

Mapping the Future of Undergraduate Career Education

Equitable Career Learning,
Development, and Preparation
in the New World of Work

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The Future Isn't What It Used to Be! Revisiting the Changing World of Work After Covid-19

Tristram Hooley

People ask me to predict the future, when all I want to do is prevent it. Better yet, build it. Predicting the future is much too easy, anyway. You look at the people around you, the street you stand on, the visible air you breathe, and predict more of the same. To hell with more. I want better.

(Bradbury, 1982/1991, p. 155)

Predicting the future is notoriously difficult, and as Bradbury says, why would you want to? A successful prediction of the future robs individuals of their agency and accepts that the way things are is the way that they must be. If the future is fixed, my only role is to fit into it wherever I can, to go with the flow and find my place in the coming world. For career educators such a revelation is depressing, as when we support people in their career development, we are supporting them to make their world and shape the economy and society. But of course, gaining an understanding of the world and its possibilities is also a part of career learning. To misquote Marx, we might say that people make their careers, but they do not make them in the circumstances of their own choosing. If we recognise people's careers as the expression of agency in their life, learning and work, we still need to understand the circumstances within which they are doing it. Indeed, providing people with a strong understanding of the context within which they are operating and where key social and economic trends appear to be leading may be viewed as foundational knowledge for their career building and their wider social participation.

In this chapter I will look at the future of work and identify several key trends that need to be addressed in career education, but I will also argue against deterministic views of the future. As Bradbury argues, the future should be viewed as something to 'prevent' or make 'better' rather than as something to passively 'predict'.

The Changing World of Work

A few years ago, terrified by reading Ford's (2015) *Rise of the Robots*, I started to investigate the shadow that the imagined future throws on the way in which people develop their careers and the way in which career education responds to this (Hooley, 2017). In his influential book, Ford argued that growing levels of automation and artificial intelligence are eroding jobs and the likelihood that workers can find employment that will guarantee them the *good life*. Elsewhere, detailed research from Frey and Osborne (2017) demonstrated that many different occupations are highly susceptible to be automated and computerised.

But although there is evidence that automation is changing work, the economic, social and career implications of this development are much more contestable. Commentators variously argue that automation is nothing new and that there is no reason to believe that it will suddenly re-engineer society (Denning, 2015), that technological change typically leads to new innovations that create new jobs (David, 2015; Khan, 2016) and importantly that individuals, organisations and societies have choices about how they will respond to these changes (Srnicek & Williams, 2015). Ford's assumptions about the future are based on the somewhat improbable idea that while there will be major technological shifts, the existing power structures in society will remain stable, with robots continuing to enable the rich to get richer, whilst the rest of us passively watch our jobs, careers and livelihoods slip away.

The fact that the future is contested presents a dilemma for career educators. On one hand there is value in offering people insights about the future, perhaps encouraging them to read these accounts of automation and consider their response to them. On the other hand, the future appears to be uncertain and contested and this asks the career educator to take a different role, supporting critical enquiry and helping manage uncertainty and consider how the future can be influenced in ways that ensure that the fruits of society go to the wider populace rather than to the owners of the robots.

Yet career education has rarely taken this kind of critical stance on the future. In another article I analysed grey literature publications about the future of work and career education conferences which addressed this topic (Hooley, 2019). I concluded that career education has typically emphasised adaptive approaches to the future which encourage the individual to change and view the future as fixed and impossible to influence. I also argued that much thinking about the future makes use of a narrative that I describe as the '*changing world of work*'.

The '*changing world of work*' groups together a set of commonly anticipated changes to working life and presents them as a largely inevitable future. These changes are strongly focused on technological innovations with particular attention given to automation and artificial intelligence, growing digital connectivity, big data, 3D printing and augmented reality. The changing world of work discourse also addresses

several wider contextual challenges for our working lives, including demographic change, globalisation, the ‘great’ (post-2008) recession, environmental change and urbanisation, but these big contextual issues are often viewed as secondary to the technological transformation (the fourth industrial revolution) that is presumed to be driving the future.

