

KEYNOTE

Challenging the idea of Career and Paid Employment in the Changing Global Economy

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This keynote reviews major structural changes in the global political economy and their effects on the global and national division of labour, policy preferences for paid employment (e.g. SDG8), and dominant conceptualisations of career as an individualised social journey. It conceptualises structural change as an outgrowth of a political economy of competitiveness and world market integration. The ecological dominance of world market competitiveness over other structural dynamics generates feedback effects such as climate change, global inequality, migration flows and geo political tensions. These feedback effects, in turn, are disrupting existing social structures, norms and expectations, including those relating to working life, ‘careers’ and ‘career guidance’ (and associated occupations).

The presentation draws on the concept of social reproduction from materialist feminist theory to analyse social change and continuity across time, space and scale. In contrast to Bourdieusian accounts, Feminist Social Reproduction Theory understands social processes as dynamic and contested. The contemporary conjuncture is therefore marked by both shifting power relations and openings for progressive social change.

Contestation over the meaning and significance of these changes appears through competing descriptions, predictions and normative claims about how working lives have changed, are changing, and will change. These range from populist nostalgia for an imagined past of economic security and ‘good jobs’, to critiques of neo liberalisation, precarity and platform work; feminist concerns about the distribution and valuation of paid and unpaid labour; optimism surrounding ‘fully automated luxury communism’; and policy and techno futurist imaginaries centred on ‘mega trends’ and ‘the future of work’, particularly within international organisations and management consultancies.

Turning to Critical perspectives on career and career guidance, the keynote argues that professions concerned with supporting people to ‘find their place’, ‘fit’, or ‘succeed’ in society face enduring ethical dilemmas rooted in the tension between facilitating individual positioning within social hierarchies and challenging the dynamic construction of those hierarchies. Career guidance is no exception, and periods of rapid structural change often intensify these contradictions. At the same time, because career guidance is embedded in contested and evolving social structures, professional values, standards and everyday practices constitute important sites of struggle over the future meaning, purpose and organisation of work.

The keynote concludes by arguing that debates over models, standards, training and practice in career guidance must be grounded in an understanding of broader structural dynamics, including the tensions between ethics of care and justice. This provides a foundation for recognising how practices operating within ‘traditional theory’ constraints may nonetheless retain ‘critical theoretical’ —and therefore emancipatory—possibilities.

ORAL COMMUNICATIONS

Earning while learning: student employment and the case for Employment Rights Literacy

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Most young people in full-time education now engage in paid employment alongside their studies - 'Earning while Learning' (EwL) – driven by labour market fragmentation, increased demand for part-time labour, rising education costs and the cost-of-living crisis. The majority of school students will have done some form of paid work by the time they leave school, and across Europe, over half of full-time HE students do paid work.

Typically, debates around EwL focus on the (negative) impacts of student work on learning experiences, attainment and outcomes, with EwL located as a distraction which is potentially harmful to education engagement and future outcomes. This contrasts sharply with initiatives that promote certain career-oriented (unpaid) internships and work placements as essential to enhancing students' 'career readiness' and future employability. This binary view of EwL glosses over the content and nature of student work and neglects the extent to which these early experiences of work may be shaped by, and productive of, wider inequalities in young people's working biographies.

In this paper, we will present findings from a major ESRC-funded mixed-methods study of young women's earliest experiences of work (<http://www.ywworking.co.uk>), drawing on national surveys (including the Labour Force Survey) and focus groups with 83 young women students (aged 14-23) in schools, colleges and universities across England. We show how EwL is characterised by low pay, poor working conditions, including sexual harassment and abuse, a lack of voice in the workplace, and signs of occupational gendering and path dependency into feminised careers. Our research suggests an urgent need for Careers Education to engage students' in critical conversations about their current experiences of work. This includes prioritising and embedding 'Employment Rights Literacy' in careers practice, including discussions about students' rights at work and how to enforce these.

Keywords: student employment; inequality; employment rights literacy; gender; social justice

Using utopian pedagogies to reimagine career guidance practice

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Aims: This paper presents a plan for a participatory research project which will develop utopian pedagogy (Webb, 2017) in career guidance practice. The aim of utopian pedagogy is to assist participants in thinking towards alternative utopian horizons as part of a radical critique of the present. Therefore, utopian thinking is inherently critical: it is to read the past and present discourses, concepts, models, and rationalities against radical alternatives to see them in a new critical light and imagine and describe alternative futures. Utopian thinking therefore engages with critically revisiting ideologies, social institutions, and practices. According to Levitas (2013, p. 84), utopias are ‘explicitly holistic, imaginary, critical, normative and prescriptive’.

Methods and Empirical context

COCAG Working Group 3 subgroup “Radical imaginaries” will engage themselves in un/learning circles which we call Radical Career Imaginaries Laboratory. The structure of laboratory is built on three elements, and each session results in a concrete output for career guidance practice.

1) “Seeing the Box” introduces participants to a specific area of problematisation in current career conceptualisations and guidance practices. This is the “Box”: dominating discourses, rationalities, and assumptions in career theory and models, and in institutional systems where career thinking and guidance practice exists, with no apparent alternatives.

2) “Thinking outside the Box” involves the introduction and exploration of critical literature (e.g., post-humanism, relational approaches, social justice theories, alongside postcolonial, Indigenous, and other global perspectives) which will then be read diffractively (Barad, 2007) against current theories and practices. Diffractive reading highlights how different theoretical perspectives shape the understanding of practices. Aim is to generate interdisciplinary insights that enable participants to begin to see current career discourses and guidance practices in a new light, making more visible the gaps and silences in these and to begin to imagine the existence of radical alternatives which align with the particular ideas introduced.

3) “Changing the Box” is where participants are encouraged to engage in speculative thinking in a more concrete manner and start co-drafting narratives on what particular aspects, relations, and discourses of career thinking and career guidance practice these new radical alternatives would explicitly challenge and resist, and what new possibilities in both careering and guidance practice emerge. Here, participants will be invited to concretely construct holistic imaginaries of alternative ways of “beings” and “doings” in both careering and career support, based on discussed alternative imaginaries.

Contribution

The project will develop a pedagogical model and resources based on utopian pedagogy for clients, career guidance practitioners, and trainers. It will create an anthology of career imaginary stories combining written accounts with creative outputs like podcasts

or videos, anchored in the theoretical ideas introduced in the Radical Career Imaginaries Laboratory. These resources will offer practitioners and trainers accessible alternative imaginaries to conventional career representations

Keywords: Utopian thinking; Utopian pedagogy; Diffractive reading; Participatory research; Radical career imaginaries

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Career learning and education for response-able sustainable development: Relational perspectives and ideas

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This paper explores how career learning in youth education can contribute to response-able sustainable development by drawing on relational and critical perspectives. Contemporary career education is often framed in individualistic and instrumental terms, emphasising employability, personal responsibility, and choices aligned with economic needs (OECD 2018). We problematise these assumptions and argue for a shift toward understanding career learning as relational, entangled, and world-centred rather than as an individual project. Building on Karen Barad's concept of intra-action (2007), we argue that career choices and identities do not emerge in isolation but are constituted through ongoing entanglements with human and more-than-human others, discourses, and material conditions. Career learning thus takes place within social, institutional, and ecological relations that shape possibilities for action. This perspective challenges dominant models that privilege autonomy, control, and linear decision-making while marginalising interdependence and ecological limits.

