriate degree, but that other forms of resources and or capital are just as important. This viewpoint is supported by Donald *et al*. (2019) and Veld *et al*. (2015) concerning the role of human capital in enhancing perceived employability and by Lin (2001) about social capital and gaining information about job opportunities accessed through professional and/or social networks. Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) is also now becoming more important in getting the right fit/match for the employer/employee relationship. This can be symbolic information regarding a person’s status, class and character which is gained through institutionalized and embodied forms. Hora (2020) argues that such results, imply the need for HE institutions to consider how universities and their agents within (e.g., CAs, academic tutors etc.) can assist students, particularly perhaps with ethnically diverse and socio-economically deprived cohorts, where cultural signals can be disconnected from the dominant culture within the hiring organization. One suggestion was to make sure CAs research organizational cultural norms and hiring criteria and to help students to be proactive in seeking out such information, allowing them to be more prepared in applying for jobs. Another idea was that students should be made aware by the CAs within the university careers service and within faculties about the potential possibility that graduates may be exposed to discrimination based on their gender, class and/or race, and how to recognize and challenge or flag such occurrences.

Understanding the meso-level views of the changing nature of graduate jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic can help universities to provide greater benefit to graduate employers by aligning the development of their students with the requirements of the future job market into which the students will enter following graduation (Boffo, 2018). The view is supported by Iavarone and Sabatano (2018, p. 401) who believe that the “*empowerment of skills”* for employability should be based on those which are useful in the labor market. Therefore, understanding the nature of future graduate jobs can inform course pedagogy within universities, to enhance employability of their students and employment outcomes of their graduates (Ashleigh *et al*., 2012; Ojiako *et al*., 2014). Meso-level actors thus play an integral role to existing university students by enhancing their employability as an antecedent to graduate employment outcomes, highlighting the importance of creating and maintaining relationships between CAs and GRs, and universities and organizations (Edwards, 2014; Terzaroli, 2018). For example, High Fliers Research (2020) found that 96% of GRs at organizations that are hiring graduates in 2020 are working with CAs and universities (96% campus presentations, 93% career fairs, 81% skills training sessions, 54% academic lectures).

However, one of the challenges faced by CAs is student engagement and overcoming negative attitudes of some students towards CAs (Greenbank, 2011). The paradox here is that students who access the meso-level support networks of CAs and GRs perceive themselves to have greater levels of human capital, greater ownership of their careers, and enhanced employability compared to others (Baruch *et al.*, 2019; Donald *et al*. 2018, 2019). In response to this paradox, Clements and Kamau (2018) call for CAs to take a more proactive role in preparing students for labor market entry, alongside the need to develop networks that cross organizational boundaries (e.g., partnerships with employers, graduate recruitment agencies, lecturers, alumni, other universities, etc.). This issue takes on even greater significance following the COVID-19 pandemic because CCT (Savickas, 2002, 2005) argues that careers are individually constructed by people attempting to successfully adapt to the changing environment; the aim being to achieve person-environment integration (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012), highlighting the interconnected and interdependent nature of actors within a career ecosystem (Baruch, 2015). Such endeavors by CAs and GRs may be facilitated given The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey published by Deloitte (2020) found that the current global pandemic has brought an even stronger sense of individual responsibility. This is supported by Rudolph at al. (2019) who found that students and recent graduates were more open to taking ownership and drawing on the support of existing meso-level networks within the career ecosystem due to continuous change of work and social environments leading to more proactive behaviors.

A further challenge faced by university careers services is the trade-off between adopting a collaborative approach, whilst simultaneously competing with other universities in terms of employability outcomes and other such metrics which determine league table rankings and the attraction of future students and their associated tuition fees (Oliver, 2020). The added complexity here relates to the previously held perception of an association between participation in HE and increased employability, earnings, and aspirations (Brooks and Youngson, 2016), and positive perceptions of return on investment of HE (Qenani, MacDougall and Sexton, 2014). However, Donald *et al*. (2018) reported a narrowing gap in terms of the perceived return on investment of HE, driven by increased tuition fees and living expenses. This could be problematic if the COVID-19 pandemic sees a repeat of the 2007-2008 financial crisis and subsequent global recession whereby a stagnation in starting salaries and wage growth for graduates was coupled with underemployment (Grove, 2018).