The ‘changing world of work’ discourse recognises that many of these changes are contingent on political decisions and the decisions taken by employers, but it pushes a great deal of the responsibility for responding to change onto individuals. The world of work is presumed to be moving in an inevitable direction and individuals need to recognise this and develop their careers by increasing their human capital through education, training and retraining, becoming more entrepreneurial, comfortable with flexibility and precarity, enhancing their tech skills and learning to work alongside the robots. As such the role of career education has been viewed as that of championing *career adaptability* (Savickas, 1997) as the best strategy available to individuals to manage the coming challenges.

But of course, career adaptability is only one strategy that individuals can take in response to a challenging set of social, technological and economic shifts. An alternative approach might be to ‘stand firm’ (Brinkmann, 2017) and resist changes that threaten to make your life worse. Or to do as Bradbury says in the quote at the start of this chapter and build the future. These ideas underpin the social justice approach to career education which argues that, rather than trying to encourage individuals to embrace change, regardless of its content, and accommodate themselves to the world as it is, we should be trying to encourage them to analyse, question, come together and change the world in ways that make the pursuit of decent work and a positive career possible (Hooley et al., 2018).

The concept of decent work is particularly useful as it moves us away from a view of career education as being simply about helping people to find work and encourages a qualitative interrogation of what work is and what it should offer to individuals. The concept of ‘decent work’ has been championed by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021), which seeks to ensure that work offers access to social protection, respect, development opportunities and freedom from poverty and gender discrimination. In the career development field, it has been adopted by Blustein et al. (2016) as part of their psychology of working theory. The concept of decent *work* establishes an ethical floor for the level of adaptability that should be expected of human beings and suggests that the future of work needs to be organised around our needs rather than individuals being expected to fit in with a new world of work that fails to guarantee them access to the good life.

The ‘changing world of work’ narrative and the possibility of responding to it in a variety of different ways reminds us that career education is a fundamentally political endeavour. Helping people to imagine their future and deal with societal narratives about what is possible within that future is grounded in an ethical belief about what people deserve from life and a strategic decision about what is possible. The

‘changing world of work’ narrows the future and there are good reasons for career educators to resist this vision or at least to present their students with alternative visions to choose from.

Concerns about the politics of the ‘changing world of work’ miss a more fundamental objection. What if the world of automation, globalisation and responsabilisation described in the ‘changing world of work’ is just wrong? What if the future actually looks nothing like that? What if, in Bradbury’s words, this narrative is ‘just predicting more of the same’ and that, as the present changes, perhaps under pressure from a major globally defining event or series of events, so too does the future?

Enter Covid-19

Looking back on the future described by the ‘changing world of work’ from the vantage point of 2021 it is difficult not to be struck by the glaring omission of pandemics. As policymakers and pundits worried about the rise of the robots and wrung their hands like a series of modern Prometheuses, the natural world struck back in a way that quickly transformed the present and future of working life.

It was not that the pandemic was impossible to predict. Indeed, Madhav et al. argued in 2017 that ‘the likelihood of pandemics has increased over the past century because of increased global travel and integration, urbanization, changes in land use, and greater exploitation of the natural environment’ (p. 315). We have created a world which is susceptible to pandemic due to environmental destruction, globalisation, unfettered movement of, at least some, people and the rolling back of the state and the loss of public and state capacity to rapidly manage a public health crisis (Navarro, 2020).

So, it was not that a pandemic was an unforeseeable possibility, but rather that it did not fit neatly into the future as imagined by the changing world of work. Their future was a future of digital technology, of globalisation, of enormous volumes of information and capital flowing around the world and ultimately of escape from the limitations of the natural world. The gloomy reality of Covid-19 originating in a wet market in China and making its way around the world through coughs and sneezes seemed to be part of a different story altogether.

