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Journal:	*Education + Training*
Manuscript ID	ET-12-2024-0581.R1
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	Career Counselling, Career Metaphor, Contemporary Labour Market, Graduate Employability, Sustainable Career Ecosystem, Well-being

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Cross-Cultural Validation of Donald's Weather as a Career Metaphor

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To Cite

Donald, W. E., Mouratidou, M., & Nimmi, P. M. (2025). Exploring the elements: Cross-cultural validation of Donald's Weather as a Career Metaphor. *Education + Training*. Advanced Online Publication. https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-12-2024-0581

Declaration of Interest Statements

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Funding

This work was partially funded by the University of Cumbria, UK.

Ethical Approval

The study received ethical approval via the institutional review board of the lead author (ERGO II: 90282.A2).

Consent

Informed consent was obtained before participation in the study.

Data Availability Statement

Access to the dataset is not possible due to ethical approval restrictions.

Exploring the Elements:

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Abstract

Purpose: Drawing on a sustainable career ecosystem theory and narrative career identity, our study empirically tests Donald's (2022) conceptualisation of Weather as a Career Metaphor (WCM).

Design/methodology/approach: Survey data were collected from 368 undergraduates in India (n=184) and the UK (n=184) through open-ended questions in 2024 to enable a cross-cultural comparison.

Findings: Qualitative content analysis, followed by frequency counts of categories, showed strong alignment between participants from both countries. The ten original weather elements proposed in the WCM (sun, rain, drought, thunder and lightning, ice, fog, tailwind, headwind, tornado, and rainbow) were empirically supported and further refined. The element rain revealed notable cross-cultural variation in emphasis across its three categories. Three additional weather elements (cloud, hail, and snow) were identified and defined. Overall, 88.86 per cent of participants (88.04 in India and 89.67 in the UK) found the WCM useful in reflecting on their employability and future careers. Interestingly, even those who reported limited usefulness described weather elements in a way consistent with other participants.

Originality: The study makes a theoretical contribution by empirically validating the revised WCM grounded in sustainable career ecosystem theory and narrative career identity. Practically, it provides career development practitioners with a new, context-sensitive metaphor to support undergraduates in India and the UK to prepare for and subsequently experience the sustainable career indicators of health, happiness, and productivity in contemporary labour markets.

Keywords

Career Counselling, Career Metaphor, Contemporary Labour Market, Graduate Employability, Sustainable Career Ecosystem, Well-being.

Article Classification

Research Paper

Introduction

Career metaphors help individuals think creatively about their careers (Inkson, 2002), particularly when incorporated into guidance from career development professionals (Amundson *et al.*, 2014). Traditionally, the career ladder metaphor dominated career thinking, portraying careers as linear and upward-moving progressions from one role to the next (Strauss, 1962). Each rung represented a career phase, where success was tied to title and salary. This metaphor evolved with the idea of lateral movement and dual career paths (Allen and Kutz, 1986), but still relied on a structured, hierarchical view.

As careers have become more dynamic and unpredictable, various new metaphors have emerged (Creed and Nacey, 2021; Inkson, 2004; Inkson *et al.*, 2015). Careers are now framed as games (Pryor and Bright, 2009), sports (Hanley, 2010), or relationships (McMahon and Watson, 2012). However, many of these metaphors are more than ten years old (Amundson, 2015; Amundson *et al.*, 2014) and may not reflect the complexities of modern careers. In light of accelerated labour market shifts, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic (Donald and Mouratidou, 2022), artificial intelligence (Rabenu and Baruch, 2025), and the rise of gig work (Akkermans *et al.*, 2025), career professionals require updated frameworks to support individuals through disruption, instability, and rapid change.

Consequently, Donald (2022) introduced the Weather as a Career Metaphor (WCM), designed to help career development professionals prepare clients for increasingly volatile career environments. The WCM leverages weather concepts to help individuals understand and navigate the fluctuating nature of work. It encourages reflection on internal states and external conditions, promoting resilience, adaptability, and future career readiness. However, the WCM has yet to be empirically validated, which presents three key issues. First, without evidence, its broader adoption by practitioners may be limited. Second, as the metaphor was developed in a European context, its

applicability in other regions remains unclear. Third, while metaphors can be powerful tools for sense-making, many existing ones are increasingly disconnected from today's career realities. The WCM's potential lies in its accessibility, emotional resonance, and alignment with current labour market conditions, but empirical support is needed to establish its value.

This study addresses those gaps by empirically testing the WCM with 386 undergraduates in India and the UK, representing two distinct regions (Asia and Europe). We focus on undergraduates because they are at a pivotal transition point from university to the workforce, a stage recognised as "an ongoing challenge for Higher Education institutions" (Creed, 2023, p. 38). Career development professionals are central to helping students manage this transition by bridging the university-employer divide (Donald, 2024), supporting narrative career identity development (LaPointe, 2010), and enabling the flow of talent within the career ecosystem (Baruch *et al.*, 2023).

