

**Emotional Barriers to Job Search Success:  
Job Search Anxiety during University-to-Work Transitions**

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Job search is an emotionally charged process that involves considerable ambiguity (Turban, Lee, Veiga, Haggard & Wu, 2013). Although research on wellbeing of employed and unemployed job seekers is well established, we know relatively little about emotional wellbeing of new entrants into labour markets. With increasing number of university leavers yet proportionally fewer high skilled jobs across the globe (Green & Henseke, 2016), new entrants into the graduate labour market face unprecedented ambiguity and uncertainty in their job search outcomes upon graduation. Moreover, these new entrants often lack the career-related experience (Boswell, Zimmerman, & Swider, 2012; Feldman, 2003) to help them negotiate this complex terrain (Jackson & Wilton, 2016). Not surprisingly then considerable level of anxiety among university leavers has been reported (Leach, 2016; Tomlinson, 2008). However, how such emotional turmoil impacts job search behaviour and thereby successful university-to-work transitions - although has important practical implications for graduate careers - is a question that received scant scholarly attention. This research aims to examine (i) the factors contributing to job search anxiety (JSA) among university leavers, and its relationship with (ii) job search behaviours during university-to-work transitions and (iii) job search outcomes upon graduation. In doing so, this research responds to recent call for studies focusing on the emotional experience of job search (Manroop and Richardson, 2015), particularly for new entrants into the labour market (Boswell et al., 2012).

**The emotional side of job search**

For most, work has important associations for identity (Turban, et al., 2013) and provides latent benefits (e.g., time structure and social interaction) that help maintain emotional wellbeing (Jahoda, 1981). The traditional model of job search-related wellbeing therefore suggests that unsuccessful job search impairs physical and mental wellbeing (Murphy & Athanassou, 1999). This view has found extensive support, particularly among unemployed samples (e.g., Creed & MacIntyre, 2001; Vansteenkiste, Lens, Witte, & Feather, 2005). The Reverse Causation Hypothesis (RCH), i.e., psychological wellbeing influences job search behaviour and outcomes (Kasl, 1982), is relatively less researched and has found mixed support (Crossley and Stanton, 2005). For instance, it was reported that depression (Hamilton, Hoffman, Broman & Rauma, 1993) and self-esteem but not psychological distress (Schaufeli and Van Yperen, 1993) predicted job search outcomes.

The role of context on job search has been recognised. Transitions from university to work provide a unique context to study the RCH approach, as the career actors are neither unemployed nor in work (although they may be employed in part-time, term-time work). For university leavers, anticipation of difficulties (due to perceived internal (e.g., confidence in skills and abilities) and/or external barriers (e.g., the state of the labour market) in transition to work has been shown to lower feelings of control over career (Monteiro & Almeida, 2015). This is inline with psychological theories of stress, which show an association between anticipation of difficulties and emotional wellbeing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The upcoming uncertainty associated with leaving higher education may therefore trigger feelings of anxiety. Research based on unemployed samples shows that financial strain during job search impairs psychological wellbeing (Price, Choi, & Vinokur, 2002), yet social support may be able to counteract such negative effects (Lui, Huang, & Wang, 2014). Thus, building on multidisciplinary models of job search (Manroop and Richardson, 2015) and research on

psychological stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), we expect the situational context (i.e., financial strain and social support) and anticipation of barriers in access to graduate jobs to contribute to job search related anxiety.

The ‘emotional response model’ of job search suggests that high levels of stress and frustration experienced by some job seekers may lead to avoidance, helplessness and withdrawal behaviours (Barber et al., 1994). This is inline with the approach/avoidance model of self-regulation. For instance, the broaden and build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001) suggests that individuals who are experiencing positive emotions are more likely to engage in approach behaviour (i.e., broaden attention, cognition and behaviour) and are therefore more likely to accomplish goals, in comparison to those experiencing negative emotions. The latter are more likely to engage in avoidance behaviour and are therefore less likely to accomplish goals. It is argued the emotional control (e.g., not allowing anxiety take over performance) is an important aspect of goal-striving as it keeps the individual on track for achieving goals (van Hooft, Wanberg & Hoyer, 2012).