Yet Covid-19 very quickly demonstrated that it had the power to transform work fundamentally. The pandemic both exerted a massive impact on the labour market conditions within which individuals were developing their careers and profoundly shaped individuals’ psycho-social worlds, shifting what they believed was possible and what they wanted from their careers (Hooley, 2020). It quickly forced governments into making substantial reorganisations of the labour market (ILO, 2020) in ways that impacted on the working lives of individuals across the world.

Unemployment has risen sharply with many governments creating forms of employment support and subsidy that have prevented an even sharper rise (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020a). And unemployment is not the only change that is taking place in the labour market. Covid-19 is also impacting on the structure of the labour market, on the task composition of jobs, on the patterns and rhythms of work, and on the transitions into, within and out of the labour market (Anderton et al., 2020). And the economic impact of the pandemic is likely to be extended, with countries facing a ‘long ascent’ (Gopinath, 2020) out of recession as they deal with the loss of human capital and the withering of social capital and business networks during enforced lockdowns.

Nor will we just pick up from where we were, if and when the pandemic subsides. Covid-19 is likely to be a crossroads for our societies, opening the possibility for multiple different futures. Some hope that post-pandemic reconstruction will be about building a better future (OECD, 2020b), but Blakely (2020) pointed out that the crisis has seen many corporations and oligarchs enriching themselves in close collaboration with governments who have increased the power of the state and used it to shore up vested interests.

Yet the pandemic has also offered individuals a ‘pedagogic moment’ (Hooley et al., 2020) in which they can think about what they want from life, what they expect from their employer and their government and how they can develop strategies that will enable them to build a career in this new and challenging environment. It is this pedagogic moment that offers opportunities for career educators to engage with students’ career thinking and encourage them to consider the wider implications of the pandemic on the future of work and society and their place within it. This requires a process of reframing where students are helped to view their personal crises and fears about accessing employment in a wider context and to consider how social and economic changes are intertwined with personal opportunity. Using materials that imagine various possible post-Covid-19 futures could be a useful stimulus for this process and, thankfully, there is no shortage of predictions about what the post-pandemic world will look like.

Analysing Visions of the Future

The rest of this chapter will be devoted to an account of what grey literature produced between the start of the pandemic in 2020 and May 2021 imagines the post-pandemic future will look like. I used a Google search for ‘filetype:pdf “Covid-19”+ “future of work”’ to identify 40 papers which examine the future of work following the pandemic. These papers were saved, read, coded and analysed through thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014). This corpus of grey literature included papers produced by consultancies (15 papers), supra-national organisations (8), think tanks (4), universities (4), tech companies (3), NGOs (3), recruitment companies (2) and a professional association (1). As such it was very similar to the corpus reviewed in

my previous work on the 'changing world of work' (Hooley, 2019) and included several of the same organisations.

The papers largely purported to take a global or international focus (24 papers), although this was mostly confined to a focus on the developed world, with only two papers shifting this focus to the developing world. The rest of the papers were either focused on a particular region like Asia-Pacific (2), Asia (1) or Europe (2), or they focused on a single country, with the largest proportion focused on the UK (8) due to my location, but also examples from India (1), Malaysia (1) and the USA (1).

The papers were heterodox with a variety of different styles, anticipated audiences and foci. Some concentrated on analysis of trends, others on policy solutions and others on the implications for business. Many of them contain interesting ideas and arguments, but in this analysis I am focusing on the commonalities between them. Consequently, I will not discuss issues that were only raised in one paper and will focus on issues that reoccur. This is qualitative research and so I do not make a claim for its representativeness. My initial Google search returned 197,000 responses and so it is very likely that another 40 (or more) papers could be found with different thematic foci. Nonetheless, the current analysis is offered to capture current discourse about the post-Covid-19 future.

The Post-Pandemic Future

The future imagined in these papers has changed substantially from the one described in the 'changing world of work' discourse. The feature of the post-pandemic future that is most discussed is *the shift to home and remote working* (mentioned in 25 of the 40 papers). This shift is viewed as having both positive and negative aspects as it increases work and life flexibility, but also poses a range of *mental health issues* (9) due to social isolation and the *blurring of the boundaries between work and homelife* (2). Some commentators anticipate that this is part of a *broader reduction in mobility* (8) which rolls back some of the existing and anticipated benefits of globalisation and encourages a renewed focus on *the importance of place* (6).

