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Conceptualising transitions from education to employment as career development and/or learning

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# Constructing the Future: transforming career guidance



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## Transforming Career Guidance

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# Chapter One

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## Constructing the Future: Transforming Career Guidance

Hazel Reid

### Introduction

Welcome to the fourth edition of *Constructing the Future*. The publication is produced biennially with the aim of disseminating selected research and development within the field of career guidance. During 2005 the Research Committee of the Institute of Career Guidance contacted other professional associations that represent career guidance practitioners, in order to explore potential links with their research groups. The committee found that many associations in the UK produce a regular journal, similar to the ICG's *Career Guidance Today*, but was unable to find an annual or biennial dissemination of research produced in a book format. *Constructing the Future* is, it would seem, unique.

The title of this edition suggests two central themes. The first, constructivism, is linked to what Savickas refers to as developments located within a 21st century preoccupation with meaning, in contrast to a 20th century focus on facts (1997). The second, transformation, refers to how the context for career guidance is being transformed and how the outcomes can be transforming for those who experience career guidance. This introductory chapter will discuss constructivism and its potential for career guidance, using this as a backdrop to introduce chapters two to six. The chapter will then explore the theme of transformation as a framework for the introduction to chapters seven, eight and nine.

### Constructivism and the importance of 'meaning'

In a postmodern world where expectations of secure and linear career progression have been overturned, guidance practitioners are seeking new ways of working with their clients. Many established theoretical models seem limited and at odds with the dynamic realities of clients' experience in a rapidly changing world (Reid, 2006). Constructivism, as a 'new' approach, appears to offer an alternative way of understanding 'career' and the diverse meanings given to career behaviour and action. Constructivist perspectives are not new (Collin and Young, 1992) but they are being viewed with increasing interest. The terminology can be confusing however and different descriptors are used, for example, constructivist, interpretive, narrative and biographical approaches. Whilst the focus may vary, what the terms share is an emphasis on the need to explore 'meaning' and perceptions of 'truth' from the client's worldview. Such

approaches score highly in terms of truthfulness as life themes, *pre-occupations* (Savickas, 1997), context and subjective experience are placed in the foreground of any 'model' used within practice.

In relation to working with clients, constructivism is about paying attention to personal meaning within a social context. We convey and interpret meaning through behaviour as well as through language. As such constructivist or narrative approaches are drawn from broad cultural traditions rather than presenting a new way of 'delivering' guidance. As noted by McLeod (1997), there is no comprehensive model or handbook on how to do this: it is derived from a distinctive philosophical and political position that requires some rethinking about the nature of truth, the relationship between the client and the helper and the relationship between the client and their world.

A core condition of constructivist approaches is to listen to the client's story. This is a profound listening from a self-aware and politically aware practitioner that is more than empathic. It is a listening that believes that the client's understanding of the meaning of events, and how they think, feel and understand the impact of them on their lives, is *the* important meaning. It is a listening that is reflexive, respectful and aims to be socially just. Constructivist approaches recognise that when we ask the client to 'tell their story', they do not provide us with a list of experiences or facts; they tell us about events. These events are not a series of unrelated episodes but form patterns representing the client's socially constructed view of themselves in the world: past, present and future.

Constructivist approaches question the 'taken-for-granted' views of the purpose, process and outcomes of career guidance. In other words, the key concept of who owns the story: who determines the sense of a story and who makes decisions about the development of career goals and career action (Reid, 2006). Constructivist approaches are, then, concerned with taking an ethical and moral position in relation to how we gather information about an individual who seeks help from a careers guidance practitioner.

As noted above, what is key to all approaches that draw on this perspective is the belief that every client should have the opportunity to tell their story. But this telling requires a different kind of listening within a narrative approach. It is not just a listening for clues about what to do next; it is an empathic listening to hear how the client structures their view of themselves through the stories they present. The practitioner needs the kind of respectful curiosity that asks: What other voices are present in those stories? How does the client position themselves through the meaning they place on their experiences? This deeper listening to stories gives the practitioner greater insight into the relationship

between the social cultures inhabited by the client, alongside their (psychological) representation of self. And it is a two-way listening, a collaborative process that requires the practitioner to be aware of the cultural and political discourses that frame their own understandings. In providing the space for stories to be heard, the client is given the opportunity to recollect (*re-collect*) and own their story, before moving on to create a new story. It may be an obvious point to emphasise, but issues for the client are evident in the stories they tell: listening to their stories is an effective way of 'assessing' their needs.

Empathy on its own may build trust, but where this is used uncritically, as in much humanistic counselling, it privileges the individual's ability to make things happen divorced from their social context (Sinclair and Monk, 2005). Empathy, intervention and action needs to resonate with the social constraints experienced by the individual in order to be useful and truly enabling; rather than, at best ineffective in terms of resulting action, and at worst coercive or even oppressive. The success of much partnership work taking place between services giving careers guidance and a range of other agencies within the UK, has gone some way towards that – in other words they have located intervention within what is meaningful for the individuals the service seeks to help. Whatever happens next in the changing policy context for the career guidance sector, this way of working needs to be celebrated, strengthened and extended.

White and Epston (1990) provide a framework for working with narrative in counselling, but how can this be related to career guidance work? Savickas (e.g. 1997), Cochran (e.g. 1997) and Peavy (e.g. 2000) have explored the use of narrative approaches for career counselling and Edwards (e.g. 1998), in the UK, has written extensively on how poststructuralism, and the work of Foucault, can be used to identify a range of discourses (ways of thinking and talking about guidance) that influence practice. Defining guidance activity (UDACE, 1986) is not easy and the boundaries between guidance and counselling are not distinct and can be contentious (Westergaard, 2003). Selective mining of techniques from counselling approaches is, potentially, risky if the thinking behind the approach is rejected due to a lack of fit with an existing model. An inadequate understanding of the theoretical underpinnings can lead to the practitioner using a technique without the resource to deal with the consequences. For example asking a 'miracle question' borrowed from Solution Focused Brief Therapy (O'Connell, 1998), without the insight into how to frame this, can leave both client and practitioner floundering. The miracle question is usually a version of the following. 'Imagine when you go to sleep a miracle happens and the problems you have disappear. When you woke up what would be the first signs for you that a miracle had happened?' If a young person has lost a parent, or has a criminal record that excludes certain work, or a medical

condition that is disabling them in some significant way, they may respond to the question with an answer that appears to enhance the problem rather than one that envisages a different future. For instance, “My mum would still be alive” as the miracle would be difficult for both client and helper to build on. Without the deeper knowledge of how to use SFBT techniques to support the client in working toward the ‘miracle’ (or a version of the ideal) expectations can be raised that are inappropriate and unrealistic.

Thus far in the UK, where practice appears to be based upon an eclectic approach to the use of theory (Kidd, 1996), often drawing on Egan’s interview model (2002), there does not appear to be any well known constructivist ‘model’ for use in guidance. It is not surprising therefore that whilst there is an interest in developing constructivist and narrative approaches, and a desire to move beyond so called ‘scientific’ or trait/factor approaches; how to do this in the UK context, remains obscure and application of the theory, appears difficult. The difficulty is located in the pragmatic realities of practice: in other words, the constant changes brought about by new initiatives, funding constraints, time-pressures, meeting targets and a lack of ‘space’ for reflection. Alongside the interest in the ‘turn’ toward constructivist ideas and working with stories, there is also likely to be some impatience about how grounded such thinking is or can be. How can the usefulness of constructivist approaches be developed for UK career guidance practice?

One view would suggest that the way forward is to identify and insert narrative techniques into an existing model of practice. However, aside from the issue raised above, this way forward would not fit with the belief that a narrative approach requires rethinking a number of core assumptions about the relationship between the client and the helper, the client and their ‘problem’ and the context and discourses which impact upon both client and practitioner. And of course, from a constructionist point of view, with its exploration of power-knowledge, the very terms ‘practitioner’, ‘client’ and even ‘helping’ are problematic as they suggest positioning the client’s knowledge as somehow less valuable. However, any radical rethink of methods for guidance interactions is problematic and this difficulty would apply to the introduction of any new approach that has the potential to be transformational, for example multiculturalism (Bimrose, 1996). Narrative approaches within counselling recognise that stories shape lives and that an unsatisfactory or ‘bad’ story can, with work and patience, be transformed to a ‘good’ story. Stories reveal the influence of family and community and of the social, cultural and historical events that shape role and identity and perceptions of what is possible. These influences are key to a multicultural understanding: narrative approaches may provide additional tools to help clients to develop meaningful career stories. But, given that the literature around constructivism is both challenging and

extensive, what can be done to move from theory to practice? Perhaps the first step is to introduce narrative thinking.

### **Narrative thinking**

If it is accepted that in terms of constructivism a narrative is not the straightforward telling of an event but is a *re-presentation* of the event imbued with meaning from the teller's perspective (Reid, 2006), then narrative thinking would require a career guidance practitioner to stay with the meaning and not move too quickly to an exploration of the future and possible action. Paying attention to the client's understanding of their situation through listening to their stories, does not maroon client and adviser in the past or fix either in the issue or the 'problem'. A key concept in narrative counselling is that 'it is not the person that is the problem but the problem that is the problem' (White and Epston, 1990). Within the experience of career guidance practitioners in the UK, working across different sectors, 'the problem' can range from multiple difficulties that have to be addressed before career ideas can be thought of, to not knowing which educational option to take next. Whatever the difficulty, 'externalising the problem' involves a different type of conversation when we view the person as separate from the issue.

For example, many discourses label young people in terms of a problem sited in a personal 'deficit'. Whilst this may emphasise the need for help, the easy application of negative terms by a range of professionals who have the power and authority to apply them, creates a negative view of the self that is limiting and not a base for competence or confidence. These views are often internalised by the young person and have long lasting and potentially lifelong effects. Narrative thinking would suggest we view the client with a 'problem' as someone who is caught up in a story not necessarily of their own making. School descriptions, backed by expert views, may have cast them in roles that become totalising, in other words the **only** way they are viewed by others. Their own view and the view of other significant people in their lives (outside of the school) may be different: this needs to be explored.

Externalising the problem, or the more fluent idea of 'developing externalising conversations' (Winslade and Monk, 1999) and looking for clues of the client's competence (the alternative story), involves opening up a more 'playful' space to lighten the exploration of the 'problem' by putting problems back where they belong, i.e. external to the individual:

Locating the problem outside the person reverses the trend in conventional counselling...[and established guidance practice] to have the person own the problem, and then take responsibility for it, as a step toward solving it (Winslade and Monk, 1999:35) [my insert].

Hence, embedded within the stories clients tell are the dominant discourses that shape their lives and their viewpoints: these discourses are seen as the norm and therefore rarely questioned. In other words a set of ideas that, whilst giving meaning to social practices, also places limits on views of what is possible. Narrative thinking would search for the stories that are limiting behaviour and action and are based on external voices heard in the stories. Use of narrative approaches would require paying attention to the client's knowledge (rather than expert knowledge) to unpack ('deconstruct') the old story in order to help the client construct a more satisfying and appealing story line. This involves gaining permission from the client to work alongside them, and others, to re-author the story.

In a guidance context, how the client and helper arrive at goals to make this happen is the key to constructivist approaches. Working alongside a client, not assuming the role of expert who knows best, can lead to goals (vocational or otherwise) that are 'integrated with other, personally relevant or identity goal systems *to make motivation operational*' (Valach and Young, 2002:102, my emphasis). Whether short or long term goals are being discussed, narrative thinking would emphasise that motivation needs to be personally and socially embedded for the client, for the resulting action to be 'operationalised' in a way that is meaningful.

### **Chapters two to six**

Moving on, what is the evidence of constructivist and narrative thinking in this edition of *Constructing the Future*? In chapter two, Barnes and Bimrose, use a longitudinal case study approach for a qualitative study that investigates the nature of effective guidance for adults. The authors view the qualitative data gathered as complementing the more traditional quantitative methods, as their qualitative approach 'encouraged multiple methods of investigation and an overtly involved stance'. The analysis of the data used a framework that was adapted from previous studies that employed interpretative and narrative career guidance research. The authors provide a compelling account of what clients viewed as effective, and present a model of 'guidance-in-action' based on four categories, summarised as, building a working alliance; exploration of potential; identification of options and strategies, and ending and follow through.

Hodkinson, Bowman and Colley, in chapter three, also report on a longitudinal study that, in this case, draws on the experiences and stories of fulltime Masters Degree students in Higher Education as they progressed from study to employment. The move from Higher Education to employment is, the authors state, of central concern to career guidance practitioners in the sector and the study challenges conventional ways of understanding this transition. Hodkinson *et al.* investigated different approaches to understanding this transition by



exploring the concepts of 'careership', career progression and career development. They explore learning as reconstructive and participatory practice, using the metaphor of 'learning as becoming'. Arising from the stories the students told, the work questions the notion that transition is a singular event and argues that transition from education to work is a lengthy process of learning.

Learning is a central theme in chapter four. Bassot begins by considering the impact of widespread societal change on the concept of career. The resulting discussion draws on both constructivism and 'situated learning approaches': approaches that pay particular attention to the context for learning. A qualitative case study is outlined, which explored the ways in which a small number of sixth form students were making decisions about their Higher Education choices, with the help of a careers adviser. Bassot illustrates how people can learn more in interactions with others than they can when learning on their own. From this viewpoint learning is seen as a participative rather than individual process. Notions of 'career' and what is thought possible in terms of future choices are described as socially constructed, 'through active participation and interaction with others'.

The theme of understanding within a particular context is evident in chapter five. La Gro reports on a study that also takes an interpretative approach and uses 'concept mapping' as the methodology to investigate and compare client and practitioners' approaches to career thinking and decision making. La Gro uses a number of quotes from the clients' interviews to illuminate the use of concept mapping. The mapping technique indicated how self-constructs were embedded in the client's social situation and highlighted the influence of both internal and external influences on career decision making. To support the concept La Gro displays the mapping concept in a series of diagrams, illustrating how a graphic tool can be used effectively alongside 'talking' techniques. This reminds us that there is more than one way to tell a story.

Moving from the client's view to the practitioner's view, Mulvey, in chapter six, offers a perspective that is 'resolutely micro'. The significance of personal meaning is core for the exploration of guidance practitioners' experience of - change; changing; managing change and undergoing a change management process. The research is illustrative and makes no claims for generalizability, rather it provides rich data in its endeavour to capture meaning. Like other authors, Mulvey draws on the literature from constructivist and narrative approaches, including those theorists and practitioners who have applied this to career counselling. In outlining the method applied, she points to how the nuances of meaning can get left out of positivist and/or large scale quantitative research methods. This is not positioning one method above another but



highlights how one **without** the other leads to an incomplete understanding of social phenomena: a partial story. As in La Gro's work, quotes from the interviews allow us to hear the story from the perspectives of the interviewees. The stories told in chapters two to six, explore the experiences of adult clients, students in higher education, young people in a sixth form and career guidance practitioners. They all focus on meaning, interpretation and the contextual influences that impact on decision making and the construction of career identity.

### **The theme of transformation – chapters seven, eight and nine**

Chapters seven, eight and nine take a wider view and focus on labour market information, the impact of the policy proposals contained in *Youth Matters* and the need to transform the way research evidence that evaluates career guidance, is applied to practice. In summarising these, this introductory chapter will return to the theme of transforming career guidance found within the title of this edition of *Constructing the Future*, and will draw on the work of Bezanson (2005).

Significant change for the provision of career guidance within Connexions centres and schools in England, is, at the time of writing, on the horizon once again (HM Government, 2005). The career guidance services in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also continue to develop and innovate. The career guidance services for adults within Next Steps, FE colleges and HE universities and community services are responding to both internal and external policy developments. However, transformation suggests more than just change and development.

Managing change is a skill needed by practitioners, not just clients in a rapidly shifting context. Who said, 'change is so rapid these days it is like white-water rafting; you are either clinging to the raft, in the water or left on the shore'? Organisations need to change, not just to survive (or maintain their 'balance' on the raft), but also to engage in a repositioning of their strategic approach. This can be troubling as it may require a significant shift in organisational structure, values and culture: a transition that sounds threatening, in other words, 'change or else'. How is transformation different?

A dictionary definition of transformation offers the following: *the action of changing in form, shape, or appearance, character or function: a metamorphosis*. The phrase 'transforming career guidance' in the title of this edition is, deliberately, dual in meaning, that is, relating to how career guidance is being transformed and can be transforming for those on the receiving end. Change is of course, Janus-faced: it offers both threats and opportunities. However, as the literature on transition theory indicates, facing change with

optimism helps to ensure that it can be managed successfully rather than endured.

That said it is not easy for clients, practitioners or guidance organisations. The struggles involved for clients can be heard in some of the stories told in this edition of *Constructing the Future*. The multiple difficulties many clients (of all ages and backgrounds) experience are well known to practitioners, but it is not just those clients who are the subjects of targeted help that experience confusion. Career guidance work is all about working alongside people who are trying to make decisions about transitions, and it's hard work.