Our study contributes theoretically by empirically validating the revised WCM, grounded in sustainable career ecosystem theory and narrative career identity. This approach addresses recent calls for empirical evidence on the effectiveness of career development tools and interventions (Chin *et al.*, 2022; Donald, Van der Heijden and Manville, 2024). The WCM also offers an opportunity to bridge employability and career development literature, which has often remained siloed (Healy *et al.*, 2022). Practically, the WCM provides career development practitioners with a novel, flexible tool that resonates with clients navigating non-linear and uncertain career paths. Unlike rigid metaphors, it supports emotional expression, helps reframe external disruptions, and promotes proactive planning in unpredictable environments. Metaphors encourage reflection on personal values, strengths, and purpose (Gutpa, 2019), promoting lifelong learning, which predicts perceived employability (Nimmi *et al.*, 2021). Taken together, it can help guide individuals toward the sustainable career outcomes of health, happiness, and productivity (Van der Heijden, 2005).

Next, we introduce our study's theoretical framework, outline the WCM in detail, and present the three research questions that guide our empirical investigation.

Literature Review and Development of Research Questions

Sustainable Career Ecosystem Theory and Narrative Career Identity

Donald (2022) initially adopted a theoretical framework of sustainable career theory (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015) and conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) to underpin the conceptualisation of the WCM. The logic for such an approach was to acknowledge the role of resources for the individual in achieving a sustainable career (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Donald *et al.*, 2020). However, the WCM also considers the interplay of resources between various actors. Therefore, instead of pairing sustainable career theory with conservation of resources theory, we pair it with career ecosystem theory (Baruch, 2015).

Sustainable career theory posits three dimensions of person, context, and time (De *Vos et al.*, 2020) and three indicators of health, happiness, and productivity (Van der Heijden, 2005). However, this does not mean an individual should expect all of these indicators all of the time, as they will naturally fluctuate across and within days, months, and years of one's lifespan. Additionally, career ecosystem theory captures the interconnected and interdependent nature of various actors and their resources operating within a career ecosystem (Baruch, 2015). The complementary nature of these two theories lead to their integration (Donald and Jackson, 2023) and definition of a sustainable career ecosystem by Donald (2023) as

> "a variety of *interconnected* and *interdependent* actors across higher education institutions [educational] and workplace *contexts*, whereby the lives and careers of *individuals* evolve and play out over *time* with an emphasis on *sustainable outcomes* for the individual, organizations, and broader society" (p. xxvii, *emphasis* added).

Consequently, sustainable career ecosystem theory offers a valuable underpinning for our current empirical testing of the WCM because the WCM can offer a tool for career development practitioners to use with their clients to prepare them for sustainable careers in contemporary labour markets. The adoption of sustainable career ecosystem theory also responds to recent calls by Donald, Van der Heijden and Baruch (2024) for researchers to place career development professionals and their clients as critical actors at the centre of a sustainable career ecosystem. Moreover, it acknowledges the interplay of agentic and contextual factors to address an overemphasis on agentic factors in the literature (Akkermans *et al.*, 2024; Delva *et al.*, 2021; Forrier *et al.*, 2009), as well as the interconnected and interdependent nature of actors and their resources playing out over time (Baruch, 2015).

Additionally, narrative career identity (LaPointe, 2010) is relevant since it examines how career identity is constructed through stories and positioning within social contexts. This builds on earlier work of career metaphors as stories (Cochran, 1998). Language and discourse play a crucial role in how individuals narrate and negotiate their identities. Hartung (2013) positions clients as authors of their own life stories, with career serving as a central plot line. Career development practitioners assist clients in constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing career narratives to enhance self-understanding and future direction. Rossier *et al.* (2021) emphasise the importance of reflexivity, encouraging clients to consider how internal beliefs and external circumstances shape their career narratives, thereby highlighting the subjective and contextualised nature of career development. These ideas align with the dovetailing dimensions of person, context, and time in sustainable career theory and underscore the pivotal role of career development practitioners in supporting narrative coherence within a dynamic and interactional career ecosystem.

Weather as a Career Metaphor

Donald (2022) conceptualised the WCM based on their lived experience as an academic (specialising in employability and career development) and as a career development practitioner (providing career coaching and mentoring). They offered ten weather elements that capture various aspects of one's employability and career development. These are presented in Table I.

INSERT TABLE I HERE

However, Donald advocates for "an awareness of cultural sensitivities for clients from different countries where some of the weather elements described [here] might be absent, or others not listed here might be preponderant" (Donald, 2022, p. 4). Similarly, Rochat and Borgen (2023) observe how career metaphors can have varying levels of impact and applications across different geographical contexts. Their view aligns with the calls to acknowledge the interplay of agentic and contextual factors (Akkermans *et al.*, 2024; Delva *et al.*, 2021; Forrier *et al.*, 2009) that play out within a sustainable career ecosystem (Donald, Van der Heijden and Baruch, 2024) and narrative career identity (LaPointe, 2010).