Avoidance/withdrawal tendencies have been reported as coping mechanisms to alleviate the sources of anxiety (Zimmerman, Boswell, Shipp, Dunford & Boudreau, 2012). Based on this, we expect JSA to negatively impact job search behaviour (expectations, effort, behaviour and strategies) during UWT and job search outcomes upon graduation. This is summarised in Figure 1.

### **Method**

A two-wave study is designed to gather data on student wellbeing and job search behaviour during university and on job search outcomes six months after graduation. Wave I data was collected from the 2016-graduating cohort from Scottish universities between May-June 2016. Participants will be approached again February – March 2017 for Wave II data on job search outcomes.

The findings presented in this synopsis are informed by Wave I data from 745 final year students (Mean age = 23, SD= 4years; 56% female; 73% Scottish national, 46% studying in engineering/science subjects; 50% were first time university-goers in their family; 67% were making job applications at the time of survey).

Wave I measures included: perceived barriers to labour market entry (adapted from Rothwell, Herbert, and Rothwell 2008); financial strain (Ullah, 1990), social support (Vinokur & van Ryn, 1993); job search expectations, job search intensity (Blau, 1993), strategies (Crossley and Highhouse, 2005) and job search behaviours (Blau, 1993); and JSA (adapted from Marteau & Bekker, 1992). Demographics, e.g., age, gender, degree subject, social background, expected degree result, university type, any experience of internships, voluntary and part-time work during university education, and the duration of job search were controlled in the analyses.

### **Findings**

Results of hierarchical regression analyses show that financial strain ( $B=.32, p<.05$ ) and perceived internal barriers ( $B=.13, p<.05$ ) predicted JSA. Binary logistic regression analyses revealed that, controlling for perceived barriers to securing graduate work and situational factors, JSA was negatively associated with an expectation of securing good job ( $B=-.38, SE=.18, p<.05$ ) and positively with that of securing any job ( $B=.90, SE=.20, p<.05$ ). Moreover, JSA was positively associated with the number of job sources used ( $B=.13, p<.05$ ) and haphazard job search strategies ( $B=.20, p<.05$ ). Students who expected to secure a good job upon graduation reported higher job search effort ( $B=.14, p<.05$ ) and relied less on haphazard job search strategies ( $B=-.13, p<.05$ ). Students who expected to secure any job upon graduation were more likely to use haphazard ( $B=.20, p<.05$ ) and less likely to use exploratory ( $B=-.17, p<.05$ ) and focused job search strategies ( $B=-.30, p<.05$ ). Expected

initial salary was negatively associated with haphazard job search strategies ( $B=-.13$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

These findings are summarized in Figure 2.

### **Discussion**

Using data from graduating students from Scottish universities, the first wave of this study, aimed to understand the correlates of job search anxiety and associated job search behaviours during university-to-work transitions. The study highlights the role of contextual factors influencing emotional wellbeing during key career transitions. It is likely that the external barriers to labour market entry have been normalized in society (Tomlinson, 2008) and internalized by students as reflected in the impact of perceived internal barriers on JSA. Moreover, findings show the importance of financial strain for new entrants' wellbeing. This resonates with earlier findings from unemployed and in work samples and demonstrates the importance of including such contextual variables in job search models.

Poorer expectations and associated haphazard job search strategies with JSA support the RCH of job search-related wellbeing. We find little support for avoidance/withdrawal behaviours. Nevertheless, the effect on job search strategies (preference for haphazard strategies over exploratory and focused) is likely to be a symptom management strategy to overcome anxiety rather than proactive job search behaviour (Kanfer et al., 2001). We expect JSA to represent an emotional barrier to job search success and to therefore negatively impact employment outcomes for graduates six months after graduation.

Practically the findings call for interventions during university education for building confidence and career adaptability by careers advisors and for money advice by student support services.