In dialogue with Donna Haraway's call to "stay with the trouble" (2016), we argue that career education should not reduce sustainability to future-oriented competencies or technocratic solutions serving the economy. Instead, it should engage young people with the complexity of present ecological and social crises, fostering practices of care, attentiveness, and responsibility that exceed the individual self and resist depoliticised narratives of sustainable development.

The paper also draws on Gert Biesta's concept of World-Centred Education (2021), which reframes education as an encounter with the world rather than a process of self-realisation. From this perspective, career learning becomes a space in which learners are invited to consider how their life trajectories are implicated in broader social, environmental, and ethical concerns. Career education is thus reconceptualised as a site of subjectification, where learners develop the capacity to respond to the world in its plurality.

By bringing together Barad, Haraway, and Biesta, the paper proposes a relational framework for career education that foregrounds care, responsibility, and responsiveness as key principles for sustainable development.

Keywords: career education and learning, relational approach, sustainable development, response-ability, youth

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Career Making under Structural Insecurity: A Critical Inquiry into Employment Policy and Career Guidance in Albania

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The profound shifts reshaping work in the twenty-first century economic uncertainty, large-scale migration, rapid technological change, and the decline of stable jobs are forcing many countries to rethink what “career” means and how it should be supported. These pressures are particularly visible in places where labour markets remain fragile. Albania is one such context: youth unemployment has been persistently high, informal work is widespread, and career guidance structures are still limited in scope and capacity. This environment makes Albania a useful case for examining how the language of policy aligns or fails to align with everyday labour market realities.

This paper explores how organisations active in employment and vocational support in Albania understand and address the challenges of career development in a context marked by economic insecurity. The study adopts a critical and exploratory approach, combining an analysis of national employment and career guidance policies with ten structured interviews conducted with representatives of organisations and associations working directly in the field of employment, skills, and labour market integration.

The insights emerging from the interviews point to a clear tension between policy narratives often centred on individual responsibility, employability, and linear career advancement and the situations encountered by practitioners on the ground. Organisations report persistent structural obstacles, including unpredictable labour demand, weak institutional support systems, and the widespread perception of migration as the most viable career path for young people. These observations suggest that dominant career development frameworks overlook the constraints and pressures that shape opportunities in contexts like Albania.

The paper argues that Albania provides an important case for reconsidering career not as a fully individualised and self-directed trajectory, but as a process shaped by broader social, economic, and political conditions. By bringing forward the perspectives of actors involved in employment and training, the study contributes to ongoing COCAG debates on how career guidance theories and policies need to adjust to the precarious realities that characterise contemporary labour markets.

Keywords: career conceptualisation, youth employment, structural constraints, labour market, employment policies.

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Reconceptualising Career Guidance under Precarity: A Critical Policy Perspective from Education Systems

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The notion of “career” has historically been grounded in assumptions of stability, linear progression, and individual choice. However, in the precarious conditions of the 21st century—marked by labour market fragmentation, digitalisation, growing inequality, and the expansion of NEET populations—these assumptions are increasingly untenable. This paper adopts a critical perspective to interrogate how dominant career and career guidance frameworks continue to reproduce normative, individualised, and market-oriented understandings of success, often obscuring structural constraints faced by young people and vulnerable groups.

Drawing on critical career theory and policy analysis, the paper examines how education systems and career guidance policies respond to precarity, with particular attention to institutional responsibilities, power relations, and the limits of employability-driven approaches. Rather than framing career challenges as deficits of individuals, the paper conceptualises career as a socially embedded, relational, and politically shaped process.

Methodologically, the study employs a conceptual analysis informed by comparative education and social policy literature, supported by illustrative examples from European education contexts. The analysis highlights three critical tensions: (1) the shift from collective responsibility to individual adaptability, (2) the depoliticisation of inequality through skills-based discourse, and (3) the marginalisation of care, well-being, and social sustainability in career guidance practice.

The paper contributes to the COCAG agenda by proposing a reframing of career guidance as a public and ethical practice rather than a technical matching exercise. It argues for policy and practice approaches that foreground structural inequality, recognise precarity as a normalised condition, and support collective, inclusive, and socially just career trajectories. This reconceptualisation has implications for education policy, guidance professionals, and interdisciplinary research seeking to address career development in an era of uncertainty.

Keywords: precarity, career guidance, social Justice, structural inequality, education policy

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Career guidance is increasingly recognized as a key public policy instrument for addressing social inequality, labour market exclusion, and unequal access to education and employment. Yet, despite this recognition, significant policy gaps remain between the stated goals of inclusion and the actual design, delivery, and resourcing of career guidance systems. This paper examines how contemporary career guidance policies across Europe and comparable economies fail to adequately address the structural conditions that reproduce inequality, including precarity, migration status, gendered labour markets, disability, and digital exclusion.

Drawing on critical policy analysis and comparative frameworks, the paper explores three interrelated gaps: (1) the mismatch between individualized career guidance models and structurally constrained labour markets; (2) unequal access to guidance services among disadvantaged populations; and (3) weak integration of career guidance within broader social, education, and labour market policies. These gaps limit the capacity of career guidance to function as a meaningful tool for social mobility and inclusion, particularly in contexts characterized by insecure employment, fragmented welfare systems, and rapid technological change.

The paper argues that without a stronger policy commitment to equity, career guidance risks reinforcing, rather than challenging, existing inequalities by placing responsibility for labour market outcomes on individuals rather than on social and economic systems. It proposes a reorientation of career guidance policy toward a social justice framework that integrates guidance into wider strategies for skills development, social protection, and inclusive growth. By reframing career guidance as a collective and policy-driven intervention rather than a purely individual service, the paper contributes to debates on how career guidance can better support equitable career development in the precarious 21st century.

Keywords: Inequality, career guidance, policy gaps, society, intervention

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Re-thinking Career and Career Guidance in an Age of Precarity: Translating European Policy into Practice

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Background: Careers in Europe are increasingly shaped by persistent precarity linked to digitalisation, platform-mediated work, demographic ageing, geopolitical instability, and the accelerated deployment of artificial intelligence. European policy frameworks—including the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Skills Agenda, the European Year of Skills, and the Employment Guidelines—recognise these transformations, yet career and career guidance systems often remain anchored in individualised notions of employability, choice, and adaptability. This disconnect raises critical questions about how “career” is conceptualised and operationalised under conditions of structural uncertainty.

Focus and Aim

This contribution critically examines how contemporary EU strategies and regulatory initiatives frame career development and guidance in a precarious labour market context. It explores how guidance can move beyond narrow labour-market matching functions towards supporting collective capability, social protection, and long-term resilience across the life course.

Approach

A critical, policy-translational lens is adopted, engaging with EU initiatives and instruments such as ESF+, ALMA, EURES, the Just Transition Mechanism, and Digital Europe, alongside regulatory developments including the AI Act, the proposed Platform Work Directive, the Gender Pay Transparency Directive, and the Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts. These are examined in relation to lived experiences of insecurity and fragmented career trajectories, particularly for young people, migrants, older workers, and those in non-standard employment.

Contribution and Implications

Career is re-framed as a socially embedded capability shaped by institutions, regulation, and collective infrastructures rather than an individual optimisation project. Career guidance is positioned as a mediating space between EU policy, national systems, and everyday practice, with a potential role in exposing structural constraints, informing policy learning, and supporting more equitable career futures. The contribution highlights pathways for aligning guidance practice with European social, digital, and labour policy objectives in the context of ongoing precarity.