We believe it is reasonable to assume that the roles played by CAs and GRs will become more important in bridging the gap between graduate needs and organizational expectations when it comes to developing and managing talent as part of the university-to-work transition. This is due to the ongoing threat to graduates of a lack of job security from the ever-evolving labor market as they transverse through the current global pandemic to find suitable employment (Bernstrøm et al., 2019). This study, therefore, contributes to the gap in the literature identified by Minocha *et al*. (2017) by understanding the employer and university interaction via two research questions.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How can university careers services and organizations work individually and collaboratively to best develop early careers talent following the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What are the challenges that university career services and organizations face when working individually or collaboratively to develop early careers talent following the COVID-19 pandemic?

Appendix I provides the interviews’ protocol.

**Methods**

*Research Design and Research Tool*

We adopted a qualitative methodological approach and between July and October 2020, carried out semi-structured interviews on CAs and GRs. To overcome barriers of access to participants caused by social distancing measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews took place via telephone. All interviews were recorded and lasted between 29 minutes and 70 minutes in length, with an average time of 40.5 minutes.

*Context and Recruitment of Participants*

According to High Fliers Research (2020), the accounting, banking, and finance sector represented 37.22% (9,167) of overall graduate vacancies and 48% of graduate vacancies in the private sector. Therefore, this research provides coverage of a large number of graduates whilst maintaining a sector-specific focus as it is acknowledged from previous studies (e.g. Donald *et al*., 2018) that actors within different sectors will have different perspectives of graduate employment and this is likely to remain the case despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The accounting, banking, and finance sector was the focus of this study due to its representation of where work and employment were relatively possible in a remote working setup (compared with, for example, the tourism industry).

Participants were initially identified via the professional networking platform LinkedIn, via university careers service and organization websites, and via affiliate institutions of graduate recruitment. The initial sample was subsequently expanded by stratified snowballing based on the early participants.

*Sample*

The study sample comprised 36 (50 per cent female (18), 50 per cent male (18)) participants, composed of 19 CAs (52.6 per cent female (10), 47.4 per cent male (9)) and 17 GRs (47 per cent female (8), 53 per cent male (9)). The mean years of experience were 16.7 for CAs, 11.1 for GRs, and 14.1 overall. The median age bracket was 35-44 for CAs, 25-34 for GRs, and 35-44 overall. Years of experience and age bracket were deduced from LinkedIn profiles based on year of undergraduate graduation and employment history, and where any ambiguity existed in terms of a lack of a LinkedIn profile, incomplete employment history, or age bracket boundaries, the individual participant was asked to clarify. ID codes were used to identify participants via linked anonymity, without revealing personal details of the individuals themselves. A maximum of three participants came from a single institution as this enriched the findings of the study by capturing different or complementary perceptions of the same environment, whilst also providing coverage of different institutions. The institutions offered a representation of Scotland, Wales, North of England, Midlands, South of England, and London, as well as coverage of pre-1992 and post-1992 universities, and large organizations and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Overall, 27 distinct institutions were represented in the research. Table I shows a breakdown of the Participant Information including ID, Role, Gender, Age, Experience, and Interview Length.