One area of careers work that clients value in the decision making process is labour market information (LMI). Bimrose, Marris, Barnes and Mason in chapter seven, acknowledge this and ask, in the context of recent policy developments, has LMI become less important to guidance practitioners and their employers? They explore this via four perspectives where a practitioner, a researcher-trainer, a researcher and an employer each share their views. They outline different definitions of LMI, seeing the term as one that describes 'all types of information used during career guidance to support entry into and the (often complex) navigation around and through the world of work.' They point to how the National Guidance Resource Forum (NGRF) can help to transform the way practitioners can access the information they need to support their work with clients. As the authors point out, it is the interpretation of such information that clients require assistance with, in order to convert labour market information into labour market intelligence. In times of rapid and constant change in the employment market, the NGRF website provides an on-line resource which is reliable and relevant to the needs of the sector. This is a good example of how a crucial area of career guidance practice has been transformed by advances in technology.

When considering changing practice, organisational change can be experienced as alienating and the prospect of a further transformation can be worrying. A recent symposium in the *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* (2006) charts the different directions taken by career guidance organisations within the UK in recent years. Some of the organisational changes have been highly beneficial, others have made changes that have not met the original intentions. Bezanson (2005), drawing on the OECD report (2004), calls for transformational change that moves beyond superficial adaptations in organisations, to changes that encompass comprehensive shifts in the way the career guidance profession is shaped. Writing from a Canadian perspective, she identifies four transformative issues:

1. Moving from fragmented services to a holistic service framework
2. Accountability – moving from simplistic to simple, and from one-dimensional to ‘true’ dimensional
3. Shifting from a service-supply focus to a service-demand focus
4. Changing a weakly professional field to one with clear professional standards for practice (Bezanson, 2004:2).

Progress has been made on many of these issues in the UK, but gains in one area have at times meant losses in another. Watts, in chapter eight, provides a critical commentary on the policy proposals relating to career guidance in England, as contained in the *Youth Matters* Green Paper (HM Government, 2005). The comments are placed in an historical context, reviewing in particular the flaws in the original design of the Connexions Service in England, and the impact of Connexions on the delivery of career education and guidance. The chapter also examines national and international research evidence relevant to the proposals outlined. It concludes that the Green Paper has not used this evidence, and that implementation of its proposals is likely to further undermine effective career guidance practice. Watts points to the transformational changes that have taken place in Scotland and Wales and recommends that, contrary to the suggestion in the proposals, career guidance funding would be better targeted at a new all-age career guidance service in England: in Bezanson’s terms this would be a transformational change.

Successful and sustained transformational change, whether we are talking about for clients, practitioners or career guidance organisations, does not happen overnight. It requires an articulated vision and should proceed in small steps. This is different to the ‘white-water rafting’ changes mentioned earlier. Although not offered as a prescription for managing (rather than ‘surviving’) change, Bezanson (2005:11) suggests the following generic action steps:

- Recognise the barriers to change: begin by addressing what stops us from transforming
- Spread new practices through learning and innovation
- Engage all the stakeholders
- Measure progress.

In terms of measuring progress and being accountable, Hughes states thus, ‘The search for meaningful and factual evidence that clearly demonstrates the social and economic benefits of career guidance is a world-wide phenomenon’. Within the changes taking place in the UK, chapter nine examines some of the problems associated with assessing and measuring both the quality and impact of career guidance interventions. Hughes argues that there is a need to transform the way data is collected and analysed, in order to encompass the

dynamic nature of the work in changing and different contexts. It is emphasised that a common language and understanding needs to be developed to ensure such quality measurement is consistent, and to enable the results to become more generalizable and comparable. This, she concludes, will require training in methods that are innovative in order to move impact measurement techniques beyond the superficial. She ends by saying, 'More fundamentally, sharing the vision and taking some positive steps to achieve this is necessary: only then will evidence be transformed into action.'

## **Conclusion**

When I was interviewed for my first post as a careers adviser in 1990, the Head of Service said that much change was on the horizon and that we were 'living in interesting times': he was correct then (and now) on both counts. Career guidance will need to keep changing and adapting to the needs of the community and the individuals it serves. The professional associations will need to reflect these transformative changes and continue to promote the particular skills and expertise required. Academics and researchers will need to keep the critical spotlight on developments and continue to explore new understanding for the shaping of career. Dissemination is key for the transformative development of practice. Edwards (1998:24) captures this relationship between theory, policy and the on-going development of practice, in the phrase 'Knowledgeable practice requires more than practical knowledge'. Careers work, in all its manifestations, is dynamic, interesting and challenging and can, ultimately, transform people's lives. Transition, transformation – both involve different stages of movement where significant learning will occur and re-occur. That learning will be achieved in partnership with others, whether that is a practitioner working alongside a client, or a career guidance organisation working with other agencies.

As this edition of **Constructing the Future** has demonstrated, new thinking and new learning is an on-going requirement in order to hear and tell stories about the benefits of 'transforming' career guidance.

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## Chapter Two

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### **Effective guidance: Transforming clients' futures**

*Sally-Anne Barnes and Jenny Bimrose*

#### **Abstract**

A five year study of guidance is in progress in England. The aim is to use a qualitative, longitudinal case study approach to investigate the nature of effective guidance for adults and explore how, over the longer-term, it can add value to post-compulsory learning and enhance employability. Fifty in-depth case studies of guidance have been successfully completed (2003-2004) in a variety of professional contexts. Of the 50 clients who participated in the initial phase of the study, 49 reported that their guidance was useful. All clients are being followed-up by telephone on an annual basis over a four year period (2004-2008) to explore their career development and examine the role that guidance has played.

This chapter considers the challenges in undertaking a longitudinal study into guidance and defining what makes guidance effective. It draws on the initial phase of the study by focusing on a comparative analysis of different perspectives on useful career guidance. It also presents a model of guidance practice in action, which details what actually happens in guidance interviews regarded as useful by clients.

#### **Introduction**

Increasingly policy has been drawing attention to the strategic importance of helping individuals gain the skills they need to be employable and personally fulfilled through better information and guidance (e.g. HM Government, 2005). This trend, coupled with changes in the labour market, has challenged the relevance of the traditional narrow view of career transition as a one-off event at an early stage of an individual's development. Career transitions are understood to be more complex, more prolonged and spanning lifetimes (Young and Collin, 2000). Although there is a growing body of evidence to support the positive effects of guidance (Watts and Sultana, 2004), there is a lack of evidence regarding the nature of effective guidance and its benefits over the longer term.

A five year qualitative, longitudinal case study is currently underway which is examining the nature of effective career guidance. Fifty case studies across a variety of professional guidance contexts were completed in 2003-2004. The clients are being followed up over a further four year period (2004-2008), to



track career progress and development (for data on the first year of follow-ups see Bimrose et al, 2005). The overall aim of the study, in line with current policy interest, is to examine whether guidance increases the likelihood that adults will engage in learning, gain qualifications (or improve existing ones) and progress into work or within work.

This chapter considers challenges inherent in undertaking this longitudinal study into guidance and summarises the methodology of the research. The views of practitioners, clients and 'expert witnesses' participating in the research about the usefulness of guidance are then examined. The main focus of the chapter, however, is a detailed examination of what takes place in a guidance interview. A typology of effective practice is presented which comprises a model of guidance-in-action. This focuses on the strategies and skills used by practitioners categorised under four headings: building a working alliance; exploration of potential; identification of options and strategies; and ending/follow through.

### **Evaluating effective guidance**

Although gaps in available research exist, a growing body of evidence supports claims for the positive effects of guidance (Watts and Sultana, 2004; Tyers and Sinclair, 2005). Evaluating effective guidance, especially longer-term outcomes, is, however, complex (cf. Killeen and White, 2000; Hughes et al, 2002; Maguire, 2004; Bimrose et al, 2004). A recent review of available research evidence not only highlighted the need for evaluation findings from quantitative research to be complemented with insights from qualitative data, but also emphasised the need for longitudinal studies (Hughes et al, 2002). The current study addresses these two particular gaps. It adopted a case study approach for the initial phase as this encouraged multiple methods of investigation and an overtly involved stance. Additionally, the approach taken has enabled detailed comparisons to be made across a range of professional guidance settings.

In analysing the nature of effective guidance, several key issues had to be taken into consideration, including time frame (i.e. whether immediate, intermediate or long-term outcomes were being evaluated) and the perspective from which effectiveness was being assessed (i.e. whose point-of-view should 'count' when measuring effectiveness: policy-makers, practitioners, guidance managers, clients, independent observers, etc.?). Evidence from the initial phase of the study focuses on the immediate impact of guidance on the client. The longitudinal nature of this study allows for follow-up over a further period of four years, enabling analysis of intermediate and (some) long-term affects of guidance on clients in the longer term.

Clients' views have been given primacy in this research, though these have

been qualified by comparisons with the views of practitioners and independent observers (referred to as 'expert witnesses'). Effectiveness has, therefore, been examined from the point of view of the client and the term 'useful' selected as the most appropriate word to probe the clients' perceptions of their guidance episode. An open-ended invitation to elaborate on the initial evaluation of whether the guidance had proved 'useful' provided detailed information on exactly how that interview had been useful. This process provided clarification of the meanings attributed by clients in the 'real world' of career guidance. Clients were also provided with further opportunities to elaborate their views on the guidance episode.

### **Researching career guidance**

The 50 case studies were recorded in a variety of professional contexts offering guidance, including: Connexions, Information, Advice and Guidance Partnerships (IAGP) and Jobcentre Plus; Higher education; Further education; community/outreach guidance and not-for-profit organisations (including organisations with charitable status); and private careers organisations and organisations offering guidance on a funded basis in the workplace. The research was designed to enable detailed comparisons to be made across a variety of guidance contexts, by focusing on the professional contexts in which the guidance was delivered. Additionally, it scrutinized: the clients' current situation; their preferred future(s); the action necessary to achieve the next stage; and the process and outcome(s) of the guidance interviews.

Guidance practitioners were often working at multiple locations and providing guidance under different funding streams, so defining the contexts in which guidance took place was sometimes problematic. For each case study, data were collected on the organisation (including its structures and operation of guidance services), in addition to baseline data from the practitioner and client (relating to, for example, gender, ethnicity, age, qualifications and so on). A guidance episode, as defined by the practitioner, was digitally recorded and questionnaires about the guidance completed after the interview by the clients, practitioners and 'expert witnesses'. These questionnaires also allowed discrepancies or conflicts in viewpoints about the guidance interview amongst research participants to be recorded.

Deductive analysis of the case study data and each guidance episode was undertaken using a framework adapted from previous studies of interpretative (Cummings et al, 1992; Booth et al, 1997), narrative (Burnett, 1999) and career guidance research (Millar and Brotherton, 1996, 2001) (for further details of the framework developed for investing effective guidance, see Bimrose et al, 2004). This was extended and developed using an inductive analysis of the digital recordings of the guidance and open coding to capture emergent themes.

Strategies and skills used by the practitioners were analysed and organised into four broad categories of activities, with 40 sub-sets.

### **Perceptions of guidance: whose account counts?**

To investigate the nature of effective guidance, it is important to establish what occurred during the course of the interview and what was valued by the clients. This type of investigation has proved contentious. For example, a small scale study into career guidance by Wilden and La Gro (1998) studied the separate views of clients and practitioners and found high levels of disagreement, with practitioners typically viewing the guidance intervention more positively than their clients. Similarly current case study research recorded the views of the client about the guidance separately from the views of practitioners. Additionally, it compared similarities and differences between clients and practitioners with an independent third party ('expert witness'). This section sets out results of the analysis of the questionnaire responses from the clients, practitioners and expert witnesses relating to whether the guidance was useful and, if so, why.

During the first phase of research, the majority of clients participating in the study (98%, n=49) evaluated their guidance interview as 'useful', immediately after the event. Moreover, high levels of agreement with these positive client evaluations were found in those provided, independently, by practitioners and the expert witnesses. Varied reasons for how the career guidance interventions had been useful to the clients emerged. Findings indicated that career guidance is useful to clients in supporting their transitions into, through and within learning, training and employment when it: provides challenge and direction; gives access to relevant resources; brings about positive change(s); and provides support and safety. Importantly, transitions were found to be best supported when guidance can be accessed over a period of time.

Positive outcomes of the guidance interview in this research have emerged as challenging a client's understanding of their own situation (e.g. suggesting that a particular career decision is possible, when the client thought it was not) or giving a client future direction and/or a plan (e.g. one client likened their guidance to 'stepping stones in the right direction'). Clients also reported that access to expert knowledge (i.e. labour market information, including vacancy information) and networks (e.g. of local training providers) had been beneficial. Constructive change in the client emerged as: increased self-confidence; development of new skills (research skills); increased awareness (e.g. of their own abilities or local employment opportunities); or motivation and inspiration. Additionally, guidance was useful when it helped clients expand their options. For example, one client said it had made them 'think outside the box'. Reassurance, confirmation or clarification of ideas by practitioners was similarly

appreciated by clients, as well as having the opportunity to talk to someone who was interested and listened. Overall, the importance of guidance to clients was evident when it was part of an ongoing process and allowed the time and space for reflection and discussion in a safe, supportive environment.

### **What happens in 'useful' guidance?**

Previous research investigated the use of theory in career guidance practice and found that practitioners varied in the seriousness with which they viewed theory (Kidd et al, 1993). The current research focused on what actually occurs in guidance interviews found useful by clients, rather than on the theoretical frameworks that may, or may not, inform practice. To achieve this, practitioner interventions were analysed in-depth, using digital recordings of the 49 'useful' interviews. Four discrete categories of activity emerged from this detailed analysis. These were:

- Building a working alliance (including scene setting/orientation, contracting, plus rapport building and maintenance);
- Exploration of potential (where are you now? – including an exploration of both hard, factual data and soft data);
- Identification of options and strategies (where do you want to go and how do you get there? – focusing on information and advice giving, plus influencing strategies); and finally,
- Ending and follow through.

The different activities that comprised each of these four categories is discussed in-depth below.

### **Building a working alliance**

Constructive change in a client is most likely to take place within a relationship in which the client feels respected and accepted. Whether working with a client for the first time, or in a follow-up interview, it is important, therefore, for the practitioner to work at this relationship. It has been argued that this phase of the interview is particularly important when working with clients from a culturally different background. Practitioners need to be flexible in their approach to accommodate individual needs and be prepared to invest effort in the continual development of rapport and trust (Ivey et al, 1997). Within this phase of the interview, three distinct types of practitioner activity were identified: scene setting (or orientation); contracting; and rapport building/relationship maintenance.

Various techniques and strategies were used to set the scene for the guidance interview. These included: orienting clients to the interview situation, making a statement about confidentiality; and (in follow-up interviews only) presenting a summary of the previous interview. Most practitioners (94%, n=46) actively

oriented their clients toward the interview. That is, they ensured that their clients felt comfortable (e.g. seating arrangements, room temperature, personal introduction, etc.) and that they understood the basis on which the interview was being carried out (i.e. length of the interview, boundary setting, purpose of documentation, availability of follow-up support and so on).

In only 35% (n=17) of guidance interviews, practitioners made explicit the confidential basis on which the interview was being carried out. However, the research process may have interfered with this aspect of the interview, as an explanation had to be given about the confidential nature of the research study.

Contracting was also a technique used to set the scene. This has been described as part of building a working alliance with clients which signals a specific commitment to a clearly defined course of action (Culley, 1991). In the majority of interviews (88%, n=43), some type of explicit contract (i.e. where priorities and desirable outcomes were explicitly agreed with clients) was evident. In the remaining interviews (12%, n=6), the priorities or desirable outcomes of the interview were not articulated by the practitioner, nor were the clients asked what they wanted from the interview. The contract therefore remained implicit and was consequently imposed on the client. Where explicit contracts were identified, different approaches were discernable. This is unsurprising since practitioners working from different practice frameworks will emphasise different possibilities. For example, in a person-centred approach, the practitioner will aim to ensure that the client determines the agenda for the interview and shares power in identifying outcomes (see for example Mearns and Thorne, 1989). In a behavioural approach, the contract will focus on the need for the practitioner and client to work together towards specific occupational goals (see for example Brammer, 1985). In interviews where explicit contracts were identified, over two thirds were, to some degree, negotiated by the practitioner with their clients. In just under a third of interviews contracts were determined by the practitioner, without any involvement of the client. In these cases, the practitioners did, typically, check with the client that what had been suggested at the end of the interview was relevant to their needs.

The third strategy identified in this initial phase of the interview was relationship building and maintenance. A number of techniques were used by practitioners to establish rapport with clients early on in the interview and then to develop and maintain the relationship throughout the interview. These included: encouraging the client to 'tell their story'; reinforcing, or indicating their agreement with something the client had said; expressing sympathy about some disclosure made by the client; and checking the accuracy of their (practitioners') understanding of what had been said. 'Encouragers' were used

frequently by practitioners in all 49 'useful' interviews (i.e. minimal, verbal responses) to show the client that they were attending to what was being said and encouraging them to say more (for example prompts included: 'excellent'; 'mmm'; 'yeah'; 'ok'; 'ah ha'; and 'absolutely'). Reinforces were used to emphasise the wisdom of a particular set of client behaviours or attitudes (e.g. 'I agree', 'I think you're right', 'that's right'). Intermediate summaries were also regularly offered during interviews (81%, n=41), but for different purposes. Most commonly, they were used to check understanding of what had been said or done. These intermediate summaries covered a range of topics such as: the client's educational history; their occupational preferences; their personality traits; a particular problem that had emerged; the client's preferences in a job; their skills and qualities; and pressures experienced by the client. Summaries were also used to refocus the interview (e.g. after an interruption) and check the client's understanding of progress in the interview up to that point. In 96% (n=47) of interviews, practitioners checked their understanding of what had been said at some stage of the interview (e.g. 'Does that sound like the sort of thing that you would enjoy?'). In a few interviews, practitioners expressed sympathy with a client's difficult situation or circumstance. This often included some level of interpretation and was not a summary, but gave a clear indication that the practitioner had heard, understood and accepted what the client had said (e.g. 'I just want to say I'm really sorry it hasn't worked out for you. It's a real shame').

