The impact of Brexit: values and emotion in career thinking

Is the political personal?

They started their university education within the EU; now they find themselves graduating in a country that has rejected its nearest neighbours, triggering economic uncertainty in an era of austerity. How is Brexit impacting on the future plans of 2018 graduates?

A year after the shock result, I set about interviewing 15 final year (domestic) undergraduates at UWE Bristol, from a cross-section of courses, to find out just that. I was surprised by the depth and strength of emotion and values in the interviews, and the role these played in motivating their career thinking. Although nothing conclusive can be drawn from this small qualitative study, I believe that the findings show the impact of the wider context of the world we live in, including the impact of political events, on potential career choice.

Emotions run high

“Brexit really woke me up,” said one, and politics certainly triggered strong emotion and opinion: “I wonder what that might mean for society if we don’t trust the people who are running our country,” to the extent that a few no longer saw themselves staying in post-Brexit Britain “...I don’t want to live in a place where I feel those values aren’t existing or they’re going backwards. So that’s definitely pushed me away...I would live in England if we stayed in the EU.”

The impact on some students’ wellbeing was vivid: “It’s almost like in a little kid’s cartoon where they live in a happy colourful world and then it’s suddenly all gone black and white and cold and scary.”

Focussed and deeper career values

Although none had changed their career choice, Brexit had impacted their career thinking: “I don’t think it’s changed my career as in like what I want to do, but I think it’s changed the way I’m going to think about doing it.” Many wanted a purposeful career to ‘heal’ a divided and intolerant society: “It’s definitely made me more motivated to try and create a better society,” with Brexit as a catalyst to become a role model: “I want to be a teacher, this kind of teacher, because of Brexit.”

Down, but not out

The uncertainty expressed by many - “nobody really knows what’s going to happen” - was balanced by some optimism - “…jobs are out there, and they are jobs where an impact can be made”. Navigating uncertainty could be in demand - “companies are now starting to find their feet ... and they’re realising that graduates who have been through this will have to lead them through potentially uncertain times and that more of them are needed.”

Implications for practice

More than ever, I believe a progressive approach to career practice is needed, whereby values are embraced and the potential impact of social and political context is not ignored; an approach which is part psychological (e.g. who am I? what motivates me? what do I want to achieve in life?) but also part sociological (e.g. what sort of society do I want to live in? what do I want to change? what is stopping me?)

Admittedly, not every student will want to change the world. However, many graduates will be seeking a life that fits with their values and aspirations. To do this, they will need to be adaptable and able to manage their emotions in a tough post-Brexit economy. As practitioners, we need to be prepared to have potentially challenging ‘career conversations’ if our graduates wish to make a difference with their career choices and change society for the better.