**Table I: Participant Information**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **ID** | **Role** | **Gender** | **Age** | **Experience (Years)** | **Interview Length (Minutes)** |
| 1 | Careers Advisor | Male | 45-54 | 25 | 40 |
| 2 | Graduate Recruiter | Male | 25-34 | 6 | 29 |
| 3 | Careers Advisor | Male | 35-44 | 8 | 41 |
| 4 | Careers Advisor | Female | 35-44 | 7 | 39 |
| 5 | Careers Advisor | Male | 25-34 | 8 | 33 |
| 6 | Graduate Recruiter | Female | 35-44 | 9 | 37 |
| 7 | Careers Advisor | Female | 45-54 | 19 | 62 |
| 8 | Graduate Recruiter | Female | 25-34 | 5 | 30 |
| 9 | Careers Advisor | Female | 35-44 | 18 | 40 |
| 10 | Careers Advisor | Male | 25-34 | 11 | 42 |
| 11 | Careers Advisor | Male | 25-34 | 7 | 38 |
| 12 | Careers Advisor | Male | 35-44 | 15 | 49 |
| 13 | Careers Advisor | Male | 45-54 | 14 | 51 |
| 14 | Graduate Recruiter | Male | 25-34 | 3 | 39 |
| 15 | Careers Advisor | Female | 65+ | 27 | 35 |
| 16 | Graduate Recruiter | Female | 25-34 | 12 | 41 |
| 17 | Careers Advisor | Male | 35-44 | 17 | 29 |
| 18 | Careers Advisor | Female | 35-44 | 10 | 33 |
| 19 | Graduate Recruiter | Female | 25-34 | 9 | 40 |
| 20 | Graduate Recruiter | Male | 25-34 | 8 | 50 |
| 21 | Graduate Recruiter | Female | 35-44 | 23 | 39 |
| 22 | Graduate Recruiter | Female | 35-44 | 20 | 43 |
| 23 | Graduate Recruiter | Male | 35-44 | 14 | 33 |
| 24 | Graduate Recruiter | Female | 35-44 | 15 | 30 |
| 25 | Graduate Recruiter | Female | 35-44 | 14 | 55 |
| 26 | Careers Advisor | Female | 35-44 | 15 | 33 |
| 27 | Graduate Recruiter | Female | 25-34 | 6 | 43 |
| 28 | Graduate Recruiter | Male | 45-54 | 17 | 51 |
| 29 | Careers Advisor | Female | 45-54 | 25 | 34 |
| 30 | Careers Advisor | Male | 45-54 | 17 | 34 |
| 31 | Graduate Recruiter | Male | 45-54 | 17 | 38 |
| 32 | Careers Advisor | Male | 55-64 | 35 | 55 |
| 33 | Careers Advisor | Female | 45-54 | 33 | 41 |
| 34 | Careers Advisor | Female | 25-34 | 7 | 30 |
| 35 | Graduate Recruiter | Male | 25-34 | 9 | 70 |
| 36 | Graduate Recruiter | Male | 25-34 | 2 | 31 |

The sample size was determined by saturation as this is considered the primary means of verification for thematic analysis (Subbaby, 2006). Saturation occurred when the interviewing of additional participants did not generate any new themes (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Category saturation was reached at 19 CAs and 17 GRs, and therefore overall saturation was achieved at 36 participants. Our overall sample size exceeds the thresholds for the median number of interviews for an authoritative paper of 32.5 by Saunders and Townsend (2016) and of 20-30 recommended by Morse (1994). Furthermore, the sample size of 36 was typical of the overall saturation number reported in a peer-review qualitative study by Donald *et al*. (2018) that also used interviews and thematic analysis and explored the student perception of graduate employability (our category saturations of 19 and 17 also exceeded theirs of 12, 12, and 12).

*Thematic Analysis of Data*

The application of thematic analysis responded to calls by Corley (2015, p.2) to “*engage with those living the phenomenon and attempt to understand it from their perspective.”* Thematic analysis is appropriate for this study because it addresses the research aim by providing a clear understanding and explanation of the meso-level views of CAs and GRs of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on graduate employment.

Braun and Clarke (2006, p.35) offer six phases of thematic analysis that were employed: “*familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report*.” We iteratively applied the six phases to enhance richness and depth of findings (Clarke and Braun, 2013). The interview transcripts were loaded into the software NVivo to conduct the thematic analysis because it offered transparency, flexibility, the ability to code data, and the ability to retrieve data quickly (Corbin and Strauss, 2015).

To ensure the validity of the findings and reduce researcher bias, the three researchers in the research team each had a distinct role as suggested by Saldaña (2015). Researcher I conducted thematic analysis on all the interviews, Researcher II conducted thematic analysis on 10% of the interviews, and Researcher III compared the themes, sub-themes, and codes from Researchers I and II.

**Results**

**Thematic Analysis Report**

Figure I provides a clear audit trail, enabling replication of the study, and promotes reliability of the treatment of qualitative data. Figure I evidences the final data structure (phase six) representing the documentation output from phases one to five based on guidance and notation by Gioia *et al*. (2013, p.21). Appendix II evidences example vignettes for second-order themes 1-20 identified in Figure I.