Consequently, our current study addresses the need for empirical testing of the WCM in different geographical regions (India/Asia and UK/Europe) to consider the ten weather elements proposed in the original conceptualisation of the WCM and whether any additional weather elements might be applicable. Our focus is on undergraduates as they offer a cohort of individuals preparing for and subsequently undertaking a significant career transition (i.e., the university-to-work transition). In case of interest, Parola *et al.* (2024) offer insights into using metaphors with individuals not in employment, education or training; while Van der Heijden *et al.* (2020) discuss a whole-life perspective to career sustainability. Therefore, Research Question One (RQ1) asks: *How do undergraduates in India and the UK define each of Donald's (2022) WCM's original ten*

weather elements? Subsequently, Research Question Two (RQ2) asks: *Are there any additional weather elements that could be added to the WCM? If so, how are these defined?*

Furthermore, given that the operationalisation of the WCM should be "driven by the needs of the client" (Donald, 2022, p. 4), it would be beneficial to know whether the participants in our study feel that the WCM is a useful metaphor for helping undergraduates think about their employability and future careers. Moreover, if participants do not feel the WCM is a useful metaphor for this purpose, it would be interesting to know why. The feedback would allow us to look at ways to improve the WCM or be aware of potential limitations for career development professionals using it with undergraduates in different contexts. Therefore, Research Question Three (RQ3) asks: *Do undergraduates in India and the UK feel that the WCM is a useful metaphor for helping them think about their employability and future careers? If not, why not?*

Method

Research Design and Research Tool

Our research design adopted a postpositivist perspective and a qualitative content analysis approach. Data were collected between January and April 2024 based on 386 survey responses to open-ended questions. Initially, participants were asked to share their gender and age. Then, to address RQ1, participants were asked to suggest a definition for each of the ten original weather elements proposed in Donald's (2022) WCM. These included sun, rain, drought, thunder and lightning, ice, fog, tailwind, headwind, tornado, and rainbow. To address RQ2, participants were asked if they could think of any additional weather elements and, if so, to provide these along with suggested definitions. To address RQ3, participants were asked whether they felt the WCM was a useful metaphor and, if not, why not.

Context, Recruitment of Participants, and Sample

The study focused on capturing the views of undergraduates studying in either India or the UK. Collecting data from countries on two continents (Asia and Europe) enabled us to conduct a cross-cultural analysis. While weather is a worldwide occurrence, our experiences of specific weather elements and our interpretations of what different weather elements mean within the WCM may vary. The approach helped us capture the contextual dimensions of sustainable careers (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015) and narrative career identity (LaPointe, 2010).

Following ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board (ERGO II ID: 90282), participants were recruited initially in India. The third author invited undergraduates at their university to complete the open-ended questions via a link to the survey. Students could access the link via the university's online noticeboard system. Individuals who clicked on the link were initially taken to a participant information sheet, allowing them to ask the lead author questions via email. Once participants had read the participant information sheet and had the opportunity to ask any questions, they could provide informed consent and complete the survey.

Data collection continued until clear categories were identified for the ten original weather elements and any new weather elements. Our sampling strategy also ensured that the gender split of 47.83 per cent female and 52.17 per cent male was representative of the undergraduate population in India. In total, 184 undergraduates from India provided completed questionnaire responses for the study, with an average age of 22.75.

Once data collection was finished in India, the second author initiated data collection in the UK. Survey Swap collected data on our behalf, and UK undergraduates who signed up for their platform were sent a link inviting them to participate. They received the same participant information form and the opportunity to ask questions via email to the lead author as the participants in India. Once informed consent was provided, these participants completed the same

questionnaire. To facilitate the comparison of the categories, 184 undergraduates from the UK completed questionnaire responses with an average age of 22.63. Our sampling strategy also ensured that the gender split of 54.89 per cent female and 45.11 per cent male represented the UK undergraduate population. Our study's total number of participants was 386 across the two countries, with an average age of 22.69 and a gender split of 51.36 per cent female and 48.64 per cent male.

Process of Analysis

The lead author conducted data analysis in Microsoft Excel (although this could also have been done in NVivo). Initially, as each of the responses for India was received, these were added to the Excel spreadsheet. There was a separate tab for each of the ten original weather elements, a tab for other suggested weather elements, and a tab for whether the metaphor was useful or not. Qualitative content analysis was employed, and categories were identified for each weather element. An iterative approach was used to enhance the validity of the findings. The process of analysis ran in parallel with data collection. Once no additional categories were identified, we collected 25 additional responses to ensure robustness in our belief that we had reached saturation at the category level. This led to 184 responses for India, which then became the target number for the UK since having the same number of responses helped to compare the categories and their prevalence between the two contexts. The UK dataset was subsequently processed in the same way as the India dataset was.

Once the lead author had processed all 368 responses, the two co-authors reviewed the categories independently. Our intercoder reliability was 0.89 and 0.94 for each co-author when benchmarked against the lead author's initial findings at the category level. While intercoder reliability is somewhat of a controversial topic, we agree with the views of O'Connor and Joffe (2020) that it can improve the "systematicity, communicability, and transparency of the coding

process; promoting reflexivity and dialogue within research teams, and helping convince diverse audiences of the trustworthiness of the analysis" (p. 1). Subsequently, any conflicts were discussed and rectified to offer a final set of categories that adhered to internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. The lead author then used the final codebook to re-check each participant's responses.