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Figure 1 Hypothesised model of correlates of job search anxiety during university-to-work transitions

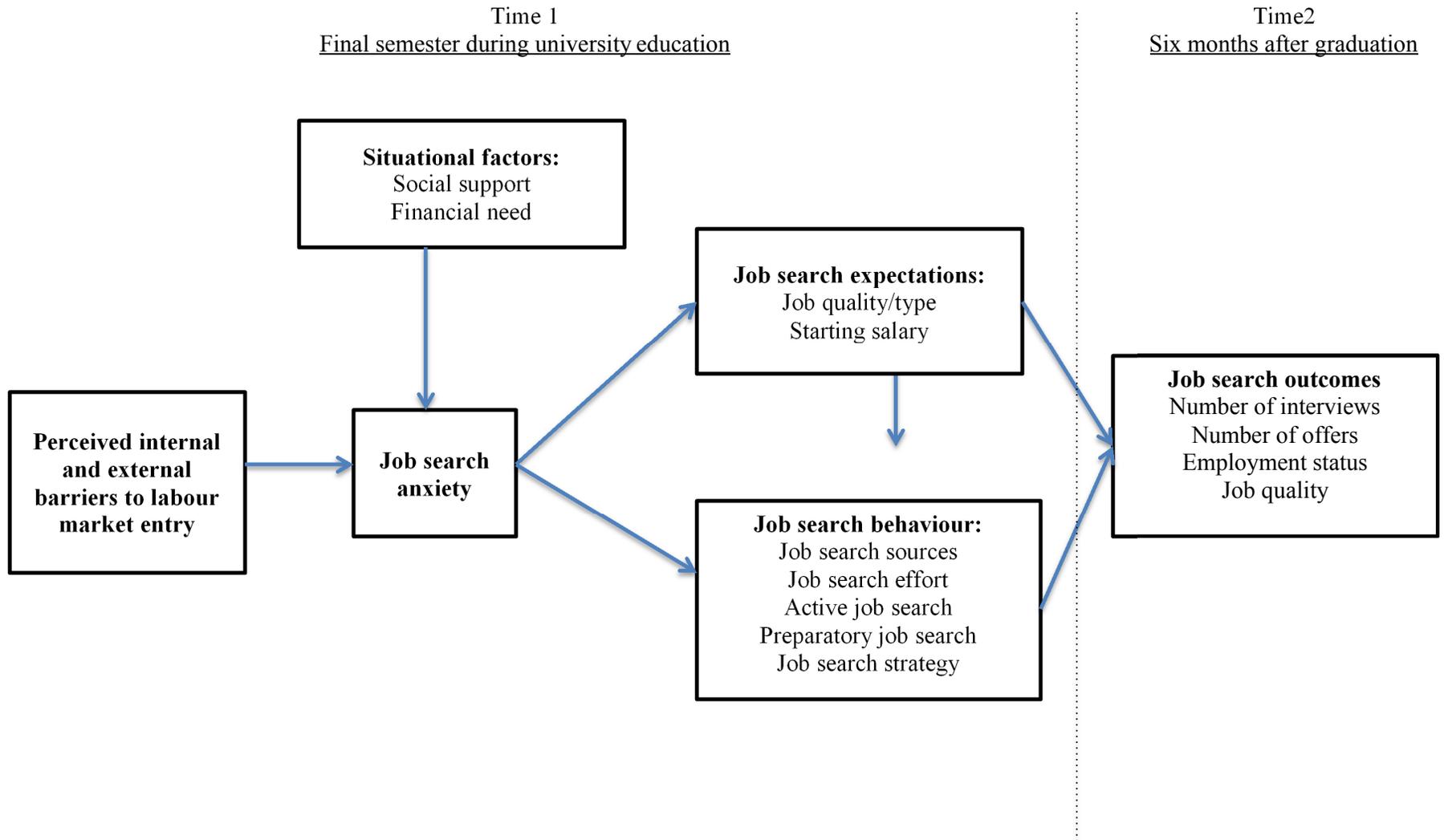


Figure 2 Summary of findings from Wave I data