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Keywords: career precarity; European labour policy; employability discourse; AI and work; policy–practice translation

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Rethinking Careers in the Digital Precarity Era: AI, Platforms, and Policy Implications

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Background: The contemporary labour landscape is shaped by precarious work conditions, rapid AI adoption, and systemic uncertainty. Large Language Models (LLMs) and platformisation are transforming labour markets and career pathways, often reinforcing inequalities and marginalising vulnerable workers. These transformations intersect with broader societal challenges—economic instability, geopolitical tensions, and environmental pressures—highlighting the urgent need to rethink careers and career guidance.

Aims:

This research examines how digital technologies, particularly LLMs, reshape careers and labour market precarity. It aims to inform public policy and career guidance practices that are responsive, equitable, and capable of addressing systemic inequalities intensified by technological disruption.

Methods / Approach:

Using a transdisciplinary, systems-thinking framework, the study combines policy analysis, sectoral case studies, interviews with workers, and secondary data on AI adoption and employment patterns. Intersectional analysis explores differential impacts on gender, race, and socio-economic status. Agriculture and service sectors illustrate how platformisation and AI reconfigure labour, skills, and governance, revealing feedback loops between technology, work, and inequality.

Conclusion / Contribution:

Findings indicate that conventional career guidance and policy frameworks are insufficient for addressing AI- and LLM-driven precarity. By conceptualising careers as part of complex socio-technical systems, the study offers adaptive, evidence-based strategies for policy and practice that embed ethical, intersectional, and systemic considerations. This research contributes to the COST COCAG mission by providing insights to support fair, inclusive, and future-oriented career guidance in an increasingly precarious 21st-century labour landscape.

Keywords: Global Precarity, AI and Automation, Career Guidance Policy, Transdisciplinary Approaches, Labour Market Transformation

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‘Market-Making’ for the Green Transition: An Eco-Critical Perspective on Career Guidance and Employability

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In the context of accelerating socio-environmental crisis, career and career guidance are increasingly positioned by policymakers as mechanisms for supporting a “green transition”. This raises critical questions about how sustainability is conceptualised within career guidance practice, and whose interests such policies ultimately serve. This paper presents findings from an exploratory interpretive policy analysis examining sustainability discourses within national and international policy frameworks shaping career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG), using higher education (HE) careers services as a critical case.

Drawing on critical policy scholarship, the study reviewed 91 policy documents produced by governments, international agencies, and non-governmental organisations influencing employability and career guidance agendas. The analysis reveals a fragmented policy landscape in which sustainability is predominantly framed through economic greening, demand-led skills reform, and human capital development. Universities and their careers services are positioned as pivotal actors in enabling the green transition; however, sustainability is largely reduced to science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) disciplines, labour market responsiveness, and risk management. These framings reinforce an instrumental and individualised conception of a “green” career, intensified in HE by employability metrics and policy pressures that prioritise graduate labour market outcomes over broader educational and societal purposes (Gee, 2025; Tight, 2024). As a result, careers services occupy a structurally constrained role, navigating tensions between impartiality, institutional performance regimes, and growing student demand for values-based and socially responsible work. Adopting an eco-critical perspective, the paper revisits Watts’ (1997) notion of career guidance as “market-making” to examine how HE careers and employability services actively participate in shaping labour markets. Positioned within institutional sustainability strategies and education for sustainable development, careers services can function as responsible market-makers by legitimising alternative career pathways, reshaping definitions of employability, and mediating relationships between students, employers, and institutions in ways that foreground social and environmental responsibility. Through the cumulative effects of guidance encounters and employer engagement, such an approach has the potential to reassert collective responsibility and moral agency in career decision-making and contribute to the reorientation of workplace practices toward a greener economy.

Keywords: Adult Guidance in PES, Work-Life model, Activation, Labour Market Policy, Conceptual Analysis, Green transition, Eco-criticism, Careers guidance, Higher education, Policy scholarship

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Disentangling adult guidance from conditionality: towards meaningful employability services

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Background: Over the past three decades, labour market policies implemented through Public Employment Services (PES) have increasingly focused on the activation of unemployed individuals, linking social welfare supports to participation in employability activities. At the same time, adult guidance remains a core function of PES, aimed at supporting unemployed individuals to access sustainable employment. Adult guidance is grounded in impartial, holistic, and person-centred principles that recognise the interconnection between life and work. It seeks to build self-esteem, confidence, and wellbeing, responding to the harmful psychological effects of unemployment through supportive interventions and relational collaboration. However, this approach often conflicts with the dominant activation model within PES, which prioritises rapid labour market attachment, conditionality, and monitoring of job seeking behaviour, rather than enabling transformational self-learning (Mezirow, 2000) leading to transitions into meaningful, decent and sustainable employment.

Aims: This paper imagines how adult guidance could be effectively delivered within PES and identifies the policy and administrative changes required to support this shift.

Method: Drawing on the work-first to life-first typology (Whelan et al., 2021) and using the core features of critical theory (Thomsen et al. 2022), this paper presents a conceptual analysis of employment guidance within PES. It further develops the capability informed work life approach tailored to individuals furthest from the labour market and draws on adult guidance theory and practice to imagine employment guidance that is effective in a context of evolving societal challenges. It argues that work first strategies are increasingly inadequate in addressing future labour market needs, particularly in relation to wellbeing, lifelong learning, repurposing skills, and enabling choice, career efficacy and adaptability towards work that the individual has reason to value.

Contribution: The paper concludes by proposing a conceptual model of employment guidance informed by adult guidance theory and practice, relevant for a future oriented and inclusive PES.

Thomsen, R., Hooley, T., & Mariager-Anderson, K. (2022). Critical perspectives on agency and social justice in transitions and career development. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 50(4), 481-490.

Whelan, N., Murphy, M. P., & McGann, M. (2024). The enabling role of employment guidance in contemporary public employment services: A work-first to life-first typology. In *Decent Work, Inclusion and Sustainability* (pp. 60-72). Routledge.

Re-imagining agency for Critical Career Studies: an exploration of reflexivity and critical consciousness

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Career guidance, grounded in vocational psychology, has long been criticised for over emphasising individual agency while obscuring structural inequalities. This paper outlines new ways to conceptualise a more radical view of agency. Building upon existing work from the authors (e.g., Christie, 2019; Christie et al., 2025) which draws on foundational theories from Margaret Archer and Dorothy Holland, it aims to move discussion beyond a neoliberal framing of the agentic individual.

Both Archer and Holland highlight the significance of culture alongside structure and agency. Archer's 'Reflexive Imperative' and Holland's 'Figured Worlds' offer complementary perspectives despite differing philosophical origins. Archer investigates the dynamic interaction of structure, culture, and agency through her morphogenetic approach. Meanwhile, Holland's ethnographically grounded work explores identity-in-practice illustrating how humans are the products of social discipline yet producers of improvisation. Both authors critique Bourdieu's sociological theory as too deterministic.