However, the *changing world of work* is not dead. Almost half of the papers (18) return to this technologically driven version of the future and make the argument that Covid-19 has *accelerated many of the changing world of work trends* that were seen as dominant in the pre-pandemic world. *Rapid technological change* (12), *automation* (12), *big data* (4) and the growing *dominance of digital communication* (10) continue to be seen as important features of the future. Concern about *environmental change* (2) is also apparent, albeit still as a minority concern in comparison with the perceived importance of technological change.

There is also a recognition that the future that individuals are now dealing with is likely to be a challenging one. Many papers anticipate *growing unemployment* (14), *economic and sectoral restructuring* (6), *labour shortages* (2) and a *rise in precarity* (6).

There are also predictions of *increasing inequality* (13), including a *growth in gender inequality* (12) and *worsening employment conditions for people with disabilities* (2) which are seen as reversing pre-pandemic trends towards greater equality. These negative shifts are fuelled by both the *Covid-19 recession* (12) and by pre-existing trends and may lead to a variety of *changes in the way that employees and customers behave* (3).

So, after the pandemic work is going to be remote and decentred, with people both more atomised and more tightly aligned to place. Technology continues to be a central driver of the future, with many arguing that the pandemic has entrenched and accelerated the ‘changing world of work’. But the conditions within which the future worker is likely to be operating have deteriorated, leading to the decline of decent work, worsening living standards and growing inequality.

Responding to the Future

If the pandemic has darkened the vision of the future of work somewhat, it has also expanded the palette of responses that are viewed as being available. While the ‘changing world of work’ responsibilised individuals and put the state and organisations in a secondary position, the post-pandemic future rebalances this, viewing a much greater role for structural actors often working together in new forms of *public–private partnership* (4). There is a belief that *investing in more technology* (5) will enhance the effectiveness of other policies, but also a willingness to go beyond the technofix.

As a collection, the authors of the papers argued that the challenges of the future, particularly increased unemployment, precarity and inequality, will require a new approach from the state. At the heart of this is a need for a *revitalised welfare safety net* (11) accompanied by a range of *employment support* measures (11) including both wage subsidies and active labour market policies. Alongside this there is a need to develop human capital through *investment in education, training and retraining* (11).

There is also a desire to see the state intervening at a macro-economic level through *economic stimulus packages* (6), *support for entrepreneurship* (5), *localisation and regional regeneration* (2), *international development funding* (2), *environmental protection* (2) and *investment in technological infrastructure* (2) including enhancing broadband provision.

As well as an enthusiasm for public investment in the economy, there is also a view that the state should take a stronger regulatory role in shaping the future of work. This includes setting out *flexible working policies* (5), *regulating decent work* (3), ensuring *wellbeing at work* (3) and supporting *labour mobility* (2). There is also some enthusiasm for policies designed to support *gender equality* (3) and *families* (2).

Many of the policy pronouncements are echoed in recommendations about how businesses need to change and adapt. The argument is made repeatedly that

businesses will need to *restructure and reorganise* (17) and that this will include *rethinking how productivity is measured* (8) as metrics based on inputs are likely to be less effective in a working world which is no longer based around presence at the office or workplace.

The most important specific change that businesses will have to make is the shift to *flexible working approaches* (20), including the normalisation of home and remote working, but also in some cases the increased use of a *precarious workforce* (3). Key to this is developing approaches that allow for *sociability and effective networking* (7) even when employees are physically distanced.

Managing these challenges means that organisations will need to *invest in new technologies* (17). They will also need to invest in people through *training and development* (11) to ensure that employees have the new skills that they need. Covid-19 raises the importance of a focus on *health and safety* (17). Organisations' continued viability is understood to be strongly linked to ensuring that staff can work safely. In many cases this is connected to a wider focus on *wellbeing* (14) that picks up concerns that remote working might create or increase mental health problems. There is also a commitment to ensuring the *diversity of the workforce* (4) and developing *family friendly* (2) policies to counterbalance growing inequalities.