### **Exploration of potential (where are you now?)**

Adult clients come for guidance with complex, sometimes messy, problems with which they want help related to transition into or through education, training or employment. To provide this help, practitioners need to understand the nature of the problems and their origins. Probing or exploring client potential and/or assessment of their readiness for career choice (Sampson et al, 2004) covered two broad domains in the 49 case study interviews found useful by clients. First, 'hard' factual client data – that is, information about client circumstances, their employment, training and education history together with an assessment of their skills, abilities and personality (collected in 54% of interviews). Second, 'soft' client data, which was related to clients' interests, motivation, feelings, preferences and awareness (collected in 62% of interviews).

The first category of information probed was factual information about the client which was required to enable practitioners to assess client potential for the achievement of certain goals. It included probing their: work-related history; educational and training background and motivations to undertake further learning; influences and constraints; skills and abilities they had to offer a future employer; and personality traits relevant to particular career aspirations.

Overall, 54% (n=27) of interviews included some type of investigation of one or more of these areas. A significant element of this category was the exploration of the types of influences and constraints operating on clients, relevant to career planning. This occurred in many of the interviews (65%, n=32) and included: the client's geographical location and mobility (affecting the ability to apply for opportunities in certain areas); financial commitments (that affected an individual's ability to forgo current levels of income); home and family circumstances (including the nature and extent of caring responsibilities); the extent to which close friends and relatives are a significant influence; and finally, the effect of health on the ability to work.

The second category of client information explored was more subjective, personal information, including: educational, leisure, employment and/or career interests; motivations to engage with, or complete, a particular course of action; feelings about a situation, decision or choice they had to make; preferences about the options identified as available; together with awareness of employment structures and their own general self-awareness. 62% (n=31) of interviews included coverage of one or more of these categories.

### **Identification of options and strategies (where do you want to go and how do you get there?)**

If a client's circumstances are unacceptable or problematic in some way, then they need help in identifying possibilities that are more satisfactory and appropriate for their potential and circumstances (Egan, 1998). Making progress in a guidance interview involves identifying suitable options for the client and agreeing strategies for achieving these options. In the case study interviews, this was achieved using combinations of the following: information-giving; advising; and influencing strategies.

In 67% of the case study interviews, practitioners gave information to their clients. Three types of information were clearly discernable: information about resources both paper-based and online from guidance organisations and others (including information on: courses; jobs; training providers; computer-aided guidance; internet navigational information; and psychometric tests); information about available options and routes relevant to the client's aspirations; and generic careers information (including: general information about educational routes; broad sources of job vacancies; and information about useful contacts).

In nearly half of the interviews, advice was given about different issues related to career progression. This was specific to the client's particular situation and related to: acquiring particular competencies required for transition into education or employment; the financial circumstances of the client; and the



identification and development of skills relevant to the client's aspirations. Specifically, nearly all the practitioners (98%, n=48) gave advice to their clients intended to enhance their competence in key areas relevant to successful transitions. This included advice on: how to complete an application form or develop a CV; appropriate job search strategies (e.g. using professional networks effectively, approaching employers); and identifying and/or developing relevant skills (e.g. using computer-aided guidance packages). In some interviews (29%, n=14) financial advice was given, such as sources of financial support for the achievement of a particular goal (like going on a course), eligibility for various types of benefits or the financial implications of committing to a full-time, compared with a part-time course of study. Other interviews (18%, n=9) included practitioners giving advice on skills. For example, the identification of skills (such IT or a driving license) that would be required for a specific occupational area and how to develop these through, for example, training or the identification and emphasis of skills identified in various contexts (e.g. in the home or in a caring role) that would be relevant to a particular occupational aspiration.

Additional strategies were used to bring about some degree of change in their clients, specifically to change a client's thinking and/or behaviour. They included: expressing a personal opinion; self-disclosure; challenging; developing or increasing a client's self-efficacy; and interpretation of computer-aided guidance results. Frequently, practitioners expressed a personal opinion about an issue under discussion. These were distinguished by those that conveyed a personal judgement regarded as relevant to a client's situation intended to provide reassurance or confirmation ('Well, I actually think that it's quite a good age really – because you've been around a bit and you know what the world of work is like'.); and those that served to reinforce or encourage some aspect of an issue under discussion ('I think that's a really, really good approach, because what you may find is, even if it was the job for you, you don't have to have it for life.').

Types of personal self-disclosure were identified in 61% of interviews (n=30). These included disclosures about: a close relative to encourage clients to pursue a particular course of action (e.g. 'My daughter-in-law.... she had twins. And she put her career on hold as well. But now she's started back and she's got a job.');

their own experiences to reassure clients (e.g. 'When I was a teenager, I got the job and I learned how to be a manager by the seat of my pants');

or to emphasise how advice given was worth taking (e.g. 'I actually went with [my friend]...having a tour round and finding out about the job. About a week or so later, they actually gave me a call because a job had come up.').

Professional self-disclosure was also used by practitioners to create an open relationship with clients and included: admissions regarding knowledge gaps



(e.g. it's more honest for me to say that I don't know.');

the potential limitations of computer-aided guidance (e.g. 'Whenever I do this [program] I get prison governor!');

and disclosures relating to their own approach to guidance (e.g. 'I've never told anybody in 20 years what to do. I can only support, guide.').

Challenging competently in an interview is difficult (Egan, 1998) and should be genuine and intended to increase, not decrease, a client's self-confidence. In 37% of interviews (n=18) practitioners used challenging to help clients re-think a problem or issue, to stop them from regarding themselves negatively or to confront the client about a self-defeating attitude (e.g. 'I don't think you're on the shelf at all. You're outside of it and you want to get back in.').

Practitioners also used different strategies to increase client self-efficacy, like bolstering a client's self-perception by giving positive feedback. For instance, one practitioner coached the client in 'positive self-talk' (i.e. reframing the perspective of the client, see Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1996) in an attempt to increase their determination to succeed and develop self-esteem:

You've got to think positive and think like 'I am going to get interviews.' 'I am going to get something out of this'. And a lot of it will depend on how determined you are to make something of what you've learned...Because you know what you're good at, you know you can do it, and it is a case of being confident enough to say 'look I can do this'.

The final strategy used to influence client's thinking and behaviour was through an interpretation of results from computer-aided guidance programs. For example:

What we've got here...in a very clear form...are your strong likes and dislikes. So whichever job you go for, it needs to, ideally, include the kind of things that are on there [the computer printout].

### **Ending and follow through**

The fourth category of practitioner activity identified from the guidance interviews included the identification of goals, as well as the action needed to achieve these goals and discussions about any relevant follow-through. Culley (1991) suggests that the end of interviews typically deal with goals, action and closure. The majority of practitioners (90%, n=44) presented a summary of the interview that included goals and outcomes, but the length and amount of detail varied. Final summaries were invariably combined with the completion of an action plan (occurred in 86%, n=42 of interviews). Practitioners typically wrote an action plan for the client during the final phase of the interview and the client was often asked to validate the plan and counter-sign the document.

Various strategies were used to signpost some form of follow-through from the interview, including: advocacy, follow-up and referral. In 41% of interviews (n=20), the practitioner agreed to undertake some type of action on behalf of the client (like speaking to a course leader on behalf of the client). In 90% of interviews (n=44), practitioners offered the client some type of follow-up support (like using various resources available through the guidance organisation or the offer of returning for subsequent interviews). Finally, 10% of interviews (n=5) involved referral of the client to, for example, a programme centre.

## Conclusions

Investigating what constitutes effective guidance is complex, but the qualitative methodology used for this longitudinal study has provided an appropriate investigative framework, and data collected have allowed for a significant deepening of understanding of the issues involved. In particular, the research has provided a clear indication of what actually takes place in guidance interviews evaluated by clients as effective. The four categories of activities (building a working alliance; exploring potential; identifying options and ending/follow-through) comprise a model of 'guidance-in-action' which reveals the comprehensive range of established, standard techniques and strategies used by practitioners. In addition, non-standard techniques, like giving personal opinions, were being used for particular purposes, as well as some advanced techniques, like challenging and self-disclosure. Finally, the continuing influence of the 'matching' approach to guidance is illustrated both by a large proportion of interviews that included recommendations for, or actual usage of, various resources based on this paradigm and the primacy given to assessing clients' achievements and competencies. The corollary to this finding was that there was little evidence of new approaches to guidance. This raises important questions about why practitioners are not using these approaches, what actually constitutes good practice and how this can be supported.

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<sup>1</sup>Expert witnesses were required to have significant experience of delivering and/or assessing guidance. They did not observe the interviews 'live'. Rather, they listened to a digital recording of the interview and were able to read a typed transcript.

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## Chapter Three

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### Conceptualising transitions from education to employment as career development and/or learning

*Phil Hodgkinson, Helen Bowman & Helen Colley*

#### **Abstract**

This chapter reports on some of the main findings from a three-year qualitative, longitudinal investigation into the progression of fulltime Masters Degree students into employment, in England. The experiences and stories of the 24 students in the sample challenged some conventional ways of understanding the education to work transition. In this paper we consider two different approaches. The first concerns issues of careership, career progression and career development. The second explores learning as reconstructive and participatory practice, using the metaphor of learning as becoming. In both approaches, transition is rightly seen as relational, involving structure, agency and serendipity. We argue that there are benefits in combining these two approaches and that seeing the transition from education to work as a lengthy process of learning, rather than as a specific event, holds implications for careers guidance practice.

#### **Introduction**

A central concern of Higher Education careers guidance is the transition from education to employment. Conventionally there have been two different approaches to this issue. One is to focus on the relationship between the product of educational learning, and its relevance and use within work. From this perspective, the dominant concept is that of learning transfer. The second approach has been to focus on career development and progression. Hodgkinson has argued elsewhere that the former notion is unhelpful. In particular, the implicit assumption that what is learned is a reified object, independent of either learner or context, leads to a distorted view of the transition from education to work (Hager and Hodgkinson, 2005). Here we are concerned with the career progression tradition and a possible third alternative to either of the other two: understanding transition as an ongoing learning process.

Our interest in this issue arose from a recently completed research investigation into the career progression of UK students studying for a Masters degree, via a one-year fulltime course. We followed 24 such students from the beginning of the Masters course, in October 2002, until about 18 months after it had finished. Four students were selected from each of six different courses, in two different universities. 12 of the students were men and 12 were women. All were aged

between 21 and 28 at the time of their first interview. One student was Indian UK and the rest were white UK.

The courses were:

*Vocational courses linked to, or required for, a specialised occupation:*

- Interpreting
- Applied Sciences

*Semi-vocational courses relating to a broad occupational area*

- Graphic Art
- Business – a conversion course for those who haven't studied the subject before

*Non-vocational courses*

- Philosophy
- Classics

(Some names have been slightly changed to preserve confidentiality.)

Four rounds of interviews were conducted with the 24, and we also interviewed varied significant others. Interviews were transcribed. In our analysis we developed a rounded picture of the progression of each student as a person. We then worked to identify patterns and common processes in the types of lives and experiences thus revealed. More detail of the findings can be found in the final report (Bowman et al, 2005).

### **Transition as career progression**

There is an extensive literature that examines the transition from education to work as career progression (Ball et al, 2000; Evans, 2002; Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). Such research tends to focus on issues of career decision-making and patterns of progression pathways. Decision-making is seen as an integral part of such patterned progression, and/or as one of the contributory causes of such patterning. One key debate centres around the relationship between agency and structure – the extent to which young people can determine their own futures (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997).

Our research was drawn up to examine one contribution to this literature – the theory of careership developed by Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). This was developed originally in relation to the progression from school to work-based youth training, in England. The trainees were working class, with relatively low academic achievements from school. The approach was then utilised in a study of progression into, through and out of English Further Education, as part of young people's 'learning careers' (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Hodkinson, 1998). The Masters degree research was designed to test and develop the theorising in relation to a very different group – Masters degree students who were older, had substantially

higher educational attainments and were likely to come from the middle and upper middle classes.

### **The careership of Masters degree students**

Many aspects of the careership theorising worked well with this new group, and required little adaptation. In essence, careership sees career decision making and progression as influenced by three completely inter-related dimensions. In other words, careership is relational. No single dimension can be understood without the others. The dimensions are dispositions; interactions in the field; and on-going development or transformations.

Dispositions make up a person's habitus. Though often tacit, they orientate our actions in any situation – familiar or new. These dispositions develop through life. At any one time, they represent the ways in which a person has been previously formed. Dispositions are embodied and social, incorporating structure and agency. It is not that a person occupies an external social structure. Rather, social structure interpenetrates the person, through their dispositions. We have space to identify only three exemplar features of the dispositions of the Masters students. The first was a deeply rooted confidence in their ability to succeed in educational settings, with the linked but more problematic assumption that such educational success should eventually lead to a good job. Secondly, these students displayed predominantly middle class dispositions about themselves and the future. Thirdly, dispositions were gendered, both in relation to occupational choices and towards family. Within these broad generalisations, there were significant individual dispositional variations, as careership theorising predicts. A person's dispositions are closely related to their social position.

The second dimension of careership is interactions in the field. Within the theory and in relation to our data, there are two different ways in which these interactions must be understood. Firstly, a person's opportunities (for example for education or work) are strongly influenced by the field and their position within it, related to the person's dispositions. Hodkinson et al (1996) coined the concept of 'horizons for action' to explain this. The horizons place limits on the possibilities for action at any one time. They facilitate some actions, but prevent others. These horizons are both internally and externally determined. They are constructed through interactions between education and labour markets and the dispositions of the individual. For example, students positioned on the interpreting course found their employment horizons focussed on conference interpreting for the European Commission. This was partly because of the nature of the course and its relations with the interpreting field of employment, but it was also influenced by the dispositions of the students themselves, focussed as they were on developing a career that used their considerable



abilities in speaking foreign languages directly. Horizons for action change over time; as position, dispositions or labour market characteristics change.

Secondly, much psychologically driven literature on career decision making overlooks the obvious but vital fact that career progression is strongly influenced by actions and decisions made by others. Our sample had not simply chosen to enter a Masters programme – the admissions tutors had decided to admit them. As the students progressed, the significance of actions taken by others could not be overlooked. Progression was constructed through complex processes of personal and social interaction, entailing sponsorship, negotiation, alliances, opposition, conflict and contestation, as the careership theory had suggested would be the case. Economic, cultural and social capital were central to understanding how this ‘game’ was played out, including the individual successes and failures of the students. Many were financially supported by parents or partners. Others were not: ‘If I’d not had to work to earn some money, then ... this MA would have been a lot different, it would have been loads better.’

Social capital – the people who they knew and could make use of – were vital at some stages in progression, and some students knew it.

I could go off and do something and meet someone and they offer me something. ... I will meet someone or get into a certain circle, rather than go through the classic, you know, applying for this.

One man got a job through an acquaintance he played cricket with. Another contacted a successful ex-private school friend to find him work. Cultural capital worked in different ways. Positively, those who had greater knowledge and understanding of the field they were trying to enter were more likely to succeed. More negatively, some were trapped by their high levels of educational cultural capital, which restricted their horizons for action to further study, and made fulltime employment seem strange and unattainable.

These two dimensions of careership worked well in helping to understand the nature of career progression for our sample. The third dimension, change over time, was more problematic. Within careership, change over time was conceptualised as a contingent succession of routines and turning points. That is, careers develop mainly through different types of routine, when nothing dramatic seems to happen, interspersed by occasional but significant changes – turning points. Some value remains in this approach. Rightly, it draws attention to the significance of on-going experience as well as the bigger critical incidents when major life changes occur. Also, it helps us break away from seeing progression as inherently linear and even deterministic. However, there are three problems with it. Firstly, as Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) point out,

there is a problem of scale. That is, what seems like a turning point within a short period of field-work may look like on-going routine, seen in the context of a whole life span. This leads to a second problem that became more apparent through this research – even within a fixed timescale, the boundaries between routines and turning points are rarely sharp, and it is a matter of interpretation which is being experienced at any particular time.

The third problem was of greatest significance. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) argued that there were different types of routine experience, such as confirming, socialising, dislocating and so on. When we applied this approach to the experiences of the Masters students, it worked reasonably well at any given point of time. However, as data collection progressed it became clear that the classifications of some of the students' routine experiences were changing or had changed, without any obvious intervening turning point; while others experienced apparently critical incidents, but their routine experience remained of the same type.

These problems combined with other issues of interest in the data, led us to a new way of understanding and explaining the transition from education to work. In so doing, we retained the first two dimensions of careership, and looked for alternative ways to explain and understand change over time.

### **Transitioning as a continuous process of learning**

For all the students, the period through the Masters degree and beyond was characterised by progressive change. The structure of the Masters courses suggests that the students' transition into employment falls into three natural stages: life before the course, life during the course and life after the course. However, this is misleading. It made more sense to see a continuous, if irregular, process of change, which began long before the Masters course and will continue well after our research was completed. Throughout this process, the young people were learning about themselves and their place in the world. They actively constructed their own sense of student and employment identity and their own employability. In this transitioning work, students went through phases of greater or lesser pro-activity. Also some students demonstrated higher levels of confidence and drive than others. Sometimes transitioning was relatively strategic. At others, it was more serendipitous and opportunistic. This transitioning process resembled a linear progression for only one student, and that linearity could change at any time. All the others experienced greater or lesser changes of direction and intention – often more than once.