In a world where uncertainty has become normalised, we integrate Holland's ideas of 'self authoring' and heteroglossia (multi voicedness) to explore their implications for Archer's reflexive types. We examine diverse orientations to reflexivity and how individuals negotiate the heightened unpredictability associated with crisis neoliberalism. We consider the risk of misrecognition, an important Bourdieusian concept and how this constrains reflexivity. While acknowledging limitations, we argue that reflexivity is an important stage in developing critical consciousness (Hooley et al., 2021) among groups and individuals and offers an alternative way to consider career possibilities, one that recognises social structures without allowing them wholly to determine career formation.

The paper discusses implications for guidance practitioners in nurturing reflexivity with sensitivity. It concludes that reflexivity is a vital process enabling individuals to question and navigate existing systems that shape career volition, and subsequent action. Our expanded conceptual synthesis also encourages practitioners and researchers to reflect critically on their own positionality and assumptions, and the institutional landscapes that shape possibilities for transformative career support.

Keywords: reflexivity; critical consciousness; agency; figured worlds; career guidance
Christie, F. (2019). Competing voices: a Figured Worlds approach to theorising graduate perspectives on career success. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 28(3-4), 326-344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2019.1631206>

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Careers under Crisis: Reconceptualising Employability, Community, and Sustainability in Career Guidance

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The deep uncertainty which has defined the 21st century, busied as it has been with increasing environmental degradation, globally uncertain geopolitics, and even the revolutionary effects of artificial intelligence, underscores a fundamental transformation of what it means to talk about a “career” and how career counseling needs to be conceptualized in this new world of work realities as outlined in Standing (2011). Deeply entrenched career discourses exist in ways that are no longer consistent with growing realities of individual career experiences amidst conditions of structural insecurity, as outlined in Hooley, et al. (2017).

Utilizing a critical-interpretive methodology, this text integrates ideas from critical career studies, sociology of precarity, sustainability education, and labor policy in order to examine how contemporary paradigms of career guidance are presently reproducing a notion of employability that individualizes while also marginalizing a group of other individuals related to work that are taken as being either normatively absent from or positioned as being distinct from career issues (Amundson et al., 2014).

These results imply an immediate need for a reconceptualisation of career as a socially embedded and collectively negotiated project rather than a personal endeavour of upward mobility. This article proposes a practical career guidance that promotes a commitment to social justice, community resilience, and ecology, hence locating career guidance as a practice of emancipation and democracy that has a potential for enabling individuals and communities in responding to contemporary crises in a global world.

Keywords: career guidance, precarity, social justice, sustainability, employability

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The emancipation of career: Utopian perspectives

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This presentation builds on a large scale new theoretical project conducted by the authors to explore the concept of career in contemporary society and sociology and establish career as an explanatory category for critical social analyses.

The project has undertaken a historical exploration of the development of the concept of career drawing on historical, sociological and psychological evidence and an analysis of the current nature of careering within the contemporary order (which we refer to as crisis capitalism).

Through this analysis of the forms and rhetorics of career, we have reconceptualised the career concept, untethering it from its origins in twentieth century capitalism and reimagining it as an emancipatory and democratic concept. This reconceptualisation allows us to discuss how the career concept can be used to support people to cope in the contemporary world, to rethink their lives and what they derive meaning from, to imagine better worlds, and develop new forms of society.

In this presentation we will draw together these historical and political discussions to present a re-conceptualisation of the concept of career. We will argue that career has the potential to become an emancipatory concept that can help scholars to analyse social phenomena and citizens to organise their lives in relation to the political economy including identifying ways to manage both shifts and inequalities. Such a new career concept is broad (moving beyond the focus on paid work), democratic (open to all, and open to renegotiation by all) and capable of stimulating a new career imaginary (within which people can imagine both a better life for themselves and their families and communities and a better world within which to career).

Against ‘sad passions’: Careers as trajectories of becoming in conditions of
uncertainty
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For decades, career theory has relied on metaphors of paths, ladders and levels, images that presuppose linearity, hierarchy and stability. These metaphors assume a world organized by fixed coordinates, where progress is measured by ascent and mastery. Yet contemporary labour markets increasingly contradict this imaginary. Krzywdzinski et al. (2025), in a recent study, describe software engineers as an uncertain elite, whose careers unfold not as predictable sequences but as contingent, hybrid and fragile assemblages shaped by shifting ecologies of skills and organizational policies. Complementary analyses by Baruch (2025) and Rabenu & Baruch (2025) show how macro level disruptions (e.g., AI dominance, geopolitical fragmentation, mass immigration, de globalization and prolonged recession), further destabilize career structures and expose individuals to volatile, rapidly reconfiguring opportunity landscapes.

Drawing on Deleuze’s philosophy of becoming, rhizomes and asignifying rupture, this paper proposes a reframing of careers as trajectories of becoming rather than ladders to be climbed. Careers are conceptualized as rhizomatic multiplicities: open, non hierarchical processes constituted through heterogeneous connections between technologies, institutions, knowledge practices and subjective investments. The principle of asignifying rupture is especially illuminating, capturing how careers sustain

interruptions, reorientations and discontinuities without collapsing, recomposing themselves through new lines of flight.

Bergson's notion of immanent possibility and his concept of *élan vital* further clarify this shift. Rather than a metaphysical force, *élan vital* is understood here as a tendency toward creative differentiation, a propulsion toward novelty inscribed in the present configuration of the world. Careers, likewise, are fields of immanent possibilities continually actualized through socio technical encounters, generating new forms rather than reproducing predetermined paths. Finally, drawing on Deleuze's reading of Spinoza, the paper argues that contemporary careers risk becoming sad passions when organizational structures diminish individuals' capacity to act or imagine otherwise. A rhizomatic reframing instead foregrounds careers as dynamic, inventive and relational becoming, a conceptual lens better suited to understanding and supporting work trajectories under conditions of uncertainty.

Keywords: rhizomatic careers; Becoming; Immanent possibility; Assignifying rupture; Sad passions.

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A sociological imagined future for 'career'. Critiquing the undercurrent of progress so essential to career conceptualisation

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The influence and shaping of the future of 'career' requires considered action, praxis, one that has at its forefront the question of 'for whose benefit?' The temptation in the past, particularly since the modern age, is to frame such futuristic endeavours via the notion of 'progress'. Progress has provided the justification for the colonialist project that has brought wealth to nations, though anything but evenly distributed, with the West parasitically extracting resources and value from the 'developing' world (Andrews, 2021). Technological advancements during this period has enabled faster modes of extraction and alienated production and travel, via industrial, transport and transmission revolutions, such a story of progress is thus propaganda, a cult of speed (Virillo, 2012). The contraction of time and space that comes with these innovations provide a darker side, their own derailment as our dromosphere becomes polluted in concert with ecological catastrophe. The post-industrial individual gets swept along with modernity's desire for progress, which provides personal and institutional schemas to grasp an understanding of the relation between individual action that contribute to grand narratives of human society. The assertion is that one's climbing of an education

and work ladder resonates with the continued betterment of society, progress thus becomes a secularised salvation (Gellner, 1971).