The final analysis stage involved creating two additional tabs in the Excel worksheet to count the prevalence of each category for each weather element and to capture whether the metaphor was useful or not. Our approach acknowledges that qualitative content analysis presents the opportunity for quantifying the categories (see Mayring, 2022; Schreier, 2012). It should be noted that as our sample is limited to undergraduates from two countries, the findings are not generalisable to other age groups or life stages.

Findings and Analysis

RQ1: How do undergraduates in India and the UK define each of Donald's (2022) WCM's original ten weather elements?

Table II shows the categories identified for each of the ten original weather elements and their variance of representation between India and the UK. Table III subsequently offers the original definitions by Donald (2022) and the revised definitions from our empirical study for the weather elements. We now briefly address each weather element.

INSERT TABLE II HERE

INSERT TABLE III HERE

Sun

Three categories were identified: (a) career progression/success/satisfaction, (b) personal development, and (c) miscellaneous. Overall, 74.46 per cent of participants provided responses

aligned with category (a). The prevalence of category (a) was also consistent between countries and genders. A definition focusing on category (a) was therefore adopted, mainly since category (b) also appeared under rain. The revised definition supported but also extended the original definition proposed by Donald (2022).

Rain

Three categories were identified: (a) career growth/success, (b) challenges/setbacks, and (c) personal development. The responses from India were split pretty evenly across the three categories, whereas the UK responses were most dominant in category (b). This is perhaps indicative of how rain in India is often welcomed due to the higher temperatures to a greater extent than rain in the UK. Consequently, our definition for rain integrates all three categories given their interlinked nature, emphasising personal development leading to career growth/success and an increased ability to overcome challenges. The revised definition supported but also extended the original definition proposed by Donald (2022).

Drought

Three categories were identified: (a) challenges/adversity, (b) lack of growth, and (c) miscellaneous. The responses from India were relatively evenly split between categories (a) and (b), while responses from the UK were twice as likely to sit within category (a) as category (b). Although present, category (c) only accounted for 1.09 per cent of responses. We opted for category (b) for the revised definition since it helped avoid overlapping with the definitions of other weather elements and aligned with the original definition proposed by Donald (2022).

Thunder and Lightning

Three categories were identified: (a) career shock/uncertainty/technological advancement, (b) high work intensity/workplace challenges, and (c) miscellaneous. Responses from India were slightly higher for (a) than for (b), whereas in the UK, (a) and (b) had somewhat similar representation.

Although present, category (c) only accounted for 1.63 per cent of responses. We focused on category (b) for our revised definition since it helped avoid overlapping with the definitions of other weather elements and aligned with the original definition proposed by Donald (2022).

Ice

Three categories were identified: (a) obstacles/stuck/frozen, (b) unhappy/stressed/hostile work environment and (c) miscellaneous. Responses from India were slightly higher for (a) than (b), whereas the split was pretty even in the UK. Although present, category (c) only accounted for 7.07 per cent of responses. We opted to draw from categories (a) and (b) for the revised definition, extending coverage from the original definition proposed by Donald (2022).

Fog

Three categories were identified: (a) unclear career path or goals, (b) unclear expectations at work, and (c) miscellaneous. For India and the UK, around 75 per cent of responses aligned with (a), circa 20 per cent with (b), and the remainder with (c). We opted to draw on categories (a) and (b) for the revised definition, whereas Donald's (2022) original definition focused on category (a).

Tailwind

Three categories were identified: (a) career support, (b) career growth/progression/upskilling, and (c) miscellaneous. In India, there was roughly the same coverage of categories (a) and (b), whereas in the UK, category (a) was more prominent than category (b). The remaining category (c) accounted for 3.80 per cent of responses. We opted to draw on categories (a) and (b) for the revised definition, aligning with Donald's (2022) original definition.

Headwind

Three categories were identified: (a) obstacles/difficulties/challenges, (b) overcoming challenges/growth, and (c) miscellaneous. The findings between India and the UK, as well as based on gender, were almost identical, with 62.77 per cent overall support for (a), 33.97 per cent for (b)

and 3.26 per cent for (c). We opted to draw on categories (a) and (b) to extend Donald's (2022) initial definition by emphasising not just the barriers but the need to overcome such barriers.

Tornado

Three categories were identified: (a) chaos/turbulence/hurdles/termination, (b) stress/negative emotions/burnout, and (c) miscellaneous. The findings between India and the UK, as well as based on gender, were almost identical, with 55.98 per cent overall support for (a), 39.40 per cent for (b) and 4.62 per cent for (c). We opted to draw on categories (a) and (b), which aligned with Donald's (2022) initial definition.

Rainbow

Three categories were identified: (a) career satisfaction/success/luck, (b) well-being/work-life balance, and (c) diversity. Category (a) accounted for 65.49 per cent overall, (b) 29.08 per cent, and (c) 5.43 per cent. Category (a) was slightly more prevalent in India (69.02 per cent) than in the UK (61.96 per cent). For the revised definition, we opted to draw on categories (a) and (b), which aligned with but also extended Donald's (2022) initial definition.

RQ2: Are there any additional weather elements that could be added to the WCM? If so, how are these defined?