This on-going process of transitioning can be understood as learning. To explain what we mean by this, it is necessary to make a brief digression into learning theories. Sfard (1998) claimed that approaches to understanding

learning could be reduced to two competing root metaphors: acquisition and participation. In the former, attention is focussed on what learning a person acquires and how they acquire it. Especially within educational contexts, this centres on the official curriculum. From this perspective, as we suggested in the introduction, transitions from education into work are seen primarily as the transfer of knowledge (or skills or understanding) from one setting (university) to another (a workplace). From within a participatory perspective, on the other hand, learning is seen as a combination of belonging to a community and engaging in activities or practices. That is, workers learn at work by belonging to the workplace community (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and/or by being part of the activity system that includes their work (Engestrom, 2001) and by doing the activities of the job.

These are not the only metaphors used for learning. Construction is also commonly used (Hager, 2005). Learners are then seen to be making sense of the world by constructing and reconstructing their own understandings of it. In similar ways, workplaces are themselves constructed and reconstructed partly through the actions of the workers who participate within them. Whereas we have sympathy for Sfard's claim that acquisition and participation views of learning are largely incommensurable, it is possible to integrate participation and construction. In fact, it is important to do so. This is because much workplace learning literature overlooks the significance of the individual and because too much of the literature on individual learning overlooks the significance of wider contextual, social and structural influences. In this chapter, our focus is on the learning and transitioning of individual students. One way of combining participation and construction is to see learning as becoming. That is, the 24 students were in the process of becoming different people, throughout the research period. However, the 'new' people were never completely new. As Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) argued, becoming is a balance between continuity and change, within the dispositions and identity of a person.

Throughout the transitioning process the young people learned and changed, often in ways that they only recognised with hindsight. For example, whilst on the course they learned through distancing themselves from undergraduate student life, and many used the time to think further about future employment. As well as the more formalised and specified content of the courses, they learned more about themselves, and worked to construct the person they wanted to be. The students looked back at who they were and had been, and looked forward, anticipating a different future. In this process they became Masters students, through participating in their Masters degree programmes in different ways.

For many, what would follow the Masters course was a matter of anxiety.

It's going to be suddenly: 'Oh gosh, Christmas! Got to decide!' Whereas what I've been thinking for several years is: 'Alright, I'll know by the end of the year', and I've just realised I'm not going to. I always thought that it would just fall into place, and it never has yet.

Some hoped that the course would structure the transition for them, and many of the vocational and semi-vocational courses certainly contributed to this. Tutors often talked about specific employment pathways, and some courses brought students into contact with prospective employers. However this was never enough and students demonstrated a wide range of different approaches in engaging with and preparing for future employment. Elsewhere, we have characterised these approaches as varying in degrees of proactivity and passivity (Hodkinson and Bowman, 2005). Where students were proactive, there were wide variations in the extent to which their activities were strategic or planned, as opposed to opportunistic and reactive.

The relationship between the Masters and eventual employment was complicated. Once they had left the course, many found themselves doing jobs that technically they could have got without doing the Masters degree. However, they all claimed that the experience of doing the Masters had been vital in helping them reach a stage where they could make that move into employment. In our terms, they had learned to become more ready to make the transition into work. For some, like some of the interpreters or applied scientists, the Masters was an essential component in career progression. Yet others used their experiences on the Masters to expand contacts and to establish a presence in their chosen field. The students' capacities to generate such opportunities varied, often reflecting their differentiated class positions within their broadly middle class location (Ball, 2003).

For many, a significant part of learning during the course was a realisation that they did not want to follow the pathway they chose at the start. Beyond the broad prediction that such changes are likely to happen, there was much unpredictability about the detail of the nature and timing of individual changes of direction and intention. Thus, when understanding the transition from education to work as learning, it is important to understand that the learning is rarely a simple linear scaffolding process. Learning as becoming is influenced by positions, dispositions and interactions in the field. Even during a one-year course, each of these things can change, and changes in one can bring about further changes in another, from the standpoint of any particular student. Indeed, one way of understanding what happens as such young people learned to become, was that their position, dispositions and horizons for action changed, partly through that learning. Such learning was not always positive.

One young man learned that 'Interpreting is a very passive job. You don't get a say in anything, you just say what someone else says, whether you like it or not.' He wanted to be much more proactive. One young woman learned that her desired applied science career was likely to be sexist and oppressive for women, as was the Masters course which led to it.

If students were learning to become employed and employable during their courses, much of the significant learning took place after they had left. None of these young people were 'oven ready' for high-level employment, despite the increasing demands from employers that they should hit the ground running. Even those with the smoothest transitions had to learn once in the job, and often, like one male applied scientist, relied on learning done during extensive work experience prior to taking the degree, in order to get and hold down the sought after position.

It was not only that people learned how to do whatever job they were aiming at; they also learned to construct their own employability. Rather than acquiring general core employability skills, this entailed getting to know some of the complexities of breaking into particular, targeted arenas of employment, such as interpreting. It entailed developing and increasing their social and cultural capital in relation to the targeted field. For many this also entailed learning more about themselves – about their existing dispositions and abilities, the resources they could tap into and about what sort of person they wanted to become. For those who were successful, this often included a growing self-confidence, sometimes arising out of overcoming adversity. For some, the process entailed learning to become someone significantly different from the person they originally thought they wanted to be, which at times involved a trade off with previously held beliefs and values.

Put differently, rather than acquiring the skills, understanding and knowledge about employability, successful students learned how to change themselves into the sort of person who was more likely to be employed in a particular occupation. Sometimes, this was as strategic and targeted as the previous sentence implies, though some serendipity was often involved.

A friend of mine who works in the Department of Health had said she got hers [job] through this temping agency and so I went to them and said I wanted a job at the Department of Health and they'd just got one that day. So it was all a bit lucky really and just right place at the right time.

Often it worked in much less planned ways.

Whilst I try to keep a strategic overview it rarely ends up like that, ... Both jobs I've got, I've got through meeting people, not through interview, not through the normal processes. So it's never been - I know what I want to do,

there's a job, go and get it.

A person might get a temporary position through an employment agency, and then use that opportunity to expand further their experience and learn to become employable in related areas. Others learned through a series of experiences and set backs, without any real sense of purpose or direction – at least in the early stages. One young woman abandoned all thought of an applied science career, only to resurrect it, when the offer of a job came as a response to a CV she had sent a year earlier, at a time when the science career was still explicitly sought.

This learning process was predominantly one of participation – in the Masters course, in a series of jobs of different types, in specific training programmes for some, in personal and family relationships, in social networks and class groupings and in community or organisational cultures. Often the learning was unplanned and unintended, except in the very general sense that they were striving, with varying degrees of determination and purposefulness, to get a job that they wanted. Through these processes of participation and belonging (the latter being often temporary), these students constructed and reconstructed their employability and career identities. They learned to become through the process of becoming.

### **Folk theories of career progression**

At the heart of this discussion lies a concern with the linked issues of the transition between education and work and career progression. Despite a large and growing body of research which tells a different story, a deeply held set of linked beliefs strongly influences the ways in which many people think of career progression. This folk theory of progression underpins much current UK policy, the management assumptions of many educational institutions, the actions and assumptions of many employer organisations, the practices of many agencies engaged in career guidance, and the beliefs and actions of many individual students and workers who are themselves progressing. Of course, this folk theory is a stereotype. Few if any people or organisations subscribe fully and uncritically to all its attributes, and some do not believe it at all. However, large elements of this folk theory are so all-pervasive and tacitly assumed, even within the guidance community, that it is important to draw attention to them. There are three main parts. (i) Progression from education to employment is or should be linear, in that successful students who make the right moves can go straight from university into a good job, and 'hit the ground running'. (ii) Progression is a matter of matching the interests, skills and abilities of the graduate (or school leaver) to the needs of a job/employer. That is, employers need to find the right ready-formed worker, and graduates need to find the existing, ready-formed job niche into which they fit. (iii) Job entry is competitive,

but that competition is inherently meritocratic. That is, a person's individual talents, acquired through education, are the prime determinant of how well such a person can do in a competitive job market.

Associated with this folk theory of career progression lie some linked assumptions about personal development and learning, and the relationship between educational knowledge and workplace performance. Thus, it is assumed that educational knowledge can be transferred into work. Increasingly, this knowledge is not simply subject expertise, but also a wider range of what are termed variously core skills, key skills or employability skills. As Brown and Hesketh (2004) put it, it is increasingly seen as the job of the university to prepare graduates who are 'oven ready' for employers, and who can 'hit the ground running'. We have argued here that inherent in this folk view of progression and learning transfer is the assumption that learning can be understood as the acquisition of commodities, which are then transferred inside the person, to the new location – work. This view of learning and transfer is contradicted by most contemporary research on workplace learning, which stresses the central significance of situation. Put simply, people learn to work by being in work, and a key part of that is learning how to become a full member of the work community, through participating within it.

The folk theory of career progression contains a paradox in relation to learning. Going through education is assumed to be a progressive learning experience, and so is the process of being in work (at least for the first few months). Yet the transition from one to the other is seen simply as a technical link. Here we argue that the move from education to work is itself a learning process, and one that often takes considerable time (Elias et al, 1999). The transition from education to work is a period of transitioning through which, as Brown and Hesketh (2004:227) state, 'people construct their employability but not in circumstances of their own choosing.'

### **Implications for guidance practice**

We opened this chapter by identifying two common ways of understanding the transition from education to work. One focussed on the transfer of learning, and the other on career progression. Based upon the research evidence, we now advance a third. This retains the focus on learning, but sees learning as an on-going process of learning to become, which we see as a blending of participatory and construction metaphors. It incorporates much of the careership theory, including the relational nature of the transition, the complex interplay between the position, dispositions, capital and actions of the student/worker, and the structures and actions within the wider field or fields with which they engage.



This research, like many others, demonstrates that the ‘folk theory’ of progression is inadequate and misleading. Rather than drawing upon such a model of simple linear progression, rational decision-making and matching of person to job, effective guidance requires a more sophisticated theoretical base that fits with empirical data about student progression. However, much of the guidance provision that we encountered in the research seemed to be based implicitly on parts of this folk theory view.

The purpose of the research was not to evaluate actual guidance provision, and we are not qualified to offer prescriptive guidance recommendations. However, both the data from this study and the analysis of transition as learning presented, raises some difficult issues that guidance providers could think about. We have space to draw attention to two (See Bowman, et al, 2005, for others).

*Market-making and person-centred approaches should be better balanced*

Constrained as they are by limited resources, HE career guidance providers’ perceptions of students’ needs centre on the point of transition into employment. They tend to reflect a somewhat instrumental, economic notion of the purpose of guidance, which dominates UK government policies. Such policies view guidance as a ‘market-maker’ (Watts et al, 1999), facilitating interactions between the supply and demand sides of the labour market. This in turn leads to practices that are often underpinned by an implicit matching of traits and factors approach, and the uncritical acceptance that education can teach employability skills which can then be transferred to work. However, the ethical base of career guidance since the 1970s has been a more socially oriented, person-centred approach, embracing much looser purposes of assisting clients to pursue self-actualisation in their own terms. This latter approach fits better with the research evidence that transition is an on-going process of learning and becoming, rather than a short-term technical decision event.

Careers advisers in our study and consultations expressed dilemmas for their practice arising from conflicts between these two approaches. They also acknowledged pressures to prioritise the ‘market-making’ aspects of their work, although this was a barrier to accessing careers services for most of the students in the study. The evidence from this research suggests the value of a more client-centred approach, contributing to students’ on-going learning and becoming, as:

- issues of prolonged study and avoidance of immediate labour market entry need careful and non-judgemental consideration
- instrumental pressures on guidance practice, to satisfy ‘hard’ targets, can lead to the assumption that procrastination is bad and clear occupational



or vocational goals are good

- students strongly resist out-dated trait-and-factor matching approaches to guidance, and this sort of approach can have a negative impact on students' perceptions of guidance.

A narrowly instrumental, market-making and matching model should not dominate either guidance practice or the public face of the service.

*HE career guidance provision should be in tune with the lived experiences of students*

The current evidence base for career guidance in HE focuses primarily on quantitative studies of the graduate labour market. Important as these are, a comprehensive review of career guidance research for the Guidance Council notes that:

Surprisingly little is done in the UK to deepen our understanding of clients, whether from a demographic and 'life-situation' perspective, or from a career decision-making perspective. (Hawthorn et al, 2003: 26)

To this we would add the need to include a *transition-making* perspective.

The findings of this research project suggests that improvements in career guidance practice and policy in HE are unlikely to be made effectively, without a far greater understanding of clients' on-going agency in relation to social and opportunity structures. The research demonstrates also that the 'folk theory' of progression is inadequate and misleading. Effective guidance requires a more sophisticated theoretical base that fits with empirical data about student progression. This chapter has attempted to contribute to this process of deepening understanding.

In addition to the importance of learning as becoming that has been explained, the following major elements of the careership and learning careers theoretical approaches continue to makes sense in relation to our data. These include:

- Decisions about entry onto the Masters courses, and thinking about possible career destinations afterwards, show all the characteristics of what Hodgkinson et al (1996) termed 'pragmatic rationality'
- Such decisions can be understood as enabled and constrained by 'horizons for action'. For a significant number of our sample, these horizons were very narrow – because of their own limited perceptions of themselves and of their future identities, related to the positions from which they view their possible options
- Issues of class, gender and ethnicity are central to constructing students dispositions, horizons for action, and actions. Social, cultural and

economic capital are important but unevenly distributed resources for advancing students' education and careers

- Often, other players are highly significant, including course tutors, employers, and key relations, friends and acquaintances.

The challenge for careers practitioners and for those who train them is to utilise these recent developments in career/transition theory to inform practice, create more effective provision for Masters students and act as advocates with funders, employers and other stakeholders in the graduate transition process. Without such changes to the underlying ideology of career guidance provision, the current gap between that provision and clients' needs, perceptions and experiences will continue.

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## Chapter Four

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### Constructing New Understandings of Career Guidance: Joining the Dots

*Barbara Bassot*

#### **Abstract**

In a changing world, career guidance needs new understandings and approaches in order to meet the changing needs of the clients it seeks to serve. This chapter aims to consider evidence from a small-scale qualitative study of sixth form students making their HE choices. The data from the study is discussed in relation to three key aspects drawn from social constructivist and situated approaches to learning; the social construction of knowledge, the zone of proximal development and learning by participation. This is done in order to gain new insights into the career guidance process. During the study one student used a metaphor of joining dots, and this is used in order to illustrate the application of these approaches to career guidance and from this a strategic role for guidance is identified in the promotion of equality of opportunity and social justice. The applicability of goal-directed approaches to working with clients is debated and the chapter concludes with a return to issues of client-centredness.

#### **Introduction**

In the postmodern world, change can appear to be constant. As a result we can expect people's experiences of career and the meanings they attach to the concept of career to change as well. In order to offer effective, client-centred guidance practitioners need to respond to change and to their clients' experiences of change, to ensure that guidance continues to meet the needs of those with whom it seeks to work. If not, it is possible that guidance will run the risk of being seen as outdated and inappropriate to the needs of many. In this changing world there is a need for new insights, understandings, approaches and techniques that enable clients to manage change and to manage career.

This chapter aims to consider critically an emerging social constructivist approach to career guidance based on situated learning approaches, in particular the work of both Vygotsky (1978), and of Lave and Wenger (1991). Ideas discussed in this paper began to emerge during a small-scale qualitative case study, which explored the ways in which students in a sixth form college were making their HE choices with the help of a Careers Adviser. The paper seeks to explore new insights and understandings that situated approaches offer in relation to career guidance practice, and to offer some pointers to the ways in which guidance practice can be developed, in order to promote equality

of opportunity and social justice.

### **Change and more change**

In recent times, particularly in the last ten to fifteen years, the impact of rapid change in the world at large has become evident, particularly through the growth of information and communication technology and the phenomenon of globalisation. Jackson et al (1996:9) comment, 'we are in an era of unprecedented changes, at both global and local levels, which have the capacity to transform the nature and structure of careers'. Storey (2000) considers a range of developments in relation to change and their impact on the concept of career, pointing to greater levels of insecurity experienced by many in the labour market.

However, in spite of all this change, most career guidance practice has continued to be dominated by trait/factor approaches that seek to match individuals to the most suitable next step or outcome, through rational decision-making processes. If career guidance practice is going to keep pace with the changing nature of the job market and the needs of its clients, it needs to consider approaches that focus on change, self-management and development for the future, not simply on the best match for today.

Constructivist approaches to career can be seen to offer some scope for this, as they argue that individuals actively construct career throughout their lives. For example, Savickas, (2000:59) asserts that people need to become 'managers of their own worklives' and that 'Career must become more personal and self-directed to flourish in the postmodern information age.' Gothard et al (2001) rightly point to the need for ongoing lifelong guidance in order to facilitate the construction of career (something seemingly at odds with the current government's Connexions strategy and perhaps more in tune with strategic approaches in Scotland and Wales), and the need to rethink the purpose of guidance in a world where the concept of career is inherently unstable.