Career is not immune to such forces, where career is framed by discourses that shape action that contribute to global injustice. Career discourse, the vernacular, policy and much of the academic, promotes the continual atomisation of individuals in a neo-colonial world that desperately requires solidarity. Career discourse promotes the notion of an individual pursuit, one that is fixated on paid work and progress, and pathologizes anything that fits outside of this framing. The chapter highlights how the utilisation of sociological, post-structural and decolonial theory can enable a deconstruction of career discourse, to highlight its coercive and oppressive tendencies, a discourse that serves capital. It then provides detail on how these theories can provide more collective understanding of personal actions, actions that connect the private troubles of the individual with global public issues. This is a means of trying to awaken sociological imagination, the ability to recognise how decisions and actions that occur outside of our perceptual capacities influence our life as well as imagining how solidarity can become a means of collective action. Such action is to resist the telos of progress, to avoid the “dystopias” of the modern age to regulate all of society”. As the late Sultana (2018) expresses, rather than a perceived telos we may consider justice as “a ‘trajectory’, a series of temporary bargains negotiated by diverse groups with diverse interests, who remain open to renegotiating the terms of their cooperation, always alert to the inevitable saturation of power in such deals” (p. 71). The presentation concludes by providing examples within the literature that utilise ‘career’ to shape collective endeavours outside of notions of progress and the centrality of paid employment. It will highlight how this can be incorporated into pedagogical interactions to enable those learning about career to come to different considerations and ignite their sociological imagination.

Keywords; career discourse, progress, sociological imagination

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Careers in the Shadow of AI and Precarity: Towards a Critical Reimagining of Career
Guidance

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Background: Career development in the 21st century is increasingly shaped by intersecting global crises, including the rapid expansion of artificial intelligence (AI), economic instability, ecological degradation in the Anthropocene, and renewed geopolitical tensions. These conditions have intensified labour market precarity and uncertainty, calling into question traditional career models that emphasise linear progression, individual choice, and employability. Within this context, career guidance risks reproducing neoliberal assumptions by framing insecurity as a personal responsibility rather than a structurally produced condition.

Aims: This paper aims to critically examine dominant career guidance paradigms and to reconceptualise career guidance in ways that are responsive to AI-driven precarity and structural uncertainty. Specifically, it seeks to challenge individualised and technocratic approaches to guidance and to propose a more collective, relational, and ethically grounded understanding of career.

Methods / Approach:

Adopting a critical conceptual approach, the paper draws on critical career studies, political economy perspectives, and sociological analyses of work and technology. Through theoretical synthesis and critical problematisation, it examines how contemporary career discourse engages with AI, precarity, and risk, and identifies key limitations in prevailing policy and practice frameworks.

Conclusion / Contribution:

The paper argues for a reimagining of career guidance as a socially embedded practice that supports critical awareness, shared agency, and socially just career imaginaries, rather than merely facilitating individual labour market adjustment. Its contribution lies in offering a theoretically grounded framework that aligns with COCAG's critical agenda and provides conceptual guidance for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers seeking to address career development in an era defined by uncertainty, inequality, and technological transformation.

Keywords: career guidance, precarity, artificial intelligence, critical perspectives, social justice

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Taking a Freirean approach: applying transformative pedagogy to create inclusive careers provision

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In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2000) asserts that education is not a mere 'deposit' of knowledge, but rather the praxis of freedom: a dialogical process through which the oppressed become subjects and agents of their own emancipation. What implications does this have for careers practitioners operating within educational contexts? How might such a perspective inform the decisions of policy makers? This session will consider the application of Paulo Freire's philosophy of critical pedagogy to the development of careers and employability support for autistic university students. Autism can be understood as a lifelong neurodevelopmental disability which impacts how an individual experiences and interacts with the world. Whilst often perceived in terms of a narrow, 'medical' model emphasising deficit, autism is increasingly understood through the neurodiversity paradigm which positions it as part of natural human variation. Despite growing acceptance of this perspective, societal barriers and inadequate support exacerbate challenges experienced by individuals. Autistic students may be faced with barriers within their careers service, such as inaccessible careers information, opaque language used in guidance meetings or simply perceiving that staff lack an awareness of autism.

Drawing on Freirean principles of critical dialogue, co-creation and praxis, this session will outline a participatory action research study which led to collaboration with autistic students, fostering transformative action to enhance inclusion (Coney & Fitzpatrick, 2025). Through shared reflections and evaluating what has been achieved through the lens of Hooley et al. (2021)'s Five signposts to a socially just approach to career guidance, this session will present a model for careers practitioners to engage with learners as equals and to develop emancipatory careers provision. Furthermore, the session will offer practical recommendations for extending this approach to address broader policy challenges and systemic inequities.

Keywords: freire, co-creation, praxis, social justice, autism

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Reimagining Career Counseling for Adults with Disabilities: invisible resources and constraints in making sense of experiences of vulnerability.

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People with disabilities offer a privileged vantage point for understanding how personal vulnerabilities, structural barriers, and socio economic transformations intertwine in redefining the very meaning of “career.” This contribution presents a qualitative analysis of the career transitions of four adults with disabilities, situating their experiences within the broader debate on the challenges of work in the Anthropocene. The thematic analysis of the TYTI interviews shows that career transitions are shaped by a complex interplay of psychological factors (low self efficacy, anxiety, traumatic experiences), environmental conditions (contractual instability, poverty, architectural and digital barriers), relational dynamics (ambivalent family networks, stigma, stereotypes), contextual and world of work constraints (a polarized labour market, digitalisation, multiple forms of discrimination linked to age and disability). These dimensions, distributed across past, present, and future trajectories, reveal how precariousness defines identity, agency, and the capacity for career planning. The narratives collected also reveal psychological and social resources are often invisible, including resilience, coping strategies, support networks, and the ability to make sense of experiences of vulnerability.

The stories analysed offer insights for rethinking career guidance as a space for social justice and transformative imagination. Crucially, the collaboration among stakeholders who engaged actively in the process has been essential in beginning to shape a pathway for transforming career counseling when working with complex histories of vulnerability.

Keywords: adults with disability, career meaning, qualitative career counseling, thematic analysis, career services

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Intellectual disability goes to work: Challenges for career theory and practice. Lessons from the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID: Ireland)

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This time of great change in the world of work further highlights the need for inclusive and creative approaches to career guidance and workplace opportunities that reflect widening access to education for people with intellectual disabilities. Inclusive education has created school environments that have supported the educational and social development of learners with intellectual disabilities. However, many learners remain marginalised from access to further and higher education and subsequent workplace career opportunities.

The Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID: <https://www.tcd.ie/tcpid/>) is a leading, pioneering, and innovative Centre that provides education for people with intellectual disabilities in a university setting. The programme presented focuses on “work readiness” through guidance using mentorship, internships, and full-time employment opportunities with significant business partners in Ireland. TCPID graduates have achieved attributes that have enhanced their learning, prepared them for lifelong learning in a changing society, and enhanced their employability skills leading to meaningful employment. The graduates are not “guests” in their workplaces. Rather, they have earned their place and make significant contributions to the organisations. The TCPID model has been influential in the recent widening of higher education opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities in higher education institutions across Ireland. It is, therefore, timely that there is consideration of the development of a more inclusive approach to careers in theory and practice using work-integrated learning (Lasrado et al., 2024). People with intellectual disabilities who have previously been excluded and marginalised from the world of work and meaningful careers have both the right to be included and the knowledge, skills, and abilities to enable organisations to meet the challenges of a dynamic environment.

As demonstrated by TCPID, an integrated inclusive approach to education, career development, and meaningful work opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities presents a valuable and innovative approach to meeting the challenges of the precarious workplace environment of today. Inclusion is the business where everyone belongs.

