Networking
\textbf{PROSPECT(HE)}

\textbf{CSU}

The Higher Education Careers Services Unit supports the work of the careers services in universities and colleges in the UK and Eire and publishes the PROSPECTS series. It is a registered charity, jointly owned by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, the Standing Conference of Principals, and the Conference of Scottish Centrally Funded Colleges.

\textbf{AGCAS}

The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services is the professional association for careers services in higher education in the United Kingdom and Eire.

\textbf{NICEC}

The National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling is a network organisation initiated and supported by CRAC. It conducts applied research and development work related to guidance in educational institutions and in work and community settings. Its aim is to develop theory, inform policy and enhance practice through staff development, organisation development, curriculum development, consultancy and research.

\textbf{CRAC}

The Careers Research and Advisory Centre is a registered educational charity and independent development agency founded in 1964. Its education and training programmes, publications and sponsored projects provide links between the worlds of education and employment. CRAC has sponsored NICEC since 1975.

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There has been much debate about whether comprehensive computer-aided career guidance systems should be available on a stand-alone basis or used only in supported environments. \textit{PROSPECT(HE)} has hitherto been available mainly within higher education careers services. Now, however, it is being networked much more widely within a number of higher education institutions.

This Briefing:

\begin{itemize}
\item examines the rationale for networking \textit{PROSPECT(HE)};
\item identifies ways in which the networked version is being used;
\item examines evidence on the effects of such networking;
\item explores the increased potential for integration with other careers activities;
\item recommends ways forward.
\end{itemize}

The Briefing is based on a NICEC evaluation commissioned by CSU, and carried out in collaboration with AGCAS. The evaluation covered six higher education institutions, plus analysis of relevant statistical data. The briefing has been written by Tony Watts (Director, NICEC) and Charles Jackson (Fellow, NICEC).
Rationale

**PROSPECT(HE)** is a computer-based careers guidance tool designed specifically for the higher education sector. Reflecting a well-accepted model of career choice, it comprises elements of self-analysis, comparison of self with career options, the exploration of occupational information, and assistance with the tactics of making job applications. **PROSPECT(HE)** is a learning system offering alternative routes through its component modules. It has as its core a regularly updated database of occupational information maintained by AGCAS. It is designed to be used without supervision or direct support, but requires considerable user commitment to be used to best advantage.

Reasons for networking **PROSPECT(HE)** include:
- To deliver careers provision more widely and allow remote user access.
- To respond to student expectations, based on their growing usage of networked services to support their learning.
- To support careers education.

The rationale for increasing access takes two different forms:
- **Compensating** for gaps in existing provision.
- **Extending** the core provision.

The decision to network **PROSPECT(HE)** may be part of a wider policy regarding the use of ICT in teaching and learning. It may also be linked to institutional strategies for broadening the "ownership" of careers provision within the institution.

Concerns

There has been some concern on the part of careers staff that students using **PROSPECT(HE)** in unsupported contexts might be less likely to use it effectively, and in particular:
- might be less likely to invest the serious effort necessary to get value from the system (the "superficial input" argument);
- might be more likely to judge the system on the basis of their feelings about the occupational suggestions it makes — i.e. if they do not like them, dismissing the system as a whole (the "superficial output" argument).

Within the careers service, support can be provided to reduce these risks. It is a question of balancing these concerns against the resource and "control" implications of confining usage to the supported environment of the careers service.

Strategies

Most institutions networking **PROSPECT(HE)** have an open diffusion policy; they do not seek to constrain usage of the networked version, and indeed in principle want to maximise access to it. Forms of integration with other careers activities are seen as ways of enhancing such usage rather than seeking in any way to control it.

At one institution, an alternative strategy has been adopted: that of managed diffusion. The strong preference here is for students' initial use of **PROSPECT(HE)** to be within the supported environment of the careers service, where information officers or careers advisers can brief students and later check how they are getting on and whether they need any help. The merit of networking **PROSPECT(HE)** is seen as encouraging repeat usage by making it more accessible.

Styles of usage

- Tom went to the computer room for something else. The program he wanted to use did not work: he charged upon **PROSPECT(HE)** and thought he would look at it. He built up a skills profile and matched it against the occupational database.
- Working in her department, Cathy found the **PROSPECT(HE)** icon on the screen and used the system intermittently over a three-hour period while she completed a project with a group of fellow students. She then went to the careers service to get some help in understanding what the results meant.
- Working in the library, Sue was surfing through the applications within the network, came across **PROSPECT(HE)**, and thought she would try it out. She spent about an hour but found some of the self-analysis questions very difficult to answer, so she went to the careers service for a drop-in session. She was referred to use **PROSPECT(HE)** again before having a full interview: this time she took two hours. She then used it a third time in her interview.
- Emma went to the library specifically to use **PROSPECT(HE)**, but also took the opportunity to collect her e-mails and an academic assignment: "you want to get as much done at once as possible".
- Liz is a mature student who has given up teaching after twenty years. She has used **PROSPECT(HE)** about ten times so far, for sessions lasting at least an hour and sometimes longer. She has used it in her department: "When I've finished my work, I spend some time on **PROSPECT(HE)**... I use it to relax... I want to take as much time as it needs."
**Effects**

It is widely assumed that the networking of PROSPECT(HE) has resulted in significant increases in quantity of usage, although no statistical data are available on the extent of this increase.