### **What might situated approaches have to offer?**

Vygotsky's (1978) work, in particular his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), is worthy of consideration within the context of career guidance because of its focus on a capacity for change. As a concept, it has been applied widely in the field of education and is considered as having much to offer in relation to understanding the ways in which people learn. In the field of career education, development and guidance, there is an established link between learning theories and career, summed up by Killeen's (1996:34) words 'every career theory acknowledges or assumes "learning"'. Writers have already drawn on the work of other theories of learning (either directly or indirectly) when considering how people learn about career (Law, 1996; Mitchell and

Krumboltz, 1996). So, what do situated learning approaches have to offer that is different from other approaches to learning that have already been applied to the field of career guidance?

In order to examine this question in more depth, the following fundamental Vygotskian premises in relation to the ways in which people learn will be considered; that knowledge is socially constructed through activities, the zone of proximal development and learning by participation. Alongside the consideration of these premises, their possible application to career guidance will be discussed using the vehicle of the small-scale study.

### **The social construction of knowledge**

Vygotsky's work falls within the paradigm of social constructivism and from this perspective it is argued that knowledge is not acquired, but is constructed through participation in activities and in interactions with others. Learning is, therefore, an active and social experience. For many years, career guidance professionals have been involved in one-to-one interviews with their clients. From a social constructivist perspective these can be seen as opportunities for clients to construct new knowledge about themselves and career. The career guidance interview is clearly only one kind of interaction in which a client might participate during the process of constructing their career, and there will be many others. However, for career guidance professionals the one-to-one interview has remained a constant feature of their work.

The word 'social', when linked with constructivism, is important in two different ways. Firstly, it highlights the interpersonal nature of learning as discussed above, and secondly, it emphasises the social and cultural context of learners. From this perspective, people are seen to develop *in* society and are immersed in, and inseparable from, their context via processes of communication. However, it is also important to understand that from this viewpoint social context is not seen as static, but as dynamic, with the potential to change as cultural practices are constantly challenged (Bruner, 1996). Society, therefore, does not remain the same, but changes over time. In relation to the promotion of equality of opportunity, this is positive news for career guidance practitioners, as they seek to encourage clients, such as those entering a non-traditional area of work or those who are hoping to be the first in their family to participate in higher education. The notion of people developing their understanding of career within their changing social context, provides a contrast to those theories that tend to emphasise the role of either the individual, (Cochran, 1997) or society (Roberts, 1993; Hodkinson et al, 1996) in the process.

### **The zone of proximal development**

The second Vygotskian premise to be considered is the zone of proximal

development. It has a clear focus on development (as the term itself implies) and emphasises learning through interactions with others. Wood (1998:26) describes the ZPD as 'the 'gap' that exists for an individual (child or adult) between what he (sic) is able to do alone and what he can achieve with help from one more knowledgeable or skilled than himself', and is an indication of learning potential. Put simply, people can learn more in interactions with others than they can alone.

In order to explore the possible application of the ZPD to career guidance, a small-scale qualitative case study was carried out in 2001. The study took place in a sixth form college in inner London, during which the career guidance interviews of six students were observed and recorded. The students were interviewed before and after their career guidance interviews, in order to explore the ways in which they were making their HE choices. When asked to describe what he felt he wanted to gain from his career guidance interview, one sixth form student, 'Tommy' (his real name has been changed in order to preserve his anonymity) used a metaphor, which was very helpful in enabling the development of my own emerging understanding of the ZPD and its possible relationship to career guidance. He described his own expectations of his career guidance interview as 'like join the dots' and 'the sort of puzzles I used to do when I was little'. By this he meant the puzzles where a picture is drawn by joining sequentially numbered dots. In simple puzzles of this kind, aspects of the picture can be seen in outline, but the dots need to be joined for the full picture to emerge. In complex puzzles, the picture can be obscured by the number of dots required to complete the detail of the puzzle. When asked what the subject of the picture was, he said 'me and my future'. He hoped that his interview would help him to join more dots in his picture.

Following his career guidance interview, we returned to his metaphor, and discussed the ways in which his picture had changed as a result, and some interesting things emerged. As a result of his interview, he felt that his picture contained more dots than he had originally envisaged, and his picture seemed to have become more complex (e.g. there were HE courses that he now wanted to consider that he had not previously thought of, and aspects of his own potential to achieve his goals had become clearer.) 'Tommy' had been able to locate these dots with the help of the Careers Adviser. The dots themselves were both internal and external to him, and together they provided an emerging picture of his development within his social context. He felt strongly that, whereas he had begun with the expectation that the guidance practitioner would join up some of the dots for him, he knew now that he had to do this for himself. His picture was clearly changing in the light of his experiences, as a result of his opportunity to participate within a career guidance interview and to construct more knowledge about himself with the help of a guidance

practitioner. In this case the ZPD can be seen as the difference between his picture before the interview and afterwards.

In the unpredictable postmodern world, where there are many factors that can influence choices, many people will be trying to draw very complex pictures of self, which are made up of many dots. Such pictures of self can be seen to be in a regular state of flux as clients grapple with changes in their environments and their own responses to them. 'Tommy' will no doubt continue to draw his own picture throughout his lifetime, and may benefit from further opportunities to construct more knowledge about his future with the help of a guidance practitioner. He appears to be drawing his picture in pencil, and is adapting it by using an eraser, as he constructs more knowledge about career. 'Tommy' is not in total control of the eraser, as university admissions tutors also have a clear impact on his picture of self through their selection decisions. The degree to which he, or any individual, is in control of his picture is, therefore, inherently contestable.

An understanding of the ZPD also shows that career guidance is about the development of the whole person throughout life. Using 'Tommy's' metaphor, his picture of self will change constantly during his lifetime, sometimes at greater speed than others. Tommy will no doubt reach key transition points in his life (e.g. when he leaves university) when he will need to spend time re-drawing his picture of self and using his knowledge to adapt it. At other times (e.g. in circumstances such as redundancy) we can expect his circumstances to have an impact on his picture.

Through his use of the word proximal, Vygotsky points to an important facet of learning in the ZPD; that people learn best that which is proximal to them and their experiences, rather than things that are at a distance. The overall purpose of learning is seen as a gradual move towards independence on the part of the learner; what learners can achieve today with help, they will be able to achieve alone tomorrow.

The concept of the ZPD reveals that career guidance needs to become proximal to the lives of its clients. Guidance practitioners need to focus on what the client understands and can do already, and then enable the client to move to what they can understand and do next. This will obviously vary greatly from client to client and will involve helping the client to assess their current position, and think through the next steps in their development. All of this must be done as part of a gradual move towards independence on the part of the client. One question that guidance practitioners could pose is 'in relation to my practice with this particular client, how is what I am doing with the client today, helping them to do it alone in the future?' Whether it is helping the client to carry out



research into opportunities such as HE choice, contacting employers, colleges, or training providers, the client should be actively engaged in the process, so that they will be able to move towards independence in the future.

The career guidance interview can be seen as one interaction where clients can construct knowledge about their career with the help and support of a guidance practitioner. Each client is inseparable from their social context, and draws their picture of self from within it. Two further points relating to guidance practice are worth noting. Firstly, guidance practitioners must not be tempted to draw the client's picture for them, but must allow clients to do this for themselves and enable them to move towards greater independence. Even though 'Tommy' initially saw the Careers Adviser as an expert who would do this for him, following the interview he realised that he needed, and indeed wanted to draw his own picture for himself. Secondly, there is a role for guidance practitioners in educating their clients regarding the potential impact of society on their pictures of self. In order to promote equality of opportunity and social justice, guidance practitioners themselves need to understand the impact of stereotyping and discrimination, so that they can discuss the issues that emerge from these with their clients. Only by doing so can their potential impact be minimised.

With its emphasis on a capacity for change and development, the ZPD can be viewed as an important concept for guidance practitioners who are working with clients living in a changing world. If people do not have a capacity for change, what hope is there that career education, development and guidance can make any difference to people's lives or have any impact in helping them to cope with change? Career guidance could then run the risk of being seen as inappropriate at best and redundant at worst. The heartening news is that insights gained from the application of the ZPD show that people will be able to learn more about career with the help of a guidance practitioner than they will alone. This is particularly positive for guidance practitioners in England, some of whom have experienced the subsuming of their work within the broader Connexions agenda, which has prompted questions regarding its value and in some cases even its existence.

### **Learning by participation**

The third Vygotskian premise to be examined is that of learning by participation. Writing from a situated approach to learning, Lave and Wenger (1991:15) argue that 'Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind'. Following studies of apprentices in different parts of the world, they argue that learning usually takes place within some kind of community, where initially learners participate on the periphery (legitimate peripheral participation). Gradually, as they gain experience, learners become

full participants within the community. This kind of learning by participation involves the whole person, and, as a result of participation, people change. Here, 'Learning ... implies becoming a different person' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:53). As people participate in communities, so the community itself is also transformed over time, as cultural practices adapt and change and new meanings and knowledge are generated. Communities of practice therefore are not static, but change in the light of the experiences of those participating within them. This could be very relevant when considering the promotion of equality of opportunity and social justice, in relation to the ways in which traditions and norms in society can be challenged and changed through participation. Lave and Wenger's (1991) view of learning by participation appears positive and potentially life changing for those who engage within the community. However, issues of power within communities can mean that access to participation can be denied, if communities are closed and will only allow learners to participate in certain areas of practice.

From the perspective of situated learning, people learn about career through participation and we need to consider the ways in which this can be encouraged within career guidance. Returning to 'Tommy's' metaphor, in order to draw their pictures of self, clients need every opportunity to play an active part in the career guidance process. Guidance practitioners need to provide their clients with a safe place in which to participate, where risks can be taken in an atmosphere that promotes the core conditions for client-centredness (Rogers, 1965). Within career guidance interviews this will involve many familiar activities, such as encouraging clients to set their own agenda for the interaction and dialogue that is shared equally. By fostering a culture of participation in guidance, clients will learn how to construct their own career in interactions with others, and learn skills that can be taken forward into other areas of life. For clients, these skills can be used in the future, when they need to continue to construct their career independently.

Clients can also participate in other areas of the community of career guidance through other activities related to career education development and guidance, which can be seen as legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Work experience is one such activity and, indeed, can be seen as one of the few ways in which young people can be given an opportunity to participate in the workplace whilst still in education. As such, it is important to maximise this learning experience, for example through discussions that enable the construction of more knowledge in relation to career. Questions such as 'what have I learned about myself that I didn't know before?' and 'how can I take this forward?' can be posed, in order to enable students to construct more knowledge in relation to self.

Within a policy framework of widening participation, many universities are currently engaged in a range of activities in relation to Aimhigher (DfES, undated) initiatives. The University of Glamorgan is one such HE institution, and is highlighted here as a case study showing an example of the ways in which people can participate in the community of career education and guidance, which can in turn foster the promotion of equality of opportunity (Clark and Talbot, 2006). The University runs Level 0 courses entitled *Into the Future*, which are open to sixth form students in South and North Wales. Wherever geographically possible, the courses are held on-site, so that students meet staff and gain some experience of what it is like to study in higher education. The courses are accredited, and those students who complete the courses successfully are awarded a certificate. The courses take students through the UCAS process, and any written work involved (such as writing a personal statement) is work that the students would have to do anyway as part of the process of applying to university. These courses give sixth formers the opportunity to participate in the community of career education and guidance and that of HE, and their participation enables them to continue to draw their pictures of self. As a result, some may begin to see themselves as prospective HE students, when previously this had not been the case. Some may see themselves studying different courses, whilst for others the courses provide useful confirmation of their ideas.

The case study highlighted above points to an important link between the ZPD, participation and the promotion of equality of opportunity and social justice. It shows that through participation people can begin to view themselves differently and can become different people. Legitimate peripheral participation, such as that offered by the *Into the Future* courses, can enable clients to participate in contexts that they would not usually find themselves in; thereby enabling new experiences to become proximal to their lives. Such participation can play a key part in their thinking about themselves and their future. Because society and culture are not static, change can come about through this participation, as more people from non-traditional backgrounds study in HE, when those who had not previously thought of themselves as HE students begin to adapt their pictures of self through participation and interaction with others. It is worth noting that without opportunities to participate, such potential learning can remain untapped. There appears to be a strategic role for guidance in facilitating legitimate peripheral participation in a range of situations.

### **New ways of working**

This chapter has highlighted some new understandings in relation to the social construction of career (such as learning by participation and the importance of enabling clients to learn about that which is proximal to them and their

experiences), as well as underlining many of the established approaches to empathic client-centred guidance practice. By focusing on what the client knows already and enabling them to reflect on their experiences of participation, guidance remains proximal to them, whilst encouraging them to see the next steps in their development. Guidance needs to be an active process, which fosters a culture of participation and a growth towards independence.

The chapter also points to a strategic role for guidance in seeking out opportunities for clients to participate in new contexts, like the example highlighted. Such participation is vital as it is the means by which new and different experiences become proximal to the lives of clients. Whilst these new experiences (for example, being the first person in a family to go to university, or entering a non-traditional area of work as a female or male) remain at a distance, little will change. This is particularly important at the current time, when career guidance has been publicly criticised again for failing to encourage young women into non-traditional areas of work (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2005, 2006).

So does any of this imply a new model for practice? And what is the place of current approaches in relation to the ZPD? In recent times, process models, such as that put forward by Egan (2002), have faced criticism in relation to their application to current guidance practice (Stewart, 2005). Is Egan's model appropriate when considering the possible application of the ZPD? His three stage model offers a strong and helpful framework for the social construction of knowledge, not only about career, but in a range of helping situations. Such process approaches are goal-orientated, and can help clients focus on what they know already, and what their next steps might be, thereby helping them make progress within the ZPD.

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that people develop holistically within their social context through participation in a community of practice, and that people always learn irrespective of the situation. Is it enough, therefore, to allow people to learn at their own pace, without setting any goals towards their development? Their case study example of the apprenticeship of butchers offers a word of caution and shows that learning can be positively restricted by a didactic culture where participation is denied through an inappropriate use of power. Two points are worthy of note here in relation to career guidance. Firstly, if goal-directed approaches were laid to one side, in favour of allowing clients to construct career at their own pace and in their own situation, learning would not be maximised and the risks of perpetuating the status quo and legitimising stereotyping and discrimination become evident. Guidance thereby fails in its duty to promote equality of opportunity. Secondly, and conversely,

guidance that is didactic inhibits learning and can lead to an inappropriate use of power within the process. These present challenging issues for guidance practitioners and are worthy of further discussion and investigation, beyond the confines of this chapter.

## **Conclusion**

The emphasis on development within the ZPD can give guidance practitioners some cause for further reflection. Situated approaches to learning argue that people develop in their social context, and that they are indeed inseparable from it. But their context is not static and neither are they, and both can be changed through participation that is positive, encouraging and supportive. In such an atmosphere, guidance and the clients it seeks to serve can thrive and equality of opportunity and social justice can be promoted. However, all of this is not meant to imply that large-scale societal change can happen overnight. Indeed, even in times of rapid change, society and its practices can appear to change slowly. In essence it appears that there are choices to be made. A practitioner may want to reflect and ask, “Within my practice do I foster a culture of participation and seek to promote opportunities for clients to participate?” Even if the answer to this is yes, the choice of whether or not to participate remains with the client and without participation, development cannot happen. However, by making a choice to encourage clients to participate, practitioners can play a part in fulfilling the requirement to promote equality of opportunity and social justice.

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## Chapter Five

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### Mapping client issues in the career counselling interview: sharing the story

*Nelica La Gro*

#### **Abstract**

The chapter reports on a study which considers client and practitioners' interpretations and experience of the careers counselling interview. The study takes an interpretative approach and uses concept mapping as the method to investigate and compare client and practitioners' approaches to career thinking and decision-making, in a small sample of career counselling interviews. Analysis of the results suggests the importance of practitioners organising and structuring their understanding of decision-making issues. The research also highlights the value of practitioners sharing their interpretation(s) with clients and acknowledging the socially situated nature of career decision-making. Strategies are suggested, relevant to the professional training of career practitioners, and those working in guidance settings.

#### **Introduction**

The study focuses on clients' experience of career exploration and decision-making, as well as developing an understanding of practitioners' perspectives. This is an area that would benefit from more research as practitioners face the challenge of integrating new theory developments into their practice and addressing career concerns of diverse client groups.

#### **Career theory and career practice**

Developments in career theory have put forward persuasive accounts of the importance of viewing the individual as firmly situated in their social context when considering career interventions (Flum and Blustein, 2000). Significant work has been carried out under the broad umbrella of social cognition that highlights the 'connection between interpersonal relationships and the work and career world' (Blustein et al, 2004:1). Social constructivist approaches argue for the value of developing understanding of the lived and unique experiences of the individual (Savickas, 1997). These developments challenge traditional career theories which emphasise a more individualistic focus, and an ordered sequence of events contributing to planful career decision-making.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) has provided an explanatory account of the relationships between career development, self-efficacy and socially situated factors, as well as contributing to the development of approaches for career counselling with clients. Studies investigating application of Social



Cognitive Career Theory show how perceptions of barriers, social and economic disadvantage can limit and even exclude individuals' consideration of a wide range of careers (Albert and Luzzo, 1999; Betz, 2000) and beliefs about personal agency and capabilities can affect the initiation and sustainment of action to achieve goals and pursue career-related tasks (Quimby and O'Brien, 2004). Implications point to the value of training that helps the career practitioner to conceptualise clients' career thinking, and introduce career interventions that enhance clients' understanding of possible and also perceived barriers as well as their capacity to take action.