*Actor Synergies for Preparing Early Careers Talent (ASPECT) Model*

Figure II evidences the ASPECT Model and is a final extension of the thematic analysis stage informed by the interviews.

*Figure II maps the opportunities for universities, recruitment agencies, and organizations to operate collaboratively for the benefit of all actors within a career ecosystem.*

**Figure I: Thematic Analysis Report**





*Figure I shows the progression from first-order concepts to second-order themes to final aggregate dimensions, whereby the arrows indicate transitions across the stages.*

**Figure II: Actor Synergies for Preparing Early Careers Talent (ASPECT) Model**



**Findings**

The purpose of this paper is to understand how universities have responded to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of preparing university students and recent graduates for entry into the global labor market, using the accounting, banking, and finance sector as a case study. The paper will now address RQ1 and RQ2, drawing on Figure I and Figure II. Limitations of the study will then be stated.

**RQ1: How can university careers services and organizations work individually and collaboratively to best develop early careers talent following the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Figure II evidences the Actor Synergies for Preparing Early Career Talent (ASPECT Model) within the context of a career ecosystem.

University careers services experienced increased demand for careers advice from current students who could now access services more easily online, and from recent graduates who had been unable to secure employment and needed greater levels of support compared to previous cohorts.

Participant 17 (CA, Male) “*What we saw over this summer, where ordinarily we would do a handful of appointments a day, we are regularly exceeding 100 appointments every week (having moved online).*”

Participant 27 (GR, Female) “*A lot of careers services have told us seeing students virtually rather than face-to-face, has meant they’ve been able to see more students, they were able to provide more engagement and more support, so it actually works quite well.*”

The increased demand for careers advice places greater emphasis on the need for collaboration with other actors within the career ecosystem (Baruch, 2015; Holmes, 2016; Minocha *et al.*,2017) to facilitate person-environment integration (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). For example, lecturers, graduate recruitment agencies, and organizations.

Participant 18 (CA, Female) “*So working with academics within the curriculum, careers advisors and employers to join all of those sorts of dots to help students develop the right skills alongside their (subject-based) knowledge.*”

Participant 6 (GR, Female) “*So the best way I think is to work with academics and to work with program leaders. We (as a graduate recruitment agency) work with a lot of universities where there’s, the two things that are kinda dealt with in isolation. So, you’ve got the academic, the technical content of the degree, and you’ve got these add-ons that the careers team do and I just think there needs to be more collaboration between the two*.”

The findings showed an agreement between CAs and GRs that students needed to be engaged earlier during their studies, to have tailored advice based on their year of study, and that CAs and GRs needed to communicate, and knowledge share more effectively (Jackson, 2020).

Participant 35 (GR, Female) “*I think it’s just really preparing them (students) from year 1 (of university). It’s not waiting until the last, you know, term of the university (in final year) to say you need to be doing this, you need to be doing that*.”

Participant 22 (GR, Female) “*I think that they (organizations) can help by updating the career services to any changes to their assessment processes so that careers advisors are passing on accurate information to the students.”*

Participant 25 (GR, Female) “*I think graduate recruiters just need to be more transparent. Some are, but they’re often in a minority, to be frank*.”

Participant 21 (GR, Female) “*I think the universities just need to tell us what are the students asking you? What do they need?*”

Furthermore, collaborations with SMEs and local or regional employers take on greater importance for universities where graduates tend to look for employment in the region after graduation. This could also help in terms of a greater representation of employers being made accessible to students (Donald *et al*., 2018).

Participant 13 (CA, Male) “*We work with a lot of small and medium-sized companies, we know they’re the bedrock of this country and there are over 5 million of them in the UK, so we want to, and I think there needs to be more support for them as well, both from the universities and vice versa*.”

Participant 6 (GR, Female) “*So careers in the SME market is struggling more at present (due to COVID-19) than some of the larger firms, but they’re (SMEs) still huge graduate employers as a collective and the university would do well to kind of tap into that market*.”

There is also a feeling that universities and organizations could collaborate more with each other and with graduate recruitment agencies in recognition that their aims and objectives are broadly the same in terms of developing and recruiting graduates for entry-level talent roles and as future managers.