Table IV shows the three new weather elements identified (cloud, hail, and snow) and their respective definitions. Table V shows the coverage of each of these new elements across the participants from India and the UK. We now briefly address each of the three weather elements.

INSERT TABLE IV HERE

INSERT TABLE V HERE

Cloud

Overall, 7.34 per cent of participants suggested the cloud as an additional element for the WCM. The figures were broadly similar regarding responses from India (7.07 per cent) and the UK (7.61

per cent). We adopted the definition widely offered by participants from both countries, focusing on the standard day-to-day and routine work aspects.

Hail

Overall, 13.32 per cent of participants suggested hail as an additional element for the WCM. However, this weather element captures how people in different locations may experience different weather elements. None of the participants from India suggested hail, compared to 26.63 per cent from the UK. We adopted the definition based on the dominant aspects provided by participants, focusing on lots of minor problems, intensity, and brief struggles.

Snow

The final additional weather element suggested for incorporation into the WCM was snow. Overall, 16.03 per cent of participants suggested snow, although it was more prevalent in responses from the UK (20.65 per cent) versus India (11.41 per cent). We adopted the definition to reflect the excitement we often feel when snow begins to fall (perceived as something good), followed by the inconvenience and disruption of snow on the ground (whereby the reality turns out not so good).

Other Suggestions

Natural disasters were suggested by 17.12 per cent of participants, including aspects such as volcanoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, cyclones, and floods. However, as some of these are not technically weather elements and we already have Tornado included in the WCM, we opted not to add these to the WCM. Career development professionals may wish to use one of these alternatives instead of a Tornado if it is useful to the client.

Additionally, 14.13 per cent of participants suggested different seasons (e.g., spring, summer, autumn, winter). Interestingly, 23.91 per cent of participants in India suggested seasons compared to 4.35 per cent of UK participants. We opted not to explicitly include seasons in the WCM because, technically, seasons represent climate rather than weather elements. However,

career development professionals may wish to consider framing seasons as the evolution of one's career across the lifespan, as it can help capture the time dimension of a sustainable career (per De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015).

Research Question Three (RQ3): Do undergraduates in India and the UK feel that the WCM is a useful metaphor for helping them think about their employability and future careers? If not, why not?

Table V shows strong support for the WCM from the participants, with 88.86 per cent saying they felt it was a useful metaphor. The figures were similar for India (88.04 per cent) and the UK (89.67 per cent). However, this also meant that 11.14 per cent of respondents did not think the WCM was a useful metaphor. The main concerns were (i) that the meaning of weather elements is too subjective, (ii) that the WCM cannot adequately capture complex ideas, and (iii) that it can be challenging to connect weather elements to specific career concepts. Interestingly, the participants who did not think the WCM was a useful metaphor still tended to suggest the same meaning for each weather element as the respondents who believed the WCM was a useful metaphor. The findings suggest that career development practitioners should consider offering the WCM as a tool for use with clients, but then be led by the preferences of the specific client as to whether the tool is beneficial within that specific context.

Discussion

Theoretical Contribution

This study presents a pioneering empirical validation of Donald's (2022) WCM, resulting in a refined version grounded in sustainable career ecosystem theory (Donald, 2023) and narrative career identity (LaPointe, 2010). Through a robust sample of 384 undergraduates, our study employed open-ended survey questions to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of categories, surpassing the constraints of closed-ended inquiries. The revised WCM incorporates the original

ten weather elements: (i) sun, (ii) rain, (iii) drought, (iv) thunder and lightning, (v) ice, (vi) fog, (vii) tailwind, (viii) headwind, (ix) tornado, and (x) rainbow (RQ1), alongside three additional elements of (xi) cloud, (xii) hail, and (xiii) snow (RQ2). Notably, our findings indicate a high degree of alignment between responses from participants in India and the UK, with 88.86 per cent expressing that the WCM is useful for helping them think about their employability and their future careers (RQ3). These findings offer empirical evidence to assess the effectiveness of different career development interventions and tools (Chin *et al.*, 2022) and address concerns regarding the Eurocentric origins of the original WCM (Donald, 2022). Moreover, the empirical validation of the revised WCM serves to bridge the employability and career development literature, which has tended to develop in parallel with limited cross-pollination of concepts (Healy *et al.*, 2022).

The adoption of sustainable career ecosystem theory responds to recent calls by Donald, Van der Heijden, and Baruch (2024) to position career development professionals and their clients as central, interactive actors within a dynamic career ecosystem. This perspective foregrounds the continuous interplay between individual agency and contextual influences, challenging the traditional overemphasis on self-directedness in career discourse (Akkermans *et al.*, 2024; Delva *et al.*, 2021; Forrier *et al.*, 2009). Integrating a narrative career identity lens, the WCM illustrates how metaphors can function as momentary descriptors of experience and as expressions of deeper identity dimensions such as values, traits and dispositions (LaPointe, 2010). Reflexivity, as emphasised by Rossier *et al.* (2021), supports individuals in critically examining the interaction between self and context over time. Within this narrative-ecosystemic frame, the WCM becomes a practical tool for career development practitioners to help clients construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their career narratives, with attention to present circumstances and future possibilities.