Researchers such as Martin (1992) and Mayfield et al, (1999) assert that practitioners need to develop the necessary confidence to organise and structure knowledge about their clients. Career practice can never be context free and involves an interactive dynamic process between clients and those delivering guidance interventions (French and French, 1994). Accessing the knowledge structures of providers as well as clients can provide the researcher with valuable information about how practitioners' mental representations of issues relate to clients' understanding of these same issues. Theory development has provided new lenses through which to understand career thinking, career exploration and offer explanations of how individuals approach career decision-making. At the same time it is important to consider how practitioners integrate such developments into their practice. Dagley and Salter suggest that the paradigm shift to a more 'process-oriented holistic approach to career counselling' (2004:129) may be more 'rhetoric than reality' and that actual counselling practice still predominantly reflects a 'commitment to the dissemination of information' (2004:129).

The 'primacy of rational decision-making' has been challenged in recent writing (Phillips et al, 2001:194). Wei-Cheng (2004) argues that career decision-making difficulty is emerging as an important construct and suggests it is also necessary for career counsellors to recognize the cultural difficulties of career decision-making tasks. Cochran (1997) supports a narrative approach, explaining that making a career decision is more like composing a meaningful story. Alternative versions of decision making suggest a process that is 'consultative and inherently relational, in which people seek out support, guidance and assistance as they move through a set of decisional tasks' (Blustein et al, 2004:432).

A number of authors have investigated how individuals develop and represent knowledge about self and environmental factors and how knowledge is structured into schematic representations of these domains (Baldwin, 1992; Brower and Nurius, 1993; French and French, 1994; Portnoi et al, 2004). These authors have examined how the individual's schemas may undergo adaptation

and change as they encounter new events, experiences and social interactions with others. 'It is our ability to share schemas through social interaction that is the basis of communication and human relationships' (Brower and Nurius 1993:20).

Research into the links and associations of clients' cognitive domains is relevant to understanding practitioner interventions and may eventually lead to insights about the impact of approaches when working with individual clients. A contribution towards this would be to investigate and compare practitioner and client schemas to interpret the meaning of what is significant for client's decision-making and career thinking; and consequently how practitioners can progress client career concerns. This study was designed to investigate such issues by comparing how career practitioners and clients conceptualise the meanings they attach to exchanges in the interview and also to consider implications for professional training.

### **Method and measures**

The research took an exploratory approach aiming to develop an in-depth understanding of the client and practitioner conceptualisations in a sample of one-to-one career counselling interviews. The researchers worked closely and collaboratively with participants as a joint endeavour to develop understanding and relate this to practice.

Techniques used to analyse cognitive activities and meaning-making strategies were reviewed. Concept Mapping Task (CMT) was chosen as an approach that offers a window into identifying the mental pictures and associations that participants are using during an event. A concept map can be described as a 'pictorial representation of a domain that consists of concepts represented as nodes connected by arcs' (Freeman, 2004:1), where the concepts are words or ideas that represent events, objects or emotions and feelings. The connecting arcs represent the conceptual links. The contribution of concept mapping has been described as 'enabling shared understanding, including affect, balancing power and involving the client' (Freeman, 2004:1).

Concept mapping has been used in studies that have focused on ways in which practitioners can be assisted to develop schemata that incorporate the complexity of the client and their concerns (Mayfield et al, 1999). The method was adapted for use in this research and content analysis of practitioner and client conceptualisations enabled the researchers to focus on similarities and differences in their meaning-making strategies. Martin, who employed similar methods, suggested that such types of cognitive assessment could offer rich data that 'capture some of the highly personalised meanings clients and practitioners construct and experience in therapeutic interaction'

(Martin,1987:195). In the current guidance context practitioners are often working with clients who present complex and challenging stories. This approach offers a way of gaining insight into the interview experience.

### **Procedure**

Participants volunteered to take part in the research. Each interview, which was between 30 and 45 minutes in length, was audio-recorded and a transcript made of the exchange. The transcript was then divided into dyads, each representing an exchange between the two parties. Each exchange was pasted onto cards. The client and interviewer were asked to return separately to complete the tasks noted below with the researcher. The instructions were:

- (a) Group the cards that seem to go together because the statements are about the same area of thinking and identify an overall label for that cluster;
- (b) Write on a card any other areas that were missed and give these a label;
- (c) Arrange the labels on this sheet of paper and identify the links which best explain how these areas of thinking relate to each other;
- (d) Explain what this arrangement of cards means to you.

Both parties had the opportunity to identify the concepts that were contained within the exchange and to map them, showing linkages and positioning, in terms of their own assessment of their relative importance. At a later date, participants were shown the written analysis of the concept maps and asked to comment on the accuracy of the interpretations. All participants agreed with the information presented. Respondent validation ensured a rigorous and collaborative approach.

### **Findings**

A sample of two career counselling interviews is discussed in this study. During the discussion, clients and practitioners were asked separately to give an interpretative commentary concerning category clusters, the relational positioning and links depicted in their maps.

#### **Interview 1**

The thirty three year old, white, male client was employed as a primary school teacher, had been actively involved in a job search and was feeling at an impasse; unsure whether to remain within his current teaching role or to seek employment opportunities in related areas. This was his first career counselling interview. The practitioner was employed by a careers company, female and white.

Client 1 situated links between clusters within two overarching concepts, the

professional self and the ‘personal self’ or the ‘real me’ (see Figure 1). When commenting on the professional self, the client queried:

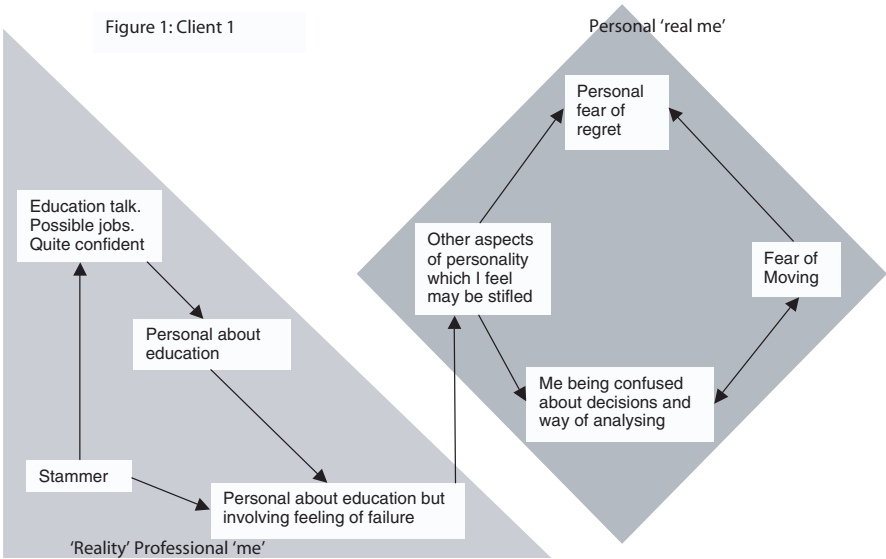
Is that really me? A model for the class? I don’t always feel like being that. I don’t always feel committed to the system.

Comments concerning ‘the personal self’ identified other aspects:

This side is about me, what if I wasn’t a teacher, and other aspects of my personality I may have stifled, especially music and writing. I use elements of creativity in teaching but can’t always be as relaxed as I’d want to be.

The client acknowledged that that the relative positioning of the professional self and personal self shifted:

There are elements of education that are also the real me. Sometimes the link seems stronger, when a week’s been good, and there are elements that I like a lot in school. Then, when it’s been bad, I’ve shifted more to my personal side.



Markus and Wurf (1987) and Brower and Nurius (1993) in their work on conceptualisations of self, recognize that an individual may hold different perceptions of self in different contexts, and these self-perceptions are stored through memory, beliefs and feelings. Brower and Nurius have described ‘the

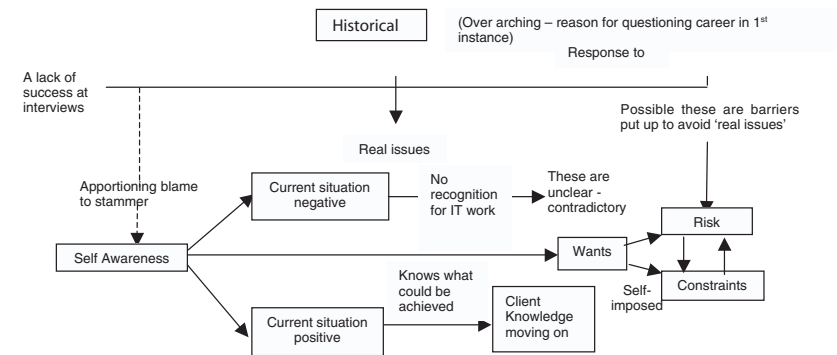
possible self’ as ‘the concrete expression of our goals, plans, aspirations and fears’ (1993: 67). By applying these conceptualisations of ‘self’ to client 1, the ‘desired self’ or ‘possible self’ may be conceived of as the ‘personal self’ described as ‘the creative and real me’, held in the memory and the representation of which is retrieved from time to time. The degree of congruity or dissonance experienced by the client between the ‘professional self’ and ‘the personal self’ concerned situational factors, such as how his week in the classroom had been, as well as the influence of more distal factors, such as the effects of educational policy on practice. Congruity and dissonance was also mediated by feelings of fear that a course of action may lead to a sense of future regret and so there was evidence of shifting levels of confidence in the client’s commitment to implementing change.

Practitioner 1 identified the ‘historical self’ as the overarching concept informing the client’s understanding of career plans (see Figure 2) and pointed to different events contained in this category:

There are a number of past events driving his current career crisis. This includes possible regret over the choice point of teaching and music career. Some of that’s real - he’s no longer happy in a more prescriptive teaching environment. Some are self-imposed and his risk avoidance may be a response to his lack of success in recent job interviews. Maybe leading to avoiding ‘taking a leap in the dark’. He’s been a teacher for eight years, and on the surface seems to like it. Why question it now? Maybe the death of his mother prompted this, also the lack of recognition for work in ITC.

From these descriptions, it can be suggested that the practitioner conceptualised ‘self’ as socially embedded, identifying events that have signaled the client’s experience of a ‘career crisis’ with consequences for his decision-making capabilities

Figure 2: Practitioner 1



The two diagrams, although identifying different clusters, highlight the complexity of the decision-making process with significant influences and barriers impacting on the client's confidence to consider the issues he was facing as well as the next steps he could take. Baldwin acknowledges the interplay of self and socially situated factors. 'Self is not so much a list of traits but is more concerned with experiencing self in relationship to others' (1992:469).

## **Interview 2**

The thirty two year old male client was currently employed as a receptionist and office clerk. He was very keen to change his work situation and this was his third interview with the same practitioner at an adult guidance agency. The experienced practitioner, who worked with an adult guidance agency, was male and white.

In their mapping, both client (Figure 3) and practitioner (Figure 4) identified and labeled over-arching themes. Both identified the client's pervasive negative feelings about self, and the reciprocal relationship of this negativity, with feelings about his current work role and job. The client described this as a 'chicken and egg thing'. He stated:

The more stressed at work and the more negative I am, the worse I feel about myself. Because I don't feel good about myself and because of my job, my perception of myself goes down so I can withdraw. But the flip side of feeling negative is positive feelings about myself and feelings about future jobs.

The practitioner also highlighted the link between negative feelings about the job and the client's lack of self-esteem. Both viewed this negativity as driving the client to seek out change and, in relation to possible futures, both also identified his lack of awareness of occupational skills. Both client and practitioner highlighted the emotional dimension of the client's approach to decision-making as a powerful component in the process; although the client gave more emphasis to his feelings of isolation, stating in his commentary, 'I feel on my own' and 'I feel in a minority at work'.

Analysis indicated a central issue was the client's lack of self-efficacy and relationship between this and his feelings about possible futures. At the time of the interview, it appeared his lack of a future-oriented focus or readiness to engage in goal setting, impaired his decision-making process, which in turn impacted on self efficacy. Much research has illuminated this interacting relationship (e.g. Lent and Maddux, 1997; Albert and Luzzo, 1999). 'People with lower self efficacy expectations tend to be more likely to cease their efforts prematurely, thereby reinforcing their beliefs that they do not possess the skills



### **Discussion of findings and implications for practice**

The conceptual maps developed by clients and practitioners linked influences on decision-making in different ways. Both conceptualised 'self' as embedded in the social context and also identified 'self' as being more or less efficacious in different life scenarios. There was some evidence of practitioners offering conceptual anchors for their interpretations of client issues, and practitioner maps and commentaries started to address the emotional impact of unresolved decision-making tasks. In contrast, client commentaries contained constructs relating to anxiety states (e.g. seeking approval, fear of regret or fear of failure) and highlighted the impact of emotional factors on their approach to decision-making.

Client reports from this study show how they experienced changing perceptions about their capability to 'make the right choice', whether this concerned possible regret about leaving their current post, or the effects of their existing work situation on their implementation of career goals. Results from the two studies indicate that career-efficacy is not constant and can be improved or eroded by perceptions of situational factors. SCCT recognises the powerful influence of context on self-efficacy, outcome expectation and goal setting. Furthermore it recognises that individuals' career commitment can be substantially affected by the way they respond in anticipation of complex and difficult situations (Albert and Luzzo, 1999).

Exploring the range of interpersonal factors and the reciprocal relationship of thoughts and emotions as well as their affect on career choices, poses challenges to more 'traditional' forms of career counselling (Constantine and Erickson, 1998). Traditional, in this sense, concerns those approaches that rely on more rationalist, positivist assumptions that conceptualise the individual as a 'set of fixed, determined variables' (Constantine and Erickson, 1998:190). Such approaches suggest the practitioner should collect information about particular aspects of the client, for example skills, experiences and aptitudes, with the aim of making some assessment of how best the client can be assisted to progress in their career thinking or planning towards a 'best fit'. The movement away from this rationalist approach has been welcomed by many practitioners but also raises new challenges to how the interview process is managed. It can lead to more open-ended conceptualisations of client issues and recognition of the way 'emotions can be seen as serving to establish, maintain, or disrupt a relationship with the environment in the form of readiness to act' (Young et al, 1997:137). A more responsive approach enables the practitioner to accommodate clients' continual adaptation and change of their belief systems and thought processes, arising from their interaction with their social and cultural environment. Amundson (2003) argues for a more 'intuitive perspective' (2003:200), stating 'Feeling right' about a decision can be the



most critical factor in the decision-making process' (2003: 201). This also has implications on the goal setting process, which can be negotiated in relation to 'possible selves' rather than solely task focused goals.

The evidence showed that practitioner interpretations of their clients' self and situation were often not made accessible to clients during the interview. It was in the practitioner commentaries that the identification of conceptual anchors emerges. A consequence can be that clients' and practitioners' understandings develop along parallel, but separate 'tram-lines' in the interview, resulting in limited assistance given to clients to resolve career dilemmas. Both parties can also hold a vested interest in maintaining what appears to be a comfortable relationship. As practitioner 2 stated:

The client can collude in continuing with the exchange even though they may feel they are not getting anywhere because the relationship is feeling positive and otherwise the momentum could be broken down.

Brower and Nurius (1993:20) have described the importance of shared interpretations and shared schemas:

When we feel understood by others, we mean that we feel others understand our schemas (e.g. about who we are, how things are, and what is important) and the bi-directional process of this sharing is a large part of how new schemas are born and existing ones are elaborated and challenged.

Clarke (1995) explored the application of interpretation in counselling and identified that one of the positive contributions of interpretative interventions is their value in increasing client awareness of new perspectives, whilst allowing clients to be able to 'accept, reject, or revise the interpretation' (Clarke, 1995: 487). Concern about negative impact identifies how practitioners' interpretation may limit clients' self-exploration and self-discovery and therefore reduce client autonomy. However, Wilcox-Matthews et al, (1997) identified that research results show clients consistently identify interpretative interventions as helpful.

To assist the interpretation of client issues and how different factors are impacting on clients' challenges with decision-making, the practitioner could use practical techniques such as asking the client to draw a quick sketch map, labelling the various factors that are causing problems over decision-making and then identify any links between these factors. Practitioner and client could then discuss and share insights and explanations about the importance and relationships between factors.

Amundson discusses 'dynamic strategies' (2003:138) that can be utilised creatively within the one-to-one exchange to help clients develop their self

awareness. These include mind mapping (Amundson, 2003:139) to identify some of the important themes that have been covered in the exchange or drawing tasks (Amundson, 2003:171) that provide windows into clients' perspectives of past, present and future possibilities. Incorporating techniques, such as pictorial representations, as part of practitioners' repertoire may contribute to developing shared stories. Such approaches offer the potential to extend the ways in which practitioners work with clients to develop more complete and shared understanding of the dynamic and interdependency of self, situation and career decision functioning.