Participant 12 (CA, Male) “*I’m trying to think of another way to put it really, it would be groups of employers and groups of universities coming together*.”

Participant 34 (CA, Female) “*Everyone working together is actually really complicated to do well, but when it works makes such a big difference*.”

Participant 23 (GR, Male) “*I think that will be the best thing that we can all do together is really just make sure that the heads of graduate recruitment, the heads of recruitment agencies like us, and the heads of careers services are all communicating regularly and together and working towards a solution that works for all of us*”.

Finally, organizations need to promote diversity through their attraction and selection processes and to aid in the development of social capital (Lin, 2001) and to help students to pick up on cultural signals and norms (Hora, 2020).

Participant 25 (GR, Female) “*I think with the general feeling in the sector about wanting to improve social mobility as well. Online stuff just really allows you to meet those kinds of social mobility or diversity targets much, much easier than going on campus*.”

Participant 27 (GR, Female) “*I think that graduate recruiters will probably need to be more open about the types of graduates they recruit, actually, and that will massively help them with their diversity targets as well*.”

Participant 28 (GR, Male) “*I think every time you put another criteria in terms of your job-seeking you are reducing the number, you are reducing the depth and potential pool of applicants and increasing the chance that the right person for you won’t even apply for your job, let alone be accepted for it*.”

In summary, the collaboration between actors in the career ecosystem has become even more important and the COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to sustain the collaborative spirit fostered during these times of adversity.

**RQ2: What are the challenges that university career services and organizations face when working individually or collaboratively to develop early careers talent following the COVID-19 pandemic?**

 The findings indicate that both CAs and GRs are having to operate in an ecosystem that is dominated by uncertainty.

Participant 12 (CA, Male) “*There’s still a huge level of uncertainty. We’ve tried to keep our eyes open from a careers point of view on updates from the ISE, and I think it’s just, as with COVID-19 in general, we are seeing spikes coming, spikes going, so everyone is a bit hesitant to commit to things at the moment.”*

Participant 2 (GR, Male) “*Obviously, there is a lot of uncertainty in the recruitment world, including what is going on with Brexit*.”

Participant 25 (GR, Female) “*We’ve got the COVID-19 and we’ve got Brexit and there are more financial institutions who are looking to move some of their operations outside of London*.”

Unfortunately, a lack of resources and high turnover of staff often results in slow response times between CAs and GRs. This issue is exacerbated by increased demand for careers guidance from students and recent graduates who are anxious, have lost confidence, and are struggling to secure work experience or graduate employment in an increasingly competitive labor market (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2020).

Participant 2 (GR, Male) “*I mean, sometimes it’s the length of time that things take to get done, or that they take to get back to us*.”

Participant 1 (CA, Male) “*One of the challenges that careers advisors have is that graduate recruiters change fairly often, there is constant churn, people tend to be in the role for a relatively short period of time and then move on*”.

Participant 4 (CA, Female) “*The challenge is at our university we have 20,000 plus students at the university and at the careers service we only have eight careers advisors which are a mixture of full time and part-time staff. So, in relation to that, there are only a certain amount of one-to-one career appointments that we can offer*.”

 Furthermore, attraction and selection budgets are either being cut or redirected to technology platforms and associated support roles.

Participant 20 (GR, Male) “*I think yeah it is going to be tricky cos a lot of organizations or companies are going to be a little bit more cash-strapped.”*

Participant 31 (GR, Male) “*I think one of the consequences of COVID-19 will be a substantial shift to online recruitment technologies over face-to-face things*.”

University careers services often lack the budget for virtual careers platforms and must pass these costs onto employers in the form of an attendance fee. Unfortunately, this fee acts as a significant barrier to SMEs who are battling to survive the pandemic and where budget cuts have a disproportionate impact on attraction and selection compared to a larger organization (ISE, 2019).

Participant 4 (CA, Female) “*Other barriers could be for example with a lot of larger careers fairs a cost would be involved. So, for a lot of organizations, particularly given the current restrictions that are around, the money that they are earning, it would be a barrier possibly getting organizations on board.”*

 The biggest challenge, however, is the competition between universities, graduate recruitment agencies, and organizations (QS Employer Insights Report, 2020). For universities, the league table rankings based on measures of graduate employability create an aversion to sharing strategies and resources (Hora, 2020).

