

The impact of Brexit: when politics and career dreams collide

Without a doubt, Brexit has provoked heated debate across the UK and revealed a deeply divided society. For those students who started their university education within the EU and find themselves graduating in a country that is perceived as increasingly isolationist, I wondered what impact this was having as they considered their futures. So I decided to conduct a research study for the Masters dissertation module with the University of the West of Scotland.

In-depth interviews with 15 final year (domestic) undergraduates at UWE Bristol, from a cross-section of courses, revealed strong emotions and values, and showed the impact of this on their career thinking.

Emotions run high

"Brexit really woke me up!" said one. Many had strong opinions: *"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...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."*

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...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

In my opinion, 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?*) and 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. Adaptability and emotional resilience will be needed 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 have a positive impact on society.

Disseminating my research at the recent UWS Masters Research Symposium gave me the confidence to share my findings at other conferences and write articles. By developing myself as a 'Practitioner Researcher', I have discovered a friendly academic community who relish research-informed practice.

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