## **Conclusions**

The mapping provided by clients indicated how their self-constructs were embedded in the social situation, and the study draws attention to the importance of helping clients develop an understanding of how they conceive the relationship between internal and external factors in determining their career direction. Where there is a lack of shared or negotiated interpretations within the exchange the consequence may be that central issues are not clarified. At the same time importance is given to the fact that interpretation of clients' career issues may be provisional and open to re-interpretation and continuous development. Career practitioners can contribute to the clarification and elaboration of clients' schemas, as well as acknowledging the emotional impact and so assist clients develop insights into the conflicts and dilemmas that they experience in their career decision-making.

In turn it is important that the training for careers practitioners includes an emphasis on 'thinking about' or conceptualising client themes and patterns, as well as skills training. 'Students need to be helped to develop competing hypotheses about clients so that (they) can better appreciate the ambiguity of the counselling process, rather than expecting linear, lockstep solutions to complex human problems' (Cummings et al, 1990:133). Recent research (Law et al, 2002; Bimrose et al, 2005) and policy directives (Foster, 2005; DFES, 2006) have stressed the complexity of people's lives and the fact that guidance interventions need to work with this complexity, rather than deliver short term solutions based on a notion of a rational, linear career experience. This is a challenge the professional training programmes will continue to address.

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## Chapter Six

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### Experiencing change in career guidance practice: two stories

*M Rachel Mulvey*

#### Abstract

This edition of *Constructing the Future* invites papers on the subject of: ‘transforming the profession: the nature and effects of change’ and ‘managing change’. This chapter’s contribution is to explore what that means in practice for the professional at an individual level. In part, the chapter is looking for the lived experience of change and the meanings made in response to the affects of: change; changing; managing change and undergoing a change management process. But in so doing, the chapter also seeks to explore how two career guidance professionals have come through their own career development: to what extent they manage the change process, to what extent they seek to control or contain their career exploration and orientation. It is the old question asked to challenge, even taunt professionals and specialists: the question of physicians healing themselves, of cobblers mending their own shoes.

#### Introduction

Transforming the profession is seen in this chapter as an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary process, and an individual rather than a collective experience. The transformations experienced by an individual professional may seem infinitesimal, unremarkable, insignificant for the profession as a whole. Nevertheless, the perspective taken is resolutely micro; the research presented makes no claims to be statistically significant, nor is any generalisation implied. Its significance lies in the meanings made by those involved, so the approach is unequivocally phenomenological (McLeod, 1994) and committed to being faithful to the actual experience of the interviewees (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991). Cohen and Mallon argue that ‘stories as discursive constructs provide insights into individual sense-making. Through such insights, the story-based researcher can build a rich, complex, multifaceted, and integrated picture from the perspective of situated individuals.’ (Cohen and Mallon, 2001:48). Researching change and transformation through individual stories resonates with emergent approaches to career guidance practice: narrative or storytelling, and meaning-making or constructivism (Law, 2003; Reid, 2003; Law, 2006).

For this research, two interviews were conducted; with one new and one experienced practitioner. The two interviews were digitally recorded and then analysed, not to prove a hypothesis, but to capture what emerged from the

story-telling. The findings may illuminate others' experience, they may inform future action. Such future applications are not the primary intention of this research: it aims to present, accurately, what two individual career guidance practitioners have made of their experience of change and transformation.

### **21st century career guidance**

Although constructivism and narrative are seen as emergent approaches to career guidance practice (Bujold, 2004), and there is certainly a sense in which both approaches (narrative in particular) are being heralded as innovative, neither could reasonably be called an overnight success. Kelly's seminal text on personal construct theory was published in 1955, and publications on narrative now date back a decade (Peavy, 1995; Savickas, 1995). Both concepts are interlinked, indeed it can be argued that constructivism underpins narrative. Collin (1997) and Watson (1994) agree that the main theories of career guidance in the United Kingdom are: the differentialist; the developmental; the behavioural and the structural. From its inception, the differential or matching of individuals and jobs was seen as the dominant paradigm within career guidance (Rodger, 1952; Holland, 1973). But a contrasting theory, the developmental approach, quickly challenged the differential dominance. Super (1957) in particular widened our perspective to encompass the individual's environment in considering situational determinants within career decision-making, arguing that people (in relation to career) progress through life stages. Keep and Brown (2005) challenge some current labour market myths, and argue that a closer understanding of what actually happens in the labour market makes us wary of headline generalisations. Notwithstanding their compelling arguments, they recognise that there have been discernible changes in patterns of work and employment in the last decades for some workers in some sectors. These changes include: globalisation; portfolio careers; down-sizing; flexibility; the knowledge economy – the shorthand for which would be the shift from post industrial to post modernist. So the emergence of constructivism and narrative in the early twenty first century fits with the need for career guidance practice in the current socio-economic climate to accommodate uncertainty and the unsettled, which both approaches do well. What is less certain is to what extent policy makers (and funders of career guidance) are convinced that the need for decision-making through a technical rational process has now morphed into a need to make sense of experiences in order to create an individual life story.

### **Constructs and narrative**

Constructs, according to Kelly (1955) are ways of placing an interpretation on experiences. Experience does not, of itself, exist in a sequence of episodes or events, but rather in the way those events are construed and refined over time and on reflection. Both self and vocational identity are key in career thinking and self-constructs are about the individual identity. Peavy (1998) whilst

acknowledging that work and occupation are important, maintains that the main focus within careers guidance should be to enable the client to make meaning of experience. The givens in Peavy's view of the human condition are: uncertainty; non-linearity; indeterminacy and unpredictability: his world-as-flux hypothesis. But he sees constructivist career counselling as a general method of life planning, a philosophical and psychological framework from which to work, rather than a set of techniques (Peavy, 1995). Bujold (2004) presents the dual role of narrative both as a process and as a product. The process of creating a narrative allows the client to make meaning of his/her experiences, through self-awareness. The product of narrative is a story. So narrative invites the client to consider past experience, linking episodes into a story. The story is not necessarily the definitive truth: narrative allows for more than one truth, and values uniqueness of each story as it is constructed. The need for validity is satisfied by the search for internal consistency: whilst the story may shift in re-telling, consistent themes and elements recur and function as an inherent quality indicator for that story maker. Key to any story is plot, and once constructed, the story needs constant revision, constant adjustment of plot to developments within self and the external environment. Savickas (1995) sees narrative as the mechanism for making sense of our work, allowing for both continuity and psychosocial change. He argues that narrative permits us to articulate needs and goals, and is therefore well suited to career guidance. The narrative approach, by making sense of past and current experience, permits anticipation and modelling of possible future scenarios. This anticipatory element permits planning which does not have to be technical-rational, but can nevertheless envisage a future or desired scenario. There is a strong sense that story telling in isolation is not possible; rather it takes two to make meaning: the story teller and the listener/facilitator (in career guidance terms, the client and the practitioner). If there has been an argument as to whether career guidance practice is an art or a science, adopting a narrative approach is clearly an art, and one which invites creativity on the part of the practitioner.

### **Career practitioners and their own career management**

But what of the career management of career practitioners themselves? Lave (1991: 64) depicts learning as 'a social phenomenon constituted in the experienced, lived-in world' and argues that within a community of practice there is a relationship between those who are well established and those coming into the profession. She argues that these two ends of the practice spectrum should be depicted not as teacher/pupil or expert/novice, but as Oldtimers and Newcomers (Lave, 1991:68). She also indicates the essential iteration within a community of practice; a circle of life where 'Newcomers' enter the community, are accepted and become 'Oldtimers'. The relationship between Oldtimers and Newcomers is one of mutual dependency: 'the Newcomers (are dependent) in order to learn, and the Oldtimers in order to



carry on the community of practice...success of both new and old members depends on the eventual replacement of the Oldtimers by Newcomers-become-Oldtimers themselves' (Lave, 1991:74). Given the many changes career practitioners in the United Kingdom have undergone particularly in the last decade (Clark and Talbot, 2006; Howieson and Semple, 2006; MacCarthy and Millar, 2006; Mulvey, 2006), how have career guidance professionals managed these changes? And can narrative, as a research tool, explore this question?

### **Research method**

Cohen and Manion argue that positivism is limited in the study of human behaviour: 'where positivism is less successful...is in its application to the study of human behaviour, where the immense complexity of human nature and the elusive and intangible quality of social phenomena contrast strikingly with the order and regularity of the natural world' (1994:12). Given that this research focuses on how careers guidance professionals behave in response to change, it is clear that a positivist approach will not be appropriate. The intangible qualities Cohen and Manion (*ibid*) refer to above can be very telling. Those shades of meaning which individuals attach to their personal experience illuminate the collective experience, permitting a sense of the collegial reaction in their range of response to external influence. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) condemn the neglect of such intangible qualities in research on policy implementation; 'neglect of the phenomenology of change, that is, how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended - is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most social reforms' (1991:4). Edwards (1998) identifies a noticeable lack of coverage of the experience of careers guidance professionals and in particular a lack of coverage of experienced practitioners. He argues that a more discursive approach would facilitate progress from the well-run theory versus practice divide towards a more effective, less contested development of 'knowledgeable practice' (Edwards, 1998:24). In terms of sampling strategy the phenomenologist approach contrasts with the positivist approach. The concern here is to ensure theoretical sensitivity of the sample; that is, a sample which allows the researcher to enter the world of the interviewee (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Using Law's work on narrative approaches (2003) to career guidance, a sequence of questions was compiled to tease out their experience through story telling. This question route was used for both the interviews in this study:

1. Thinking about your current state: where are you now?
2. Thinking about how you have arrived at your current state, could you identify any turning points?
3. Could you identify any lucky breaks?

4. And could you identify any influences?
5. Has there been any sense of letting go?
6. If they were to make a film of your life, what kind of genre would it be?
7. Is your current situation satisfying?
8. Would you say your decision-making is more rational, or more intuitive?

### **Ethical considerations**

Readers who have themselves conducted research will be familiar with the process of securing ethical approval. But others may be unaware of this process, which is intended to protect both researcher and participants. As career guidance practitioners, we are used to defending our actions, and to working within a code of ethical practice; as practitioner/researchers, the principles are no different. My own university requires that students and staff alike seek approval from the appropriate Ethics Research Committee: at School and University level respectively. The application must be supported by a supervisor (for students) or Head of School (for staff) and no data collection may be undertaken until approval has been granted. The application process is thorough; details must be given for: the nature of the research; the nature of the participants; the aims or hypothesis, and the procedures to be used, including any questionnaires or question routes. The application also requires that the effect on participants be considered in some detail: are there potential hazards? Could the procedures cause discomfort or distress? How will consent be obtained? How will personal data be protected? How will the researcher dispose of confidential material on completion of the research study? This procedure tries to ensure that no researcher engages in dubious research practices such as those listed by Blaxter et al (1996). For this study, informed consent was given particular attention, especially in relation to confidentiality. Whilst every effort would be taken to protect identity, the nature of the enquiry meant that biographical detail could give sufficient clues to identity. This was discussed at length with both participants who were still happy to take part. What is of note here is that a small scale piece of research, undertaken by a lone researcher and involving a sample of two, is subject to close scrutiny: the quest for ethical practice is not relative.

### **Data analysis**

#### **Interview one: the newcomer**

Lave's descriptors of 'Newcomer' and 'Oldtimer' (Lave, 1991) are used here to distinguish the two interviewees. The first interviewee is in her first job as a career guidance professional: a newcomer, therefore. This interview took place in a private room at the university where she did her guidance training. The interview content is presented in the question route order: all quotes are verbatim.

**The current state: where you are now**

The respondent described her current position. Having completed her Postgraduate Diploma in Career Guidance, she had: 'been taken on as a trainee Personal Adviser (PA) in a Connexions company'. At the time of the interview she had been in post less than six months, and was just completing her first term as a schools-based career guidance practitioner. She talked about her confidence levels, and made an expansive gesture, showing that her confidence had grown since working in Connexions. She said of her status as a trainee PA: 'I was a bit miffed that I have to do the NVQ level 4 because I feel all the training I've done already, I am qualified, not experienced'. In terms of her practice, she said: 'I am going in there very confident. I feel there is no job I can't do. I'm very pleased'. She presented evidence of her competence, some direct: 'I'm very pleased, everyone's very pleased... I've had ...kids popping in at lunchtime to say Hello... a parent phoned up last week' and some indirect feedback, where her manager told her: 'they're singing your praises.' Overall, she feels that she knows what she is doing, and that it's not an act. Although she considers herself qualified, she knows that she lacks experience and said: 'I do know I can improve.' At the end of the interview she went back to this and reflected: 'I've only just started in this profession and I know I still have an awful lot to learn...and I'm very humble in the fact that I know that.'

**Turning points and lucky breaks**

The Newcomer traced her employment history, and it was clear that returning to work after the birth of her first child was a turning point. Her job at that time was in the leisure industry, and so her working hours were anti-social. However, her employer wouldn't change her shift pattern, and the difficulty of finding childcare which allowed her to work in the evenings and at weekends proved insurmountable, so she resigned. Her resignation triggered a spiral of events which resulted in financial, physical and mental stress. A turning point out of this 'rough time' was the decision to sell her property, which resolved the financial stress and permitted her to take what she describes as 'a one year career break.' A final turning point was when she sought advice, as a lone parent, on training and employment for a career change. The turning point was not as expected, in that her subsequent actions were taken despite, not because of the advice she received. She dismisses the advice given as: 'absolutely diabolical... it was "get a job and we'll help you", but they don't want you to get training, and I thought, Right, I'm going to do a better job than you!'. The Newcomer could not identify any lucky breaks: 'I don't *have* lucky breaks, I *make* my lucky breaks'.

**Influences**

In contrast to her response to the lucky breaks question, she was much more forthcoming in identifying influences, although all the influences she referred to

were people rather than events. First, and arguably foremost, she identified her father who always said: 'If you want it girl, you've got to go and get it, and only you can get it. I've always remembered that, maybe that's a big influence'. She next identifies her child: 'my biggest influence, I think at the moment, my biggest influence, or my biggest spur is my son'. Whilst no longer a lone parent, she retains full responsibility for her child: 'he has to be fed, watered, clothed, educated, loved and only I can do that'. She also identified tutors on her career guidance programme for believing in her ability to succeed even when her own belief wavered. She found this encouragement reinforcing: 'at the back of my mind I knew I could do it... but until I completed it, I didn't know I could.'

### **Moving on and letting go**

The Newcomer had traced a sequence of occupational roles she had had, but her only sense of letting go was in relation to life roles, specifically that of a parent: 'I've always been selfish in my independence, and when (my son) came along, I had to share everything. So, in a sense, yes, I had to let go of that'. She also sees a close connection between her own satisfaction and her son's happiness, particularly in relation to her current job, and in response to the question asking whether she is satisfied in her current job she replies: 'I know I enjoy it because I come home happy - and when I'm happy, he's happy'. She sees her experience of being a mother as enhancing her practice: 'I can't tell people what to do... that's had an effect... that's made me a better careers adviser.'

### **If they were to make a film of your life, what kind of genre would it be?**

This question was the first that made the Newcomer hesitate; but when she did respond, her answer was lengthy:

I mean, the main character would have to be a very strong character, very proud of being a woman and getting where she is through her own hard work and not through sleeping with the enemy so to speak. So, Yeah. Not Cinderella [laughter]. I'm thinking of Thelma and Louise - they just went off and did it, you know?

This response reveals her internal constructs, which are to do with effort and reward: she is the one who makes her own luck, and if she takes credit for all her achievements, she readily shoulders her responsibilities.

### **Coping with change, and making decisions.**

The one question that the Newcomer simply did not know how to answer was about any changes in her work as a career guidance professional. Her immediate response was: 'I'm stumped.' She expanded on her initial reaction by thinking through her situation: 'there may be changes but because I'm very

new to it, every day there's a change...I haven't been there long enough to get used to what's there'. But in anticipating her response to future changes, she drew on her past experience of change in her life: 'Well, I feel like I have always been a coper – just get on with it, just do it...as long as I'm shown how to, as long as it's explained to me how.' In terms of making decisions, she eschewed the choice between the rational and intuitive approaches, asserting that she combines both in her decision-making.

### **Final thoughts**

In this interview, the Newcomer entered the profession feeling equipped to do the job, but aware she needed to gain experience. Her confidence, badly shaken in her career break, has been boosted and she is satisfied in her current job, and envisages a career in careers. She feels she brings much of her life experience into the work domain, and believes she is a better practitioner for this. One aspect of this interview was as unexpected for the Newcomer as it was for the interviewer: at one point the Newcomer had difficulty speaking, because she was emotional. The interviewer offered to stop recording, but the Newcomer's response was:

No, no, no, I'm alright now. I was just thinking back on all those transitions, all those things I've had to go through...and here I am sitting here. I haven't really had chance to go through it all, to talk to someone, talk it through. That's why I'm a bit emotional.

### **Interview two: the oldtimer**

The second interviewee has worked as a career guidance professional for nearly ten years: a 'newcomer-become-oldtimer' (Lave, 1991). This interview took place in a private interview room at her place of work.

### **The current state: where you are now**

The Oldtimer works part-time as a manager in an organisation which delivers guidance services to refugees. Having a part-time contract allows her to undertake research and consultancy as a University Associate, which she sees as key in her professional development and job satisfaction. She first worked in her employing organisation when on placement during her initial professional training, but both the organisation itself and her role within it have expanded and changed significantly over the years. She describes her job as: 'I do Quality Assurance... and am involved in training.' Much later in the interview she was very eloquent in describing her work overall, that is beyond the confines of her current job description:

my thing is to help practitioners to kind of survive in the field really, because work with refugees...it's very rewarding but very very challenging, but

especially in the environment of targets. It's trying to balance organisational targets and constraints and all that, with your need to be professional; and my belief that the two have to work together.