Practical Implications

Our study's practical significance comes from providing a revised and empirically validated WCM metaphor for career development practitioners to use with undergraduates. The metaphor aids in preparing for and navigating contemporary labour markets, ultimately fostering sustainable career outcomes such as health, happiness, and productivity. Notably, for every £1.00 invested in career guidance for individuals in education, the return on investment spans from £1.20 to £4.10, averaging £2.50 (Hooley *et al.*, 2023). This robust return on investment underscores the critical role of effective career interventions in bolstering the sustainability of career ecosystems for all actors (Donald, Van der Heijden and Baruch, 2024). These findings further substantiate earlier claims regarding the transformative potential of career guidance in facilitating the flourishing of students and graduates (Thijssen *et al.*, 2008).

Metaphors, exemplified in this work by the WCM, hold particular significance as they can effectively bridge theoretical concepts and practical applications in a career counselling context (Amundson, 2015). Using metaphors empowers clients to make sense of their careers and frame their futures since metaphors offer exploration and reflection opportunities (Creed and Nacey, 2021; Inkson *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, metaphors possess the transformative capacity to reframe career perspectives, opening avenues for profound personal and professional growth (Hughes *et al.*, 2021).

Practitioners can use the WCM with undergraduates as a structured reflective exercise to support their transition from university to the workforce. The metaphor enables career development professionals to gather insights by inviting students to describe their current career weather, helping them express the emotions and experiences they associate with career planning. This reflective process also creates an opportunity to uncover unhelpful career beliefs or mental barriers that may be limiting progress. Practitioners can further prompt undergraduates to describe their ideal

weather, which can reveal underlying career expectations, values, and aspirations. By the end of the exercise, students are encouraged to identify the resources, actions or mindset shifts needed to navigate the various weather elements they face now or may encounter in the future. The WCM offers a flexible and engaging tool for supporting early career development, with potential for continued use throughout an individual's career, although such claims are beyond the scope of this study.

Furthermore, our study revealed that 88.86 per cent of participants found the WCM to be useful for helping them think about their employability and future careers. This high level of endorsement was consistent among Indian and UK participants, indicating the versatility and widespread appeal of the WCM. However, career development practitioners must recognise that individualisation is vital in providing effective career support, as 11.14 per cent of our participants did not find the WCM useful.

Our endorsement of Donald's (2022) perspectives on using the WCM aligns with its multifaceted utility. The WCM is a valuable tool for exploring individual weather elements, allowing undergraduates to compare their current circumstances with their envisioned future state. Undergraduates must recognise that while extreme weather elements are often short-lived, their repercussions can have a lasting impact. Therefore, proactive planning is essential to accessing the resources and connections (i.e. social capital) necessary to weather such storms and ultimately navigate towards brighter days ahead.

Finally, several participants in our study proposed seasons (i.e. spring, summer, autumn, winter) when prompted to suggest further weather elements for inclusion in the revised WCM. However, since seasons are not weather elements, we opted not to include them. However, it is worth noting that seasons could offer valuable insights for students when considering their career trajectories over their lifespan. For instance, they could symbolise different phases of one's career

journey, including early career (spring), mid-career (summer), late-stage career (autumn), and retirement (winter). Alternatively, viewing careers through the lens of seasons could illuminate transitions across various chapters or life stages, encompassing shifts in jobs, employers, industries, geographical locations, or health and family circumstances. As suggested by Donald (2024), this approach underscores how an individual's perception of a meaningful career can evolve over time, reflecting the dynamic nature of personal and professional growth.

Limitations and Future Research

Like all empirical works, our study had some limitations that could offer avenues for future research to enhance our development of the WCM and its application in diverse contexts.

Firstly, our sample consisted of undergraduates from India and the UK, limiting the generalisability of our findings to other student populations and geographical regions. Future research may wish to include a more diverse range of participants, such as postgraduates, and explore variations across different demographic groups, including year of study and degree subject. Interviews may also be useful to enable deeper exploration and clarification, which cannot be achieved via open-ended survey questions. It would also be useful to test the WCM in different cultural or socio-economic contexts to help career development practitioners better understand the constraints and adaptability of the WCM across diverse client populations.

Secondly, the cross-sectional nature of our study meant we could only consider feedback received at a specific point in time. However, sustainable careers rely on the interplay of the person and various contexts over time (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). Therefore, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to examine the use of the WCM over time. For example, is the WCM particularly useful at a specific life stage compared to another? Could the WCM be used with primary and secondary school students? Alternatively, as posited by Donald, Van der Heijden and Baruch (2024), could the liminality dimensions of support from a

career development professional be instrumental rather than only focusing on specific transition periods (e.g., university-to-work, periods of unemployment, retirement)? If so, can the WCM offer a tool for iterative use across one's lifespan, also helping to respond to calls by Akkermans *et al.* (2024) to bridge the divide between the graduate employability and worker employability literature streams?