Keywords: Intellectual Disability, Inclusion, Education, Careers

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Defining the Notion of Crisis in the Context of Contemporary Careers Through the
Lenses of Critical Social Theory

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The concept of crisis is, in general, one of the most important for critical social theory. However, despite being the focus of many philosophers and critical scholars, it requires more detailed elaboration when applied to a specific domain of social phenomena, such as career counselling or development, generally tackling the most controversial and intriguing issues regarding the meritocracy of social order or the justice of labour regulations in each country. This paper aims to contribute to the conceptual clarifications in the field and will focus on achieving two aims. The first one is recognising the importance and influence of Marxist theory for theorising the crises and understanding the impact of the Marxist notion of crisis. Capitalism, the dominant model of social reproduction and economic relations, always destroys the given regulations and frameworks of knowledge production terms – this is what needs to be explored. The second aim is to explore what the notion of crisis could mean for research in the domain of work advancement under the neoliberal and contemporary capitalism crisis, outside of just repeating the Marxist phrases and seeking to open space for a new conceptual framework founded in critical social theory for studying career-related phenomena under the postcapitalist destruction of the “meritocracy myth”. This will be pursued by approaching the career from the angle of the crisis of capitalism and as a historically contingent, socially regulated, and politically contested, rather than an individualised trajectory of choice and self-realisation. Moving beyond orthodox Marxist formulations while retaining their critical force, in conclusion, this paper will contribute innovative insights that will be valuable for building the conceptual tools for enlarging novel critical social terminology in the field of career studies and for inspiring future empirical studies.

Keywords: structural precarity, brain drain, post-socialist transition, career as resilience

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Shifting sands and future paths: A critical look at career in precarious Albania
background

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Albania’s career landscape is a fascinating microcosm of global precarity, magnified by distinct post-communist socio-economic realities. The traditional career model is

fractured here by a "triple threat": persistent high youth unemployment, endemic informal employment (precarity by default), and massive brain drain driven by opportunity deficit and lack of trust in domestic institutions. The rise of AI and global economic shocks are not abstract threats, but additional layers of insecurity impacting an already vulnerable system. Existing career guidance, often relying on imported, individualistic models, frequently fails to address this structural precarity, reinforcing the notion that lack of success is a personal, not systemic, flaw.

This paper critically examines how the concept of 'career' is being re-imagined in contemporary Albania. We problematize the dominant Western-centric, linear career narrative in a context where temporary migration, political patronage, and informal work are often the most rational 'career' strategies.

The paper employs a critical theoretical framework, drawing on theories of structural violence, post-socialist transition, and human capital flight. We move beyond individualistic 'self-management' to explore career as a negotiation between structural constraints (institutional instability, corruption) and strategic collective action (diaspora networking, informal mutual aid). The key question is: what is the meaning of 'career' when the most significant career decision is often the choice to leave the country?

This analysis offers a vital, non-Western European perspective, compelling a fundamental re-evaluation of guidance policy. The contribution is a call for a 'Career as Resilience' policy framework in post-transition economies, prioritizing social capital, structural advocacy, and transnational guidance. A critical approach must first address the political economy of work, rather than focusing solely on individual skills.

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Career Guidance at the Edges: Sustainable Support for Non-Linear Journeys

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Background: Contemporary careers are increasingly non-linear, marked by precarity, disrupted trajectories, and systemic barriers – longstanding features of the creative sector where globalisation, digitalisation, and funding instability shape both academic and graduate futures. Dominant 'employability' discourses often individualise responsibility and obscure structural inequalities. This paper adopts a critical stance to

reframe career guidance as an ecological, relational, and sustainable practice that needs to be able to deliver social justice and support individuals in the margins of a ‘traditional career’.

Aims: This paper aims to 1) problematise linear, deficit-based assumptions in career guidance; 2) identify cohorts who do not or cannot access appropriate career guidance; 3) propose a critical integration of the Systems Theory Framework (STF) and Sustainable Career Ecosystem Theory (SCET), demonstrating its collaborative value for career practitioners and intersectional marginalised groups in delivering socially just career guidance.

Methods/Approach: The paper offers a blended conceptual-empirical contribution. Conceptually, it integrates STF’s multi-level systems perspective with SCET’s emphasis on sustainability over time and across stakeholders. Empirically, it draws on qualitative interviews with creative academics and practice-based case vignettes to surface how power, inequality, and neoliberal metrics shape guidance encounters. The approach translates into actionable methods suitable for practice and professional learning.

Conclusion/Contribution: This will contribute: Theory – building critical consciousness by integrating aligned models to support intersectionality that centres sustainability and social justice while recognising barriers and complexity.

Practice - tools for working with fractured trajectories, precarious work, and unconventional career transitions across multiple arenas.

Policy - an argument to recognise creative education as lifelong, lifewide learning rather than narrow employability training. For the COST Action community, the paper advances a critical agenda that reimagines guidance as a lever for equitable, sustainable participation in evolving career ecosystems.

Keywords: Non-linear careers, Social justice, Career guidance, Sustainability, Intersectionality

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The Privilege Paradox of Expatriate Careers in Times of Crisis: A Critical Perspective on Global Careers, Identity, and Precarity

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Background: In dominant career discourse, expatriate careers are commonly framed as privileged and self-directed trajectories associated with mobility, security, and

advantage. However, in the precarious context of the 21st century—marked by global crises, economic instability, and transnational uncertainty—such assumptions increasingly warrant critical interrogation. This paper responds to calls within critical career studies to rethink career beyond individualised success narratives by examining how privilege is experienced, contested, and destabilised in expatriate careers during crisis.

Aims: The paper aims to conceptualise how expatriates negotiate career-related privilege under conditions of crisis and to problematise the assumption that expatriates constitute a uniformly advantaged career group. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to critical perspectives on career by highlighting structural vulnerability, relational inequality, and exclusion.

Methods: Drawing on a qualitative study based on twenty semi-structured interviews with expatriates, the analysis adopts a reflexive thematic approach informed by social comparison theory and expatriate identity theory. A critical lens is used to explore how career identities and coping practices are shaped by structural conditions across home and host country contexts.

Conclusion: The findings present the privilege paradox: while expatriates initially sustain a sense of privilege through temporal and downward social comparisons, these strategies fracture when access to institutional support and resources is constrained. Under such conditions, expatriates experience forms of double exclusion, feeling disadvantaged relative to both host-country nationals and citizens in their countries of origin. The paper conceptualises expatriate privilege as conditional and relational, and far more structurally fragile than is commonly assumed. This challenges individualised career and coping narratives and calls for a career policy that addresses transnational inequality, collective responsibility, and structural precarity rather than relying on assumptions of self-sufficiency and resilience.

Keywords: Privilege paradox, expatriation, double exclusion, structural identity

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Careers Under Constraint: How Institutional Power Shapes Early Career Researchers' Careers Across National Contexts

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Academic careers are often portrayed as meritocratic, mobile, and universally accessible. Yet for early career researchers (ECRs), institutional and national contexts profoundly shape career trajectories, producing structural constraints such as employment precarity, intensified performance pressures, racialised and gendered inequalities, and uneven access to mentoring and support (Buford & Flores, 2025). Prior research has focused primarily on individual-level outcomes or macro trends. However; it has not sufficiently examined institutional power and career construction processes comparatively.