Participant 31 (GR, Male) “*I think employers would really like universities to collaborate more, I think the universities have got, all of the pressure they have had over recent years from (Government) policy has been to compete with each other and try and sort of screw each other over*.”

Graduate recruitment agencies are often viewed as a threat by university careers services when in many cases such agencies help CAs and GRs to understand one another.

Participant 36 (GR, Male) “*So, I think perhaps a more transparent and collaborative approach for those kinds of careers services who have not wanted to engage with graduate recruiters (or agencies) for whatever reason*”.

Participant 24 (GR, Female) “*I think the challenges are basically the reason why I set my business up! They don’t understand each other*.”

Organizations must consider the risk versus reward of sharing resources and strategies whilst competing for early careers talent. However, this is perceived to be easier to calculate for organizations than for universities.

Participant 31 (GR, Male) “*It’s much easier for them (organizations) to do some of those calculations and think about things like that.*”

 In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing challenges and created new challenges highlighting the relevance of CCT (Savickas, 2002, 2005) because our work and social environments are constantly changing (Rudolph *et al.*, 2019). However, the pandemic has also fostered an environment whereby collaboration between actors within a career ecosystem has been essential. Whether collaboration on such levels will continue and how such psychological contracts will develop remains uncertain (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019).

Participant 20 (GR, Male) “*I think there has been a lot of good faith between different institutions and people willing to support people that are doing great stuff or trying to support students at this time (during the COVID-19 pandemic) and even though I don’t think it will continue in quite the same way, hopefully, it will continue to some degree*.”

**Discussion**

*Theoretical Implications*

The contribution of this study comes from applying a framework of career construction theory (Savickas, 2002, 2005) within the context of a career ecosystem (Baruch, 2015) to understand the views of the intermediary, meso-level actors, which, to-date have lacked representation within career theory literature (Holmes, 2013, 2016; Minocha *et al*., 2017). The study also highlights the complexities and nuances around the collaboration between CAs and GRs, which is often oversimplified. The roles of CAs and GRs take on greater importance post-COVID-19 as university studies and life-long learning are a mechanism for a sustainable career (Vanhercke *et al.*, 2014). Our study also shows that CAs and GRs share similar views but struggle to articulate these due to the use of different terminology. Additionally, whilst collaboration is often desirable, it is extremely challenging to evolve from a theoretical desire for collaboration to practical implementation.

Furthermore, the study offers some of the first findings on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, helping to ensure that organizational behavior and career theory literature reflect the dramatically changing landscape in the university-to-work transition. The understanding of the interaction between meso-level actors within the career ecosystem means that future studies will be able to compare the evolution of the views of these actors as we progress through the COVID-19 pandemic and begin to emerge into the recovery phase. Our study thus addresses the call of Rudolph *et al.* (2019) to capture the evolving nature of work and social environments in career theory literature through the context of a global pandemic.

*Practical Contribution and Policy Implications*

This research provides an insightful bridge between graduate recruitment and the work of careers professions to understand how a global pandemic influences the way that university careers services and graduate recruitment teams can work individually and collaboratively to best prepare students for the graduate labor market, resulting in enhanced outcomes for all stakeholders. For example, we offer guidance to CAs into how to prepare current university students and future graduates, as well as providing new opportunities for working collaboratively with GRs via a new psychological contract (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019), addressing existing expectations between actors (Jackson, 2020). This benefits universities in terms of employability and employment outcomes of their graduates, as well as benefiting the individual students/graduates as they transition from university into an extremely competitive graduate labor market (Terzaroli, 2018). GRs can help organizations to benefit from a stronger talent pool and by understanding the views of other organizations, enabling them to plan strategically in terms of the recruitment and retention of graduates to gain competitive advantage (Donald *et al.*, 2020).

From a policy perspective, we highlight the need to look at new ways of measuring graduate employability to remove existing barriers for collaboration between universities. We feel that such competition can be detrimental to students and recent graduates, particularly to those from diverse backgrounds. Existing measures of graduate employability also fail to account for regional and sector variances or changes in the demand and supply of graduates, all of which are directly impacted by the global pandemic.