Third, our current study only focused on the views of one specific actor within a sustainable career ecosystem: the individual. Incorporating the perspective of career development professionals could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the WCM in real-world career counselling settings. Future research could involve administering the WCM to career development practitioners and gathering their feedback on its utility and relevance in supporting clients' career development. Engaging career development professionals and their clients aligns with recent calls by Donald, Van der Heijden and Baruch (2024) for a more holistic approach to career development that emphasises the importance of liminality and positions individuals and career development practitioners at the centre of a sustainable career ecosystem.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our study empirically tested Donald's (2022) conceptualisation of WCM within a sustainable career ecosystem theory framework. Through survey responses via open-ended questions from 368 undergraduates in India and the UK, we validated the ten previously proposed weather elements from the WCM and refined their definitions. Additionally, three new weather elements were identified and defined. Despite minor differences, the views of participants from both countries largely aligned. Moreover, 88.86 per cent of participants felt the WCM was useful for considering their employability and future careers. Even participants who deemed the WCM not useful still suggested similar meanings for each weather element. The validation of the revised WCM contributes theoretically by grounding it in empirical evidence and practically by providing

career development practitioners with a new metaphor to aid clients in navigating contemporary labour markets and achieving sustainable career outcomes. Future research should look at the WCM in different cultural or socio-economic contexts to help career development practitioners better understand the constraints and adaptability of the WCM across diverse client populations.

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Table I. Original Ten Weather Elements and Definitions

ID	Element	Represents
1	Sun	Intrinsically rewarding employment
2	Rain	Personal growth through the acquisition of resources
3	Drought	Career stagnation
4	Thunder and Lightning	Visible conflicts with other people
5	Ice	Hidden challenges that cannot always be seen
6	Fog	Uncertainty and an inability to see ahead
7	Tailwind	Support mechanisms for career progression
8	Headwind	Barriers to career progression
9	Tornado	Negative outcome of a career shock or a chance event
10	Rainbow	Positive outcome of a career shock or a chance event

Source: Donald (2022, p. 4).

Table II. Empirical Findings for the Original Ten Weather Elements

Weather as a Career Metaphor (WCM)								
Element	**Category**	**India (n=184)**		**UK (n=184)**		**Total**		**Difference**
		n	%	n	%	n	%	India v UK
1. Sun	(a) Career Progression/Success/Satisfaction	133	72.28	141	76.63	274	74.46	-4.35
	(b) Personal Development	46	25.00	40	21.74	86	23.37	3.26
	(c) Miscellaneous	5	2.72	3	1.63	8	2.17	1.09
2. Rain	(a) Career Growth/Success	66	35.87	19	10.33	85	23.10	25.54
	(b) Challenges/Setbacks	65	35.33	136	73.91	201	54.62	-38.59
	(c) Personal Development	53	28.80	29	15.76	82	22.28	13.04
3. Drought	(a) Challenges/Adversity	98	53.26	117	63.59	215	58.42	-10.33
	(b) Lack of Growth	84	45.65	62	33.70	146	39.67	11.96
	(c) Miscellaneous	2	1.09	2	1.09	4	1.09	0.00
4. Thunder & Lightning	(a) Career Shock/Uncertainty/Tech Advancement	104	56.52	93	50.54	197	53.53	5.98
	(b) High Work Intensity/Workplace Challenges	76	41.30	89	48.37	165	44.84	-7.07
	(c) Miscellaneous	4	2.17	2	1.09	6	1.63	1.09
5. Ice	(a) Obstacles/Stuck/Frozen	95	51.63	85	46.20	180	48.91	5.43
	(b) Unhappy/Stressed/Hostile Work Environment	75	40.76	87	47.28	162	44.02	-6.52
	(c) Miscellaneous	14	7.61	12	6.52	26	7.07	1.09
6. Fog	(a) Unclear Career Path or Goals	134	72.83	143	77.72	277	75.27	-4.89
	(b) Unclear Expectations at Work	42	22.83	36	19.57	78	21.20	3.26
	(c) Miscellaneous	8	4.35	5	2.72	13	3.53	1.63
7. Tailwind	(a) Career Support (e.g. Mentor, Family, Friends)	92	50.00	110	59.78	202	54.89	-9.78
	(b) Career Growth/Progression/Upskilling	85	46.20	67	36.41	152	41.30	9.78
	(c) Miscellaneous	7	3.80	7	3.80	14	3.80	0.00
8. Headwind	(a) Obstacles/Difficulties/Challenges	116	63.04	115	62.50	231	62.77	0.54
	(b) Overcoming Challenges/Growth	60	32.61	65	35.33	125	33.97	-2.72
	(c) Miscellaneous	8	4.35	4	2.17	12	3.26	2.17
9. Tornado	(a) Chaos/Turbulence/Hurdles/Termination	104	56.52	102	55.43	206	55.98	1.09
	(b) Stress/Negative Emotions/Burnout	72	39.13	73	39.67	145	39.40	-0.54
	(c) Miscellaneous	8	4.35	9	4.89	17	4.62	-0.54
10. Rainbow	(a) Career Satisfaction/Success/Luck	127	69.02	114	61.96	241	65.49	7.07
	(b) Wellbeing/Work-Life Balance	51	27.72	56	30.43	107	29.08	-2.72
	(c) Diversity	6	3.26	14	7.61	20	5.43	-4.35

Notes:

(1) India 47.83% Female, 52.17% Male; Average Age 22.75. UK: 54.89% Female, 45.11% Male; Average Age 22.63. Total 51.36% Female, 48.64% Male, Average Age 22.69.
(2) Difference is the India % minus the UK % for each category.
(3) Green = 0 to 4.9% difference; Amber = 5.00 to 14.99% difference; Red = 15.00 or more % difference.