This study addresses this gap through a cross-comparative case study of higher education institutions in Türkiye, Macedonia, Serbia, Italy, Germany, Croatia, and Portugal. The selection of these countries reflects diverse levels of economic development, political stability, and academic labour market conditions that shape precarity, mobility, and career progression for ECRs. Drawing on approximately thirty semi-structured interviews with ECRs at different career stages in diverse fields, it explores how institutional norms, evaluation practices, and career expectations shape access to mobility, recognition, and progression for both internationally mobile and domestically based researchers.

Grounded in Social Justice Career Theory (Hooley et al., 2017) and Intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2016), the study conceptualises early academic careers as socially and institutionally structured rather than individually driven. This theoretical integration moves beyond deficit-oriented accounts to highlight how intersecting social positions and institutional arrangements produce uneven opportunities.

The comparative design reveals how discourses of excellence, productivity, and internationalisation operate differently across national contexts, privileging certain forms of mobility and productivity while marginalising others. By foregrounding institutional power, the study contributes to critical debates on inequality in academic careers and offers insights for rethinking evaluation regimes and promoting more socially just, context-sensitive pathways for ECRs.

Keywords: Early career researchers; institutional power; precarity; intersectionality; social justice

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From Habitus to Advocacy: Critical perspectives on class, career formation and social justice in higher education

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In the precarious landscape of contemporary higher education, academic careers are increasingly shaped by intersecting inequalities, volatile labour markets, and institutional performance regimes. Drawing on a multi level conceptual framework that integrates the work of Bourdieu with career development theories, this doctoral study traces trajectories across the social, sector, and organisational fields through the

mediating force of habitus, interrogating the recursive relationship between individual agency and structural constraints in career formation. Using a phenomenological, iterative narrative-based methodology, the research draws on the career stories of six academics based in the UK, co-constructed through multi-stage interviews, career timelines and photo elicitation.

Findings reveal non-linear trajectories shaped by financial precarity, cultural dissonance, and systemic barriers, challenging meritocratic narratives of success. Participants describe experiences of imposterism, cleft habitus, and emotional labour, yet also their capacity and drive to mobilise resilience, navigational capital, and advocacy to contest exclusionary norms. Career decisions - such as moving between institutions, prioritising stability over prestige, or rejecting leadership roles - illustrate adaptive strategies within volatile organisational contexts.

Voice-centred relational analysis situates these trajectories within broader political, socioeconomic and technological transformations, highlighting how neoliberal governance and marketisation intensify precarity. Policy implications align with CA23112 objectives:

- Reimagining career guidance as a social justice intervention, not a market discipline
- Embedding equity-sensitive progression frameworks to mitigate fixed-term churn
- Developing guidance practices that foster critical consciousness, collective advocacy, and resilience

By foregrounding classed experiences and problematising the deficit lens often attached to working-class people in higher education, this paper contributes to the paradigm shift envisioned by COCAG - towards career theories and guidance practices that critically engage with the political economy and envision more equitable futures, providing a practice ready, policy informed account of how careers are both made and remade under precarity.

Keywords: academia; agency; career formation; precarity; social justice

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Young people's 21st-century navigation of their careers is and will continue to be increasingly shaped by unprecedented challenges linked to economic instability, ecological disruption, and technological transformation. Nonetheless, dominant career frameworks, rooted in an individualistic, adaptive, and employability-oriented understanding of career and career guidance, inadequately address these structural realities and tend to reproduce power imbalances by positioning young people as passive recipients of expert knowledge rather than agents of change (Hooley et al., 2021; Vaccarino-Ruiz et al., 2025). We argue that such positioning, usually known as adultism, is a form of epistemic injustice, silencing youth voices and reproducing inequitable practices that make them invisible. Because research is conducted with young people and not on them, participatory research approaches can be a powerful emancipatory tool enabling the articulation of youth-based counter-narratives that challenge dominant, market-oriented and adult-centric understandings of career and career guidance. By positioning youth as co-researchers who collaboratively engage in the research process as co-producers of knowledge, these approaches have the potential to redistribute epistemic authority, build critical consciousness, and generate collective responses to systemic barriers (Cook et al., 2019).

Drawing on critical participatory frameworks, we propose a conceptualisation that positions participatory career research as a mechanism for youth to collectively interrogate structural constraints—from precarious labour markets to climate-induced displacement—and co-design interventions that address root causes rather than individual adaptation. We will do this by articulating (1) methodological innovation through shared analytic authority and multivocal meaning-making, with (2) a power structure critique that challenges deficit-based approaches and that is centered on youth knowledge and expertise. Such a framework allows reconceptualising career research as collaborative political practice and advances a social justice agenda that responds to 21st-century precarity through collective action and institutional transformation.

Keywords: participatory career research, youth, methodological innovation, epistemic justice, structural change

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The Impact of AI-Powered Career Development Systems on the Precarious Working Life of the 21st Century

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Background: The rise of precarious employment forms—such as platform work, task-based labor, and fragmented career trajectories—has reshaped the meaning of career stability in the 21st century. As traditional employment models erode, workers increasingly face uncertainty, weakened employment protection, and reduced access to structured career development pathways. In this context, AI-enabled Human Resource (HR) systems have emerged as influential tools capable of redefining how individuals navigate careers in unstable labor markets.

Aims: This conceptual study investigates how AI-driven career development systems—such as AI-based guidance, skills mapping, and job-matching technologies—may either mitigate or exacerbate career precarity. The primary aim is to examine whether these systems can offer meaningful career support, particularly for vulnerable groups including the precariat and gig workers, or whether algorithmic biases and opaque decision-making structures risk deepening existing inequalities.

Methods / Approach: Adopting a conceptual and integrative approach, the study synthesizes contemporary literature on AI in HR, precarious labor, digital career systems, and algorithmic governance. It draws on theoretical perspectives from career self-management, transition skills, and socio-technical systems to evaluate the dual role of AI: (1) as a potential enabler of personalized career trajectories, micro-learning pathways, and enhanced worker autonomy; and (2) as a possible amplifier of exclusion through biased data, surveillance mechanisms, and unequal access to digital tools.

Conclusion / Contribution: The study argues that AI-enabled career development systems hold significant promise for supporting individuals in navigating uncertainty—provided they are designed ethically, transparently, and with explicit fairness safeguards. Conceptually, the paper contributes to rethinking career development in an era of precarity by proposing that AI should not merely automate HR functions but serve as a socio-technical instrument that promotes adaptability, continuous learning, and equitable opportunity structures. Properly governed, AI systems can help shift career conceptualizations toward flexibility and resilience; poorly governed, they risk reinforcing the very insecurities they aim to solve.

Keywords: Gig Work, AI-Enabled Career Development, Algorithmic Governance, Digital Labour Platforms, Career Self-Management

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The Masters Tools: Contesting the ideological basis of artificial intelligence and it's relationship to an emancipatory career guidance

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This paper will be a theoretical account arguing for the vital importance of theorising the relationship between career guidance practice and Artificial Intelligence. Audrey Lorde, in her 1979 essay, argued that "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House". AI currently exists as a *Zeitgeist*, often constructed as progressive and the obvious next move in the development of career guidance practice. The inevitabilism accompanying the adoption of AI into practice is rarely disputed. This paper will present a theoretical account of the relationship between AI and career guidance practice. Central to this will be to investigate the ideologies and structures that AI in its current form represent. This will be used to argue that tools based around a logic of extraction and exploitation can not be used to develop an emancipatory career guidance.