*Limitations*

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions the interviews were carried out by telephone rather than in-person. Further, the participant views might be changed as government policy has continued to evolve (e.g. the availability of vaccine and the anticipated impact of the Brexit). We still believe that such insights are valuable in capturing the evolving nature of work and social environments during a global pandemic (Rudolph *et al.*, 2019) and that the findings continue to offer value. Lastly, the accounting, banking, and finance sector formed the case for this study. The findings are not necessarily representative of other sectors, particularly those where working from home during the pandemic was not feasible. However, according to High Fliers Research (2020), the sector of focus does represent 37.22% of all graduate vacancies, and 48% of all private-sector graduate vacancies.

*Recommendations for Future Research*

 Future research should continue to develop an understanding of how the meso-level actors of GRs and CAs can best prepare students and recent graduates for the labor market following the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, by comparing the findings from the accounting, banking, and finance sector with different sectors of the labor market. An opportunity also exists to undertake quantitative research, perhaps longitudinally, to map the changes within a career ecosystem between CAs and GRs over time.

Furthermore, it would be useful to re-visit the university student perspective to compare their views before and after the pandemic. For example, what impact has the pandemic had on their perceptions of graduate employability, and how do they feel that CAs and GRs can support them in terms of developing employability, securing employment, and wider areas of career construction within the career ecosystem.

These areas of research would help to build on the opportunities and address some of the challenges to collaboration that we have identified.

*Conclusion*

 The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing challenges and created new challenges for CAs and GRs to work individually and collaboratively to prepare students and recent graduates for entry into an extremely competitive graduate labor market. This study helps to raise awareness of these challenges whilst also aiding understanding of the opportunities for collaboration by using the accounting, banking, and finance sector as a case. Our findings offer an insightful bridge between universities and organizations. We hope that students and recent graduates can benefit from greater levels of support as they undertake the university-to-work transition during this time of uncertainty.

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**Appendix I: Summary of the Research and Interview Questions**

*Participant Information*

Gender, Role, Years of Experience, Age (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65+)

**Research Question 1**

How can university careers services and organizations work individually and collaboratively to best develop early careers talent following the COVID-19 pandemic?

*Interview Question 1*

How do you feel that careers advisors can best prepare university students and recent graduates for the graduate labor market following the COVID-19 pandemic?

*Interview Question 2*

How do you feel that graduate recruiters can best prepare university students and recent graduates for the graduate labor market following the COVID-19 pandemic?

*Interview Question 3*

How can careers advisors and graduate recruiters work collaboratively to best prepare university students and recent graduates for the graduate labor market following the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Research Question 2**

What are the challenges that university career services and organizations face when working individually or collaboratively to develop early careers talent following the COVID-19 pandemic?

*Interview Question 4*

What challenges do careers advisors face in preparing university students and recent graduates for the graduate labor market following the COVID-19 pandemic?

*Interview Question 5*

What challenges do graduate recruiters face in preparing university students and recent graduates for the graduate labor market following the COVID-19 pandemic?

*Interview Question 6*

What challenges do careers advisors and graduate recruiters face in working collaboratively to prepare university students and recent graduates for the graduate labor market following the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Appendix II: Example Vignettes for Themes 1-20**

Appendix II offers an example vignette for each of the second-order themes identified in the Thematic Analysis Report (Figure I).

**Theme 1: Access to Careers Advice**

Participant 1 (CA, Male)

*“Most careers services, as far as I am aware, went online very quickly back in March of this year (2020) and I think will continue to be predominantly online certainly for the remainder of this year (2020).”*

**Theme 2: Employability Events**

Participant 15 (CA, Female)

*“I think the majority of it (Employability Events), for the foreseeable future, is going to continue as it has for the past four of five months (March-August 2020) in that most of it will be virtual. So, I think, you know, there won’t be the physical presence on campus of organisations at careers fairs or skills workshop, I think it’s all going to be done virtually. I think the whole of the recruitment cycle (2020-2021) is again going to be done virtually.”*

**Theme 3: Curriculum Input**

Participant 17 (CA, Male)

“I think involvement in curriculum always goes down really well, bringing the curriculum to life wherever possible. Theoretical learning is brilliant and has its place, but sometimes that application is what inspires a student on to achieve more.”