This corpus of literature has less to say about the strategies that individuals can use in their careers. There is an expectation that individuals need to be ready to make *career changes* (5) in a dynamic situation and to take advantage of the opportunities to participate in employment programmes and access training. But, while the individual was viewed as a key actor within the changing world of work narrative, they are now dwarfed by more structural approaches and accorded relatively little importance in comparison to state and corporate actors.

The post-Covid-19 future is understood to be in flux. There is a desire to stabilise the situation around a new working paradigm, but also considerable awareness of some of the challenges and downsides in doing this. Forms of flexible working are viewed as the direction of travel, but there are big questions about how best to organise this. Furthermore, there is a pessimism about the macro-economic context for the future of work. Change is a lot easier if there is a lot of money around, yet these papers generally anticipate a recession, a fractured labour market and rising inequality.

These problems require big structural solutions of the kind that the state and to a lesser extent businesses and employers are better placed to make than individuals. So, the hope for the future is vested in investment in people and infrastructure, the active compensation for labour market failings and the willingness to mobilise the power of the state to safeguard the future. But where does the individual fit into this, what kind of career management is required and what does effective career education look like in this post-pandemic working future?

Reflections and Implications

Richard Nixon is supposed to have said ‘we are all Keynesians now’ when faced with a mounting crisis in the US economy in the early 1970s. In fact, the quote is probably more accurately attributed to Milton Friedman, who vociferously protested that it was taken out of context (Snider, 2016). But the mythology of the iconic bad boy of American conservatism turning to Keynesianism during troubled times proved powerful, with the story being frequently retold as policymakers argued about the correct response to the great recession of 2008 (Weibrot, 2008).

My analysis of the grey literature of the post-pandemic working future suggests that once again we are all Keynesians. The Covid-19 recession is understood to be threatening much of what we have held to be valuable and important about work. There appears to be little faith that *laissez-faire* economics can solve this crisis alone and so people are reaching out to the state for a wide range of forms of support and intervention.

Some may argue that this renewed belief in the state, in planning and in intervention in the economy marks the beginning of a political shift to the left. But, as Blakeley (2020, p. 59) argues, this is a misunderstanding: ‘no matter how much a government spends on healthcare and education – or in this context furlough schemes and business loans – it will never become a socialist state’. What we are witnessing is more akin to ‘corporate welfare’ and a coming together of the political class and the corporate world. What is missing from the visions of the future set out above are the concepts of democracy, agency, self-determination and emancipation. The futures that we have explored in this chapter repeatedly ask how we can manage the crisis, but they rarely ask in whose interest we are managing it, nor envisage any kind of transfer of power and authority. These are questions that careers educators should encourage students to consider. Shifts in economic and political power shape the opportunity structure and determine career possibilities. To be effective, students’ thinking about their own career needs to be built on analysis of what is, and what should be, happening in the world.

The fact that so many commentators ignore the question of what social and political interests are shaping the future leads them to fall back on the idea of technology as the key driver of change and provider of solutions. While the pandemic has reduced the importance of automation and the other technological features of the ‘changing world of work’, technology continues to loom over the future of work, eroding jobs and alienating workers. Yet, as Febvre (1935/1983) argued, technology should not be understood as an external force acting on society but rather as something that is enclosed within it. The nature of new technologies and the ends that they serve can be shaped, but again the question is who has the power to shape this and to what end? Once again career education has a role to play in questioning technological determinism and encouraging students to think about who owns and shapes the technologies that are shaping working futures. As Zuboff (2019) noted, big tech,

aided and abetted by the state, is involved in a project of surveillance and reworking of our subjectivities. Given this, there is a strong case for careers educators to be encouraging students to reflect on the following: the technologies that they use; students' relationships to various technologies; how these might be shaping their career thinking; and what alternative ways might exist to organise and regulate the ownership of the technologies that are shaping the future.