This account will be developed by firstly presenting a historical account of how EdTech and Social Media has impacted on career guidance practice. By learning from previous instances of how technologies have interacted with career guidance practice this paper will draw on critical lessons for how the sector relates to Artificial Intelligence. Particularly this will consider the ideologies and relationships that technology has fostered (Selwyn, 2016). Crucially this will consider technology not just as an instrument with various affordances but as attached to an ideological system that is reproduced through the economic models and ideological norms that exist around contemporary technology.

The paper will end by reflecting on the critical task on reflecting on the relationship between AI and career guidance practice and how we should theorise this relationship to pursue an emancipatory career guidance.

Keywords: AI, Critical Theory, Digital Technology, EdTech

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Precarious Academic Careers in the Age of Digitalisation
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Across Europe, digitalisation has become a key driver of organisational change in higher education and knowledge-intensive work. While digital technologies and artificial intelligence are often framed as tools for efficiency, innovation and flexibility, their implications for academic careers remain deeply ambivalent. This paper examines how processes of digitalisation and the introduction of AI-based tools are reshaping academic work, career trajectories and professional identities under conditions of increasing precarisation.

Drawing on an anthropological and critical organisational perspective, the study explores how digital platforms, performance metrics and algorithmic systems

reconfigure everyday academic practices, temporalities and forms of recognition. Based on qualitative research conducted in several European higher education institutions, including in-depth interviews with academics and university staff across different contractual positions, the analysis highlights how digitalisation intensifies existing structural inequalities while producing new forms of labour insecurity. Rather than stabilising careers, digitalisation often fragments academic trajectories into short-term projects, temporary contracts and continuous self-optimisation, reinforcing a regime of permanent availability and measurable performance.

The paper argues that digitalisation does not merely transform tasks and tools but operates as a powerful mechanism of subjectivation. Academics increasingly internalise managerial and evaluative logics, navigating tensions between vocational commitment, institutional demands and personal well-being. In this context, precarious careers are not an unintended side effect of digitalisation, but a structural feature of contemporary academic capitalism. At the same time, the study identifies situated strategies of adaptation, resistance and resignification through which individuals attempt to preserve professional meaning, autonomy and dignity within digitally mediated work environments.

Keywords: Digitalisation of academic work; Precarious academic careers; Academic capitalism; Artificial intelligence in higher education; Labour subjectivity.

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Developing Critical Career Theory: Governing Public Services to champion Social
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Background: Globally, career guidance is a vital public service for ensuring employment stability and social justice (Hooley et al., 2025). In the "precarious 21st century," characterized by the Anthropocene, technological disruption, and economic volatility, traditional governance models based on New Public Management (NPM) are increasingly failing. Existing literature has scrutinized high-level policy mandates and micro-level practitioner interventions, while mid-level systemic governance remains an under-researched missing link. Innovation and management in career guidance services are frequently built on a logic characterised by efficiency, digitalisation, and standardisation, with the risk of ignoring the complex, systemic power asymmetries affecting individuals. This calls for new transdisciplinary approaches to rethink how value is created and destroyed through career guidance services.

Aim and Approach: The paper explores how shifting the management focus from service delivery (output) to value-in-context (user outcome) alters our understanding of public service innovation (PSI) within career guidance. We propose a transdisciplinary framework that combines a descriptive PSI typology with the critical lens of Critical Service Logic (CSL) to understand innovation and management in career guidance services. The PSI typology allows us to systematically categorize innovations in structures and practices in mid-level systemic governance (Criado et al., 2025). Subsequently applying CSL to problematize these categories, the focus shifts from technocratic "service delivery" (output) to "value-in-context" (user outcome) (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). This critical approach explicitly examines power relations, conflicts, and value co-destruction, and allows us to problematise how traditional efficiency metrics in career guidance services can constitute a form of 'value co-destruction' at the expense of long-term, sustainable career learning and development.

Contribution: We argue that systemic governance must move beyond "fixing" individuals for the labor market. Instead, we highlight the importance of emancipatory governance that recognizes power asymmetries and navigates conflicting value systems, such as short-term policy goals versus long-term sustainable social justice. Integrating descriptive typologies and critical logic provides a roadmap for shifting institutions from process-control to collective strategy facilitation. We conclude that addressing mid-level systemic governance is essential for creating a radical imaginary where career guidance systems actively champion social justice (Hooley et al., 2025).

Keywords: Career Guidance, Social Justice, Governance, Public Service Innovation, Critical Service Logic

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A Qualitative Analysis of the Career Experiences of Laid-off Engineers and
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The technological landscape of the 21st century, particularly with the rise of Generative AI, is challenging the assumptions of guaranteed employment within software engineering. Mass layoffs and rapid automation call into question mainstream narratives that frame a career as a stable trajectory of technical expertise. This study examines how individuals make sense of this structural transformation and how the concept of career is being reconceptualized during technological uncertainty. By describing the experiences of 12 software engineers displaced due to AI-oriented policies and 15 engineering students nearing graduation, the research provides critical perspectives for future guidance policies.

Constructed within a qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using content analysis to identify shared areas of experience. The analysis identifies five critical dimensions. In professional narratives, a sense of intellectual dispossession and being expendable for corporate efficiency comes to the fore. Second, students perceive a structural inadequacy in university curricula, which can no longer compete with technological change. Third, career is no longer defined as a success story, but as an endless struggle for survival and constant skill updating. Furthermore, findings indicate a collapse of professional loyalty, replaced by cynicism toward corporate structures that prioritize algorithmic efficiency over human resources. Finally, software engineering is evolving from an elite status toward standardized digital labor.

The study suggests that focusing solely on upskilling is insufficient for addressing this structural crisis. Consequently, career guidance for this demographic must evolve into a more critical framework capable of analyzing political-economic processes and advocating for collective rights in the face of technological unemployment.

Keywords: Software engineering, artificial intelligence, precarity, professional identity, critical career guidance

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Critical Perspectives on Vocational Assessment for Technical Workers in a Work-Study Program in a Mexican Private University

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This ongoing study is derived from an institutional intervention that united two distinct areas of a private Mexican university: the Direction of Operations and the School of Pedagogy and Psychology. The project investigates a "vocational test deficit" observed within a work-study program designed to facilitate educational opportunities for technical and maintenance staff, including gardeners, audiovisual technicians, and maintenance personnel. While the university promotes education as a tool for self-determination, the standardized vocational assessments administered—traditionally designed for high-school-to-college transitions—failed to yield meaningful results for this specific population. This observation problematizes traditional trait-and-factor models, suggesting they fail to capture the holistic, work-embedded realities of adult workers in skilled trades. Grounded in Blustein's *Psychology of Working* and Savickas's *Career Construction Theory*, this inquiry evaluates the validity of these tests for individuals whose career paths are defined by survival, mastery, and the precarity of a shifting labor market. The study builds upon quantitative test data by incorporating qualitative career construction interviews to explore the participants' work narratives and adaptive competencies. The analysis will critically compare formal test results against the demonstrated resilience and narrative identity constructed through their work-study experience. The study aims to examine how staff combining education and skilled labor should focus on assessment methods that are sensitive to context and use storytelling. These methods should respect the dignity of work and provide a more inclusive and relevant solution to guidance issues during a time of precarity.

Keywords: Vocational guidance, Occupational psychology, Career development, Work study programs, Evaluation methods

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