**Theme 4: Employer Engagement**

Participant 27 (GR, Female)

*“So then it’s perhaps on the kind of careers services to reach out to the employer and maybe expand the type of employers that they work with. Because we still get complaints (from students) that it’s always the same employers and same sectors that are represented on campus.”*

**Theme 5: Student Engagement**

Participant 12 (CA, Male)

*“I think it would be the most engaged students that are proactive and find that (careers support) for themselves, whereas trying to ensure the whole (student) cohort has access to that.”*

**Theme 6: CA Guidance**

Participant 9 (CA, Female)

*“So, I think trying to explain that to them (students) and help them to, you know, ok, the applicant tracking system who need to get through the first stage and then you need to get through the next stage. I think I do really see my role (as careers advisor) in supporting them through each stage and also trying to help them (students) just understand how employability and graduate recruitment work.”*

**Theme 7: GR Guidance**

Participant 21 (GR, Female)

*“I think a lot more around the recruitment process as well, I think we (graduate recruiters) could be doing more to say (to students) look this is how the recruitment process works.”*

**Theme 8: CA Experience**

Participant 10 (CA, Male)

“I think there a lot to be said for working in partnership with university careers services and employers around introducing students into that world. So, whether that’s an insight program or some kind of short internship opportunity, or a placement, or a mentorship, or sponsoring a business scheme, or something to give students a flavor for what the world of work is like.”

**Theme 9: Employer Experience**

Participant 22 (GR, Female)

“*I think another thing that would be good would be employers working with the universities to offer things like virtual internships and work specifically with the university to do that*.”

**Theme 10: Attraction and Selection**

Participant 31 (GR, Male)

*“But the other thing is a shift to more AI (Artificial Intelligence) type systems, so things like video interviewing, that kind of thing.”*

**Theme 11: Diversity**

Participant 28 (GR, Male)

*“Every time you put another criteria in terms of your job-seeking you are reducing the number, you are reducing the depth and potential pool of applicants and increasing the chance that the right person for you won’t even apply for your job, let alone be accepted for it.”*

**Theme 12: Strategy**

Participant 18 (CA, Female)

*“I think it’s just kinda joining the dots up between all of the key players to make sure that we’re helping students to develop the right skills, knowledge, attributes, and experiences and then kinda making them as clear as possible.”*

**Theme 13: Mentality**

Participant 19 (GR, Female)

*“I think that it has to be about sharing knowledge from both sides but also about sharing knowledge in the right place so that it’s not just going out into the ether but that it’s collected in the most useful way.”*

**Theme 14: Employment Opportunities**

Participant 14 (GR, Male)

“Looking ahead to sort of September 2021, already we’re having discussions with employers that are saying you know we’re just not sure how many people we’re going to need, but we’re thinking it’s very likely that we’re going to need less than we did this year (2020).”

**Theme 15: People**

Participant 4 (CA, Female)

*“A lot of the challenge is at our university we have 20,000 plus students at the university and at the careers service we only have eight careers advisors which are a mixture of full time and part-time staff.”*

**Theme 16: Time**

Participant 15 (CA, Female)

*“So there’s 5 careers advisors and 2 of those are full time and the others are part-time. So actually, there’s no way that we can have the time to build relationships with employers.”*

**Theme 17: Budgets**

Participant 20 (GR, Male)

*“It is going to be tricky cos a lot of organisations or companies are going to be a little bit more cash-strapped; universities potentially again could be more cash-strapped.”*

**Theme 18: University v University**

Participant 12 (CA, Male)

“We’ve got students from all different universities coming together. But again that, that seems to be a rather politically charged issue because some institutions wouldn’t want to group with other institutions.”

**Theme 19: Careers Service v Agencies**

Participant 36 (GR, Male)

*“I think there’s a tendency for some universities to almost be (hesitates) scared of, of recruiters who are trying to support students to become employed. So, I think perhaps a more transparent and collaborative approach for those kinds of careers services who have not wanted to engage with graduate recruiters (or agencies) for whatever reason.”*

**Theme 20: Organisation v Organisation**

Participant 31 (GR, Male)

*“I think for firms, they are in competition with each other. But I can imagine a partnership between a number of firms much more easily than I can imagine universities getting to that.”*