On quality of usage, routinely-recorded data from six institutions where PROSPECT(HE) is networked were compared with data for 57 institutions where usage is confined to the careers service. The comparison showed that:

- New users are considerably more likely to have short sessions in the networked institutions than in the other institutions. This may mean that they are more likely initially to engage in “surface” rather than “deep” usage.
- On the other hand, they are also more likely to return for a further session. This may mean that more users on networked sites come across PROSPECT(HE) by chance and decide to come back to it later; it may also mean that ready access leads to greater likelihood of repeat usage.
- The length of sessions for repeat users is virtually identical in the two sets of sites; as are the ratings of how helpful and interesting users find PROSPECT(HE) and whether they would recommend it to a friend. This suggests that differences in quality of usage are less than has previously been thought.

Qualitative data suggest that other effects of networking include:

- Easier access to PROSPECT(HE) in terms of location – the number and geographical spread of access points.
- Easier access in terms of time: PROSPECT(HE) can now be accessed outside careers service opening hours.
- Removing rationing constraints on usage of the system, so making it easier to consider opportunities for structured usage and to justify access to non-student groups (e.g. graduates under the AGCAS “mutual aid” scheme).

No institution has reported any reduction in usage of the careers service: indeed, there is some anecdotal evidence of increased demand.

**Integration**

Networking PROSPECT(HE) can be seen as liberating its use from the physical constraints of the careers service, but also as increasing opportunities for linking it more closely with other careers provision. Examples of such links are:

- Including references to PROSPECT(HE) in publicity and information materials = leaflets, notice boards, newsletters, websites, etc. Some of these refer to PROSPECT(HE) in general terms; others to the use of specific features for particular guidance purposes.
- Commenting in duty sessions on the availability of PROSPECT(HE), and possibly including some demonstration or specific referral, or discussion of results.
- In full interviews, using PROSPECT(HE) beforehand to prepare for it effectively, or afterwards as follow-up, or even occasionally within the interview itself.
- In careers education, activating usage of PROSPECT(HE) through structured tasks, or even possibly through simultaneous group usage in ICT teaching rooms. Structured tasks include:
  - Building a full personal profile, and then answering a series of questions relating to the occupational matches against these profiles.
  - Being given a profile of a fictitious student, building a detailed profile for him/her using PROSPECT(HE) to generate a list of appropriate occupations, and describing the reasoning.
  - Studying in depth a career area of particular interest, and analysing it in the light of one’s self-knowledge.
  - In an advanced careers education course, relating the design of PROSPECT(HE) to theories of career development.
- In placement preparation, to help in choosing placements and in writing CVs.
- In tutoring, enabling tutors to take a stronger interest in offering careers help to their students.

Such integration is particularly important if the potential of PROSPECT(HE) as a learning resource, rather than simply as an information resource, is to be fully harnessed.
**Recommendations**

- Higher education institutions which have not so far networked PROSPECT(HE) should consider the potential for doing so.

- Institutions networking PROSPECT(HE) should:
  - Consider carefully the relative benefits of the "open diffusion" and "managed diffusion" strategies.
  - Seek from the outset to consider the range of possibilities for integrating the use of PROSPECT(HE) with other careers activities, and the training implications of such integration.
  - Review ways in which support can be provided to remote users.

- CSU, in collaboration with the AGCAS PROSPECT(HE) Liaison Sub-Committee, should:
  - Consider how to enhance the system's potential as a learning resource.
  - Review the current procedures for collection of routine evaluation data.

- The AGCAS PROSPECT(HE) Liaison Sub-Committee, in collaboration with CSU, should:
  - Explore ways in which enhanced training to support the integration of PROSPECT(HE) with other careers activities might be supported.
  - Encourage, and where appropriate initiate, development work on tools for readiness assessment and on innovative forms of support for remote users.
  - Encourage dissemination of good practice in these and other areas through articles in Phoenix and other ways.

**Future information**

The report summarised in this Briefing is published as:


It is available free of charge from CSU, Prospects House, Booth Street East, Manchester M13 9EP.

Additional copies of this Briefing are available from NICEC on receipt of an A4 stamped (31p for one or two copies, 38p for up to four copies, 45p for up to six copies) and addressed envelope.

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