

Networking PROSPECT(HE)

CSU

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

AGCAS

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

NICEC

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

CRAC

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

Sheraton House, Castle Park, Cambridge CB3 0AX
Tel: 01223-460277 Fax: 01223-311708
E-mail: enquiries@crac.org.uk

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

This Briefing:

- examines the rationale for networking *PROSPECT(HE)*;
- identifies ways in which the networked version is being used;
- examines evidence on the effects of such networking;
- explores the increased potential for integration with other careers activities;
- recommends ways forward.

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

RATIONALE

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

Reasons for networking **PROSPECT(HE)** include:

- To deliver careers provision more widely and allow remote user access.
- To respond to student expectations, based on their growing usage of networked services to support their learning.
- To support careers education.

The rationale for increasing access takes two different forms:

- *Compensating* for gaps in existing provision.
- *Extending* the core provision.

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

CONCERNS

There has been some concern on the part of careers staff that students using **PROSPECT(HE)** in unsupported contexts might be less likely to use it effectively, and in particular:

- might be less likely to invest the serious effort necessary to get value from the system (the "superficial input" argument);
- might be more likely to judge the system on the basis of their feelings about the occupational suggestions it makes – i.e. if they do not like them, dismissing the system as a whole (the "superficial output" argument).

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

STRATEGIES

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

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

STYLES OF USAGE

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

EFFECTS

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

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

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

Qualitative data suggest that other effects of networking include:

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

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

INTEGRATION

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

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

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

SUPPORT

If the networked system is to be strongly integrated into other careers provision, training is needed both for careers staff and for academic staff to familiarise them with *PROSPECT(HE)* and to explore ways of using it effectively. Examples include:

- A tailored one-day course for careers staff and careers education tutors.
- Attention to *PROSPECT(HE)* in training sessions for academic staff involved in running a careers education programme.

Other possible forms of support include:

- Paper-based or video-based guides to *PROSPECT(HE)*.
- Within the "managed diffusion" strategy (see earlier), training students as paraprofessionals to support the initial use of *PROSPECT(HE)* within the careers service.
- Tutorial intervention – possibly using e-mail and Internet conferencing facilities.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The future offers scope for increasing access to *PROSPECT(HE)* even further, possibly as part of a virtual career centre on the Internet. This would make it easier for *PROSPECT(HE)* to be accessed by, for example, higher education students in further education institutions, and by distance learners. It would also open up possibilities, subject to licensing and copyright agreements, for *PROSPECT(HE)* to be made available more widely as a community resource – possibly linked to the University for Industry. This would open up more demanding issues about making support available on a distance basis.

- Higher education institutions which have not so far networked *PROSPECT(HE)* should consider the potential for doing so.
- Institutions networking *PROSPECT(HE)* should:
 - Consider carefully the relative benefits of the "open diffusion" and "managed diffusion" strategies.
 - Seek from the outset to consider the range of possibilities for integrating the use of *PROSPECT(HE)* with other careers activities, and the training implications of such integration.
 - Review ways in which support can be provided to remote users.
- CSU, in collaboration with the AGCAS *PROSPECT(HE)* Liaison Sub-Committee, should:
 - Consider how to enhance the system's potential as a learning resource.
 - Review the current procedures for collection of routine evaluation data.
- The AGCAS *PROSPECT(HE)* Liaison Sub-Committee, in collaboration with CSU, should:
 - Explore ways in which enhanced training to support the integration of *PROSPECT(HE)* with other careers activities might be supported.
 - Encourage, and where appropriate initiate, development work on tools for readiness assessment and on innovative forms of support for remote users.
 - Encourage dissemination of good practice in these and other areas through articles in *Phoenix* and other ways.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report summarised in this Briefing is published as:

Watts, A.G. & Jackson, C. (1999). *Networking PROSPECT (HE): Practice and Potential*. Manchester: Higher Education Careers Services Unit.

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

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

March 1999