Students finishing degree programmes are likely to look out on the pandemic economy and their future careers with trepidation. The crisis has damaged the global market for graduates and led to considerable fears that the current generation will suffer from substantial economic scarring (Institute of Student Employers, 2020). Against such a background many will enthusiastically support economic stimulus packages, employment support schemes and opportunities for retraining. Bigger questions about the organisation of society and the economy and the trajectory of the future may seem to be irrelevant to the immediate task of finding a job and making a successful start to your employment career.

As career educators, we have an opportunity to help students to see that their career development exists in a dialectic with the future. The analysis of the future of work that I have presented in this chapter suggests that students are likely to need a lot of help and support as they enter the labour market and navigate their way through it. Career educators need to be comfortable discussing the future with students as something that is contingent on political and economic uncertainty, rather than as something that is fixed and unalterable. Meanwhile, faculty members and instructors should encourage students to repurpose their academic research skills and criticality and turn it onto themselves, their careers and the wider world. Higher education should challenge and problematise the way things are and the future that is promised rather than school its students into uncritical acceptance of what might be (Rawlinson & Rooney, 2018).

An individualistic strategy for career development that emphasises the accumulation of human capital and the internalisation of career adaptability is unlikely to be sufficient. Effective careerists need to become adept readers of the political economy, analysing how decisions made in Washington, Brussels or Beijing are transforming what is expected from them in their career. The career education that we provide needs to help them to think through strategies for effective remote working and the use of digital communication and networking tools. But it also needs to help them to manage setbacks, to preserve their employability in times of recession, to access government programmes when necessary and to look after their mental and physical health.

In practice this might include encouraging students to reflect on their ideas about the future of work and analyse where these ideas come from. It should also encourage students to recognise their individual agency, and to see the possibilities that collective action opens up. This means forging a connection between career education and wider forms of civics and citizenship education. Within higher education

such issues are most likely to be addressed within the curriculum where career professionals and faculty can collaborate to move away from instrumental forms of career education focused on the preparation of resumes and the moulding of the self to the requirements of the labour market. Instead, there is a need to create expansive and emancipatory career education curricula (Hooley, 2015, 2017) which encourage learners to:

- *explore themselves and the world where they live, learn and work*, e.g., by exploring their imagined future and the kind of place within the world that they hope to inhabit;
- *examine how their experience connects to broader historical political and social systems*, e.g., by reviewing predictions about the future and considering their impact on their career aspirations;
- *develop strategies that allow individuals to make the most of their current situation*, e.g., by considering what skills, knowledge and experience might be useful in various imagined futures;
- *develop strategies that allow groups to work together and make their most of their current situation*, e.g., by thinking about the institutions, associations, networks and forms of reciprocity and mutual aid that might be able to support career building in the imagined future; and
- *consider how the current situation and structures should be changed*, e.g., by considering issues of justice, fairness and ethics to evaluate possible futures and issues of power and politics to consider how the future might be influenced.

Above all, career education should empower those who receive it to have a critical engagement with the world of work and the future. It should point out that the future is not what it used to be and remind people that the political possibilities and opportunity structures of today looked different yesterday, and may look different again tomorrow. Before the pandemic commentators advocated a vision of the future dominated by robots, the gig economy and the free movement of capital, goods and labour around the globe. After the pandemic, the political economy has changed, the world looks different and the future has been rewritten to be one of homeworking, state intervention and growing inequality. The future, as ever, tells us more about what is happening now than it does about what will happen next, and it is career educators' responsibility to remind students of the contingency of the future and to help them to recognise their agency in shaping it.

Against such a constantly morphing and highly political future, career education should encourage students to engage in norm criticism (Wikstrand, 2018) by questioning received wisdom about what is desirable and what the future will hold. It should build their critical consciousness, help them to reach out and make common cause with others and recognise that the future does not have to be the same as the present and that it certainly should not be worse (Hooley et al., 2018). If career education achieves nothing else it should inspire students to look at their

future, the futures of their classmates and the future of the world and say, 'to hell with more. I want *better*'.

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