Source: Author's own.

Table III. Revised Definitions for the Original Ten Weather Elements

ID	Element	Original Definition*	Empirical Findings** (n=368)	Revised Definition
1	Sun	Intrinsically rewarding employment.	Career progression, success, and satisfaction.	Meaningful and rewarding work gives you a sense of satisfaction and provides opportunities for career progression.
2	Rain	Personal growth through the acquisition of resources.	Personal development, growth, and ability to overcome challenges.	Opportunities for personal development that lead to growth and an increased ability to overcome challenges.
3	Drought	Career stagnation.	Lack of growth.	A period in one's career with a lack of growth (e.g., career stagnation).
4	Thunder and Lightning	Visible conflicts with other people.	Workplace conflict.	Conflicts in the workplace (e.g., with team members or senior management)
5	Ice	Hidden challenges that cannot always be seen.	Hostile work environment, obstacles, stuck, or frozen.	A hostile work environment presents obstacles to doing a job or career progression, leaving us feeling stuck/frozen.
6	Fog	Uncertainty and an inability to see ahead.	Unclear career path or goals, unclear work expectations.	An inability to identify a career path or career goals coupled with unclear expectations of what is required of you to succeed in your current job.
7	Tailwind	Support mechanisms for career progression.	Career support (e.g. mentor, friends, family colleagues) for career growth, personal development, upskilling	Support mechanisms that facilitate career growth/advancement (e.g., mentor, friends, family, colleagues) and help identify areas for personal development and upskilling.
8	Headwind	Barriers to career progression.	Obstacles, difficulties, and challenges to overcome for growth.	Obstacles, difficulties, and challenges that we face in our careers that we have to overcome to progress.
9	Tornado	Negative outcome of a career shock or a chance event.	Chaos, turbulence, termination, stress, and burnout.	A period of chaos in one's career that results in a negative outcome (e.g., being fired, burnout, or mental health challenges).
10	Rainbow	Positive outcome of a career shock or a chance event.	Luck, wellbeing, and work-life balance.	This is an excellent period in one's career when one experiences good luck and good health and is content with the balance between work and non-work demands.

Notes
(1) * These definitions are based on the initial conceptualisation of the Weather as a Career Metaphor (WCM) by Donald (2022).
(2) ** We chose the category/categories from the empirical findings that minimised replication across the different weather elements.

Source: Author's own.

Table IV. Three New Weather Elements

ID	Element	Empirical Findings	Definition
11	Cloud	Standard day-to-day, routine work.	The standard day-to-day routine of work with nothing significantly good or bad occurring.
12	Hail	Lots of minor problems, intensity, brief struggle.	An intense, albeit short, period of time when lots of small things all go wrong at once but subsequently are then quickly resolved.
13	Snow	Initially, it seems good, but it turns bad.	An unexpected occurrence that initially appears positive for your career but later turns out not to be (e.g., an unexpected promotion, but you then struggle to perform in the new role).

Source: Author's own.

Table V. Additional Empirical Findings

Weather as a Career Metaphor (WCM)							
Question	**Category**	**India (n=184)**		**UK (n=184)**		**Total**	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Useful Metaphor?	Yes	162	88.04	165	89.67	327	88.86
	No	22	11.96	19	10.33	41	11.14
	(a) No Reason Given	*6*	*3.26*	*2*	*1.09*	*8*	*2.17*
	(b) Meaning of Weather Elements Subjective	*6*	*3.26*	*7*	*3.80*	*13*	*3.53*
	(c) Too Vague/Cannot Adequately Capture Complex Ideas	*6*	*3.26*	*3*	*1.63*	*9*	*2.45*
	(d) Cannot Relate or Connect Weather Elements to Concepts	*4*	*2.17*	*7*	*3.80*	*11*	*2.99*
Other Elements?	(a) None/Not a Weather Element	70	38.04	48	26.09	118	32.07
	(b) Different Seasons	44	23.91	8	4.35	52	14.13
	(c) Natural Disasters*	36	19.57	27	14.67	63	17.12
	(d) Snow	21	11.41	38	20.65	59	16.03
	(e) Cloud	13	7.07	14	7.61	27	7.34
	(f) Hail	0	0.00	49	26.63	49	13.32

Notes
(1) India 47.83% Female, 52.17% Male; Average Age 22.75. UK: 54.89% Female, 45.11% Male; Average Age 22.63. Total 51.36% Female, 48.64% Male, Average Age 22.69.
(2) * The examples included Volcano, Earthquake, Tsunami, Cyclone, and Flood (although worth noting some of these are not actually weather elements). Source: Author's own.