On leaving school, she had worked as a secretary and in advertising, but after several years she found she 'couldn't stand it anymore', so took an Access course which led her onto an undergraduate programme as a mature student. On graduating she felt, perhaps because of her age, that she needed 'something that would give me a qualification. I wanted to be a...a something.' She had friends who were working as careers advisers, and who enjoyed it, so she undertook postgraduate initial professional training and 'assumed I would have taken a job in the careers service' doing what she calls 'classical careers guidance', by which she means employed by a Careers Service, working in schools. But she had always 'had a thing about working with adults, perhaps because of my own journey' so followed up the chance of a placement with refugees. This led to voluntary work, which in turn led to paid employment. Her current job allows her to draw on all her experience, including the politics she studied at undergraduate level:

'I like politics at that kind of level...very much part of a political world. I like looking at how guidance fits into a bigger system – the contribution it makes to society in general. If guidance isn't there, it has severe implications for the labour force.'

### **Turning points and lucky breaks**

A number of turning points can be clearly identified from the Oldtimer's journey: tiring of secretarial work; becoming a mature student; qualifying as a career professional. Her response to the question about lucky breaks was very similar to the Newcomer's:

Luck is a strange word, isn't it? In some respects I believe you make your own luck... I have been quite lucky in that I've met some great people along the way who encouraged me, who were wonderfully encouraging.

Initially she identified a lucky break in organisational terms, whereby external funding for Guidance Accreditation Board/matrix accreditation came on-stream as she was leading the accreditation process. On reflection, she saw that it was fortunate only because they had already embarked on this development, independent of such incentives, and she acknowledges something closer to planned happenstance: 'it's amazing how things happen, not by chance, but by coincidence... it kind of dovetails'.

## **Influences**

As with the Newcomer, the Oldtimer identifies people who have influenced her rather than events. Since returning to education as a mature student, she progressed from undergraduate degree, through professional training on to a Master's level degree in Careers. Without exception, there have been tutors on all of her programmes whom she identifies as being influential. She also acknowledges the influence of her family, recognising that a 'certain security' in her personal life has allowed her to 'jump forward' in the management of her career.

## **Moving on and letting go**

The Oldtimer made a nice distinction; whilst there are things she misses, they are not necessarily things she regrets. Her immediate reaction was: 'I don't meet clients anymore. I've had to leave the direct contact behind...I wouldn't say I regret it, but I do miss it.' She is clear that she still helps clients, but in a different way now she is a manager. There is a healthy acceptance of letting things go as new things are taken on. This had not always been the case; she had initially felt that moving from the role of secretary to that of student meant shedding her previous persona. But her tutor at the time helped her to realise that she could transfer skills derived in one role and apply them in another domain. She sees a wholeness in her experience and understanding, and can draw on these personal resources at will. When thinking about letting go, the Oldtimer reflected on her career in careers:

I've met the most amazing people - it's really broadened my outlook. It's been amazing really, meeting people who've lost everything, they're so humbling. I'm so so glad that it's happened, you know, that I've found my way into this particular work with refugees. It's a great sense of satisfaction. I suppose I wouldn't want to do anything else.

There was clearly no need to ask the question about job satisfaction.

## **If they were to make a film of your life, what kind of genre would it be?**

Like the Newcomer, the Oldtimer found this a hard question. She laughed and hesitated, but eventually ventured: 'like a drama...wouldn't exactly be an action film [laughs] ...I don't know really. I like films that recount life'. She went on to reframe the possible film in terms of social transformations, of how each generation's experience differs from the one before, how, albeit subtly, society changes shape.

## **Final thoughts**

An interesting pattern is discernible in the Oldtimer's story: discounting a possible option or route, being encouraged (or required) to try it out, then

finding (to her surprise and delight) that not only is she capable in the new domain - but that she actually enjoys it. The first example of this is when choosing a degree, she told her Access tutor: 'I don't want anything to do with politics or business...purely kind of to help people'. Once safely enrolled on European Studies she was required to take some politics classes and: 'found that I loved the political bits - when you look at the final modules [of her degree] it was really European Politics I had done'. She goes on to relate this to guidance: 'it's the careers thing, several options, it's just a matter of thinking about them.' Another example of engaging with the unlikely, the unthinkable, relates to management. She thinks back:

If someone had asked me, in my first year of working as a careers adviser, am I interested in management, I would have said 'Oh no, please, I don't want management, please don't show me down that route.

Management is, of course, what she does now.

## **Conclusions**

The intention of this research was to represent accurately two stories about how individual practitioners have coped with change and transformation. Whilst there is no imperative to compare and contrast the stories, there are nevertheless some similarities - and some differences. Both respondents are unequivocal about finding their current jobs satisfying: a testament to a career in careers, despite the prevailing uncertainties in the external environment. Both have transferred knowledge, skills and understanding from one domain to another, and have found this transformation enhances their understanding and performance in the new role. Both have experienced change; for the newcomer more in work transformations and combining worker and parent roles; for the oldtimer, transformation within careers work, from practitioner to manager.

In terms of personal constructs, the Newcomer prizes self-reliance; she shoulders her responsibilities, and takes credit for her achievements. This permits her to take stock, but also to take action. The Oldtimer initially sets limits on new possibilities, but overrides that in being open to trying out and permitting personal transformation. This equips her to deal with challenge, to cope with change, and has allowed her to realise her potential. Neither practitioner subscribes to technical/rational decision-making but both have found their way through their career using an emergent approach. Neither believes in luck but both have taken advantage of possibilities, whilst readily acknowledging the influence of others.

As a practitioner, the Newcomer knows the value of making sense of transitions, and sees on a daily basis how 'talking it through' can help clients make sense



of their world and their place in it. Yet she herself had had little chance to do so. When the chance came, the process of telling her story was powerful, and emotional. Both respondents, when responding to the write up of their respective interviews, commented on how useful the narrative interview had been in making sense of their experience. Their stories are sufficient in themselves, but certainly have illuminated transformations in the profession for this writer. This small scale research adds to the case for including story telling in our professional toolkit – but also in our personal repertoire when making sense of experience.

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## Chapter Seven

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### Labour Market Information: Broadening Horizons and Connecting Practitioners

*Jenny Bimrose, Lucy Marris, Sally-Anne Barnes and Ann Mason*

#### Abstract

Research evidence tells us that labour market information (LMI) is one of the things that clients value most about career guidance. It helps with many aspects of career progression, including: selecting options, making decisions, motivating, clarifying values, reducing confusion and building confidence. Though with recent policy developments, has LMI become less important to guidance practitioners and their employers? This chapter explores four different perspectives on LMI in career guidance with a practitioner, researcher-trainer, a researcher and an employer each presenting their views. Arguments are presented for LMI being a crucial component of career guidance and an explanation provided of how the LMI Future Trends section of the National Guidance Research Forum (NGRF) website is supporting the process of making high quality, reliable, industry-based LMI available to the guidance community.

#### Introduction

In the context of career guidance, LMI is referred to variously as: occupational information, job information, career information, employment trends, employer information, educational, training and course information or just simply information. A further distinction has been made between labour market *information* and labour market *intelligence*, where information relates to quantitative or qualitative data found in original sources such as tables, spreadsheets, graphs and charts, and intelligence relates to an interpretation of labour market information, referring to subsets of information that have been subjected to further analysis (Learning and Skills Council/Department for Education and Skills, 2004).

Offer (2003) notes three different definitions of LMI. The first defines it as data about the workplace, employment rates and salary information. The second relates it to the structure and working of a labour market, including factors influencing the operation of that market, like mechanisms that match people with jobs. A third definition considers LMI to be essentially data, statistics and research about the workplace including things like unemployment rates, salary, demand for, and supply of, labour.

Sampson et al (2004) make yet another distinction between LMI that is non-interactive and interactive. Non-interactive LMI, it is argued, is generally linear

in nature, is paper-based, often broader in range, more detailed in topic coverage and low cost. Its use is considered to be limited, however, for motivating further exploratory behaviour in users. Interactive LMI (using ICT) is generally non-linear, with the user maintaining some control over the selection and sequencing information. Whilst it is typically less detailed in topic coverage and more expensive to up-date, it increases motivation for career exploration.

In this chapter, the term 'LMI' is used as an over-arching concept to describe all types of information used during career guidance to support entry into and the (often complex) navigation around and through the world of work. It explores whether and how LMI is important for career guidance, how it is used, the types of LMI that career guidance professionals want, challenges faced in trying to meet these needs and describes a national LMI website resource currently being up-dated with the close involvement of employer bodies.

### **LMI at the heart of career guidance: a practitioner's perspective**

When someone receives good labour market information that leads to a good decision, it benefits the individual, the employer and the economy. (Learning and Skills Council/Department for Education and Skills, 2004:2)

Effective careers guidance encompasses many things. A practitioner may motivate clients, help them to market themselves effectively, explore skills, raise aspirations, develop career management skills or build self-confidence. Further, building meaningful relationships with clients depends on a highly developed skills base. This might include counselling skills like: rapport building; active listening; negotiating; probing; summarising; immediacy; and challenging. Yet careers guidance does not take place in a vacuum and even the most intensive and effective guidance process cannot change the realities of the labour market, or create new jobs. So knowledge of the labour market is critical. The use of high quality, reliable LMI as an integral part of practice can reveal hidden opportunities and assist with the identification of the tactics required to navigate such opportunities.

Whilst career guidance is certainly about much more than assisting entry into, and movement within, the existing labour market, imagine any attempt at credible practice *without* access to LMI and it becomes immediately self-evident that LMI matters, and it matters a great deal. It matters because having access to LMI makes practitioners credible to clients. It matters because that information can be used to help clients enter and navigate existing and future opportunities in the labour market – even carve out new opportunities. Furthermore, it matters because by critiquing and engaging with LMI, practitioners are better placed to promote equality of opportunity not only for

their clients, but for the wider population.

Certainly there is no shortage of LMI, but the amount available can be overwhelming. Not unreasonably, clients often look to careers guidance professionals to act as mediators. In order to make sense of the plethora of labour market information it needs to be transformed into its more useful partner, labour market intelligence. However, the extent to which practitioners can achieve this depends on many things. LMI can be patchy, incomplete, incomprehensible, biased, out of date, misleading and contradictory. Not long ago, there was a serious shortage of plumbers. Apocryphal tales abounded of individuals leaving high paid city jobs to retrain because financial rewards for plumbers were so great. Yet more recently, the Association of Plumbing and Heating Contractors (2006) have stated in a press release that there is now an 'excess of plumbers'. This example illustrates two points, the way shifts in the labour market can occur rapidly and the difficulty in judging the relative reliability of apparently conflicting LMI.

It follows that LMI has to be kept constantly up-to-date. Many factors impact on the labour market. Advances in technology and globalisation are significant, together with other factors, including government policy (e.g. forthcoming legislation on anti-age discrimination) and demographic change (e.g. the aging population). So understanding the current picture simply in terms of labour market opportunities is an insufficient basis for supporting clients. There is a strong distinction between information about opportunities, which is comparatively easy to access and use in guidance, and LMI about broad socio-economic trends. Finding information about these trends, such as future employment intelligence and anticipated skills shortages, is much more complex.

The effective use of LMI can, certainly, help identify current and future opportunities for clients, but as previously stated, career guidance is about much more than just easing transitions into the labour market. Importantly, it is underpinned by a commitment to the principle of equal opportunities – as outlined in the Institute of Career Guidance Code of Ethics (ICG, 2005). For such a principle to be meaningful, equal opportunities data should be used to inform and transform practice. For example, LMI that incorporates data on salaries might allow young women to consider the long term financial consequences of entering a stereotypical occupation, such as hairdressing or childcare, as opposed to more highly paid opportunities in traditionally male dominated areas, such as construction. However, relaying this type of information is not sufficient to address inequality. Always assuming the individuals concerned are open to considering quite different opportunities, there is a need to work with clients to explore what (if any) challenges they may

encounter if they choose to buck the gender stereotyping trend and find themselves working in, for example, a male dominated environment. What support is available and what coping strategies might be needed?

In relation to gender equality, while some progress has been made, 30 years on from the Sex Discrimination Act there are still shocking inequalities in the labour market. For example, average hourly earnings for women working full-time are 18 per cent lower than for men working full-time, and for women working part-time hourly earnings are 40 per cent lower (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2005). Understanding what to do with such information in the guidance process is perhaps more important than knowing this statistic.

Professional judgements need to be made about how to use LMI with clients, but does labour market intelligence currently inform guidance practice enough? Probably not always, for two reasons: there has been a lack of readily accessible, reliable, high quality, comprehensive and navigable information; and even where high quality LMI existed, practitioners may not have the necessary skills training to engage critically with that information.

The NGRF website is making headway in addressing the first of these problems. As it moves into its next wave of development, the LMI Future Trends section should become the place to access such intelligence. It will be a conduit not only of information provided by the employers themselves (as represented by the Sector Skills Councils), but can also engage in dialogue those who gather and provide the information to ensure it is comprehensive, trustworthy and pertinent to the questions posed by our clients. Further, because the LMI sits within a website that addresses broader aspects of guidance, it will be able to support practitioners seeking to engage with and critique the LMI, so transforming the raw *information* into labour market *intelligence*.

This section has argued that LMI is essential for career guidance. Whilst its effective use is an important guidance skill, it is not innate and has to be learnt. The next section examines how it should be used by practitioners as part of a skilful guidance process and considers what LMI clients need.

### **Using LMI effectively in practice: a researcher-trainer perspective**

Evidence is limited regarding exactly what LMI works and what can be regarded as successful from the point of view of the client. However, recent research from England does indicate that LMI is highly valued by guidance clients. In 98 per cent of guidance interviews rated as 'useful' by clients, LMI was a key feature. Specifically, 98 per cent of these clients had been given general LMI by practitioners in their guidance interviews (e.g. educational routes, useful contacts, job vacancies); 73 per cent of these clients had been given

information about various resources (e.g. websites); and 29 per cent of clients were given information about job options (Bimrose et al, 2004). Clients have reported how the LMI presented in their career guidance interviews have transformed their outlook on the opportunities available to them (Bimrose et al, 2004). One other study from the Netherlands examined the role that LMI plays in the choice of vocational specialization by students. It found that labour market forecasts were crucial in assisting appropriate student choice (Borhans et al, 1996). A further study from Australia investigated the type of LMI used by clients to make job choices and found substantial idiosyncrasies. Clients were found to lack insight into their job choices and probably relied on relatively few unspecified prompts. Because of this, they were not maximising LMI effectively in their decision-making (Athanasou, 2003).

From the clients' perspective, six broad areas of LMI have been identified which relate to their need to understand their context: the competition faced; entry routes; the rewards available; the availability of jobs within certain 'travel to work' areas; the prospects of securing employment in particular jobs; and the value of particular qualifications, experience or training. For LMI to be of value to clients, it needs to focus on: the demand for labour, progression routes; geographical availability; trends; transferability of skills and qualifications; and recruitment and selection methods (Offer, 2000).

From whichever perspective it is considered, LMI is a key feature of career guidance and it makes career guidance a distinctive process, compared with other, less specialised forms of helping. Consequently, it is an integral feature of the major evidence-based frameworks that inform current practice. However, different theoretical frameworks advocate slightly different approaches to the use of LMI (Walsh, 1990). For example, the differential approach to practice (Rodger, 1952; Holland, 1966, 1973, 1982, 1985, 1992) with its heavy reliance on assessment (of interests, abilities, aptitudes) and an emphasis on rational decision-making, regards high quality information as central. A key assumption is that the provision of LMI will change client behaviour. So, for example, giving information about application deadlines for a job or course application will motivate the client to adhere to these deadlines. In comparison, in a social learning approach (Krumboltz et al, 1976; Krumboltz and Nicholas 1990; Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1990, 1996; Krumboltz, 1994), the career guidance process focuses on understanding client goals, resolving goal conflicts and solving problems. Here, LMI would be used to challenge misconceptions, stimulate exploration and develop decision-making skills as part of an on-going learning process.

Of course it follows that the particular way(s) in which career guidance practitioners use LMI with their clients will depend, at least in part, on which



framework has been selected to inform practice. Moreover, ways practitioners use LMI with their clients will determine the type they need for effective guidance practice. For example, factual information about entry requirements and application procedures would be regarded as essential by a practitioner using a differential approach to guide their practice, whilst a practitioner adopting a social learning framework would place a greater emphasis on LMI in a format that can be used to challenge misunderstandings about entry requirements or application procedures (in the form, for example of a 'true/false' quiz). The complexity of demands placed on LMI is increased by the needs of clients, who require different types of information at different stages of their career development. For example, a Year 7 pupil, a new graduate, a woman returner and someone who has been made redundant are all likely to need different types of LMI to help them progress their careers. Clients also vary considerably in their ability to understand and interpret the implications of LMI for their own particular circumstances. Consequently, and unsurprisingly, various types of LMI have been identified as essential for effective practice by the guidance community.

The skill of information giving is regarded as a type of challenging and so classified as a higher level practitioner skill (Egan, 1998). This is because information giving helps clients to develop new perspectives on problems (e.g. information about a potential funding source to support a training course, can make a career decision appear possible that previously did not seem feasible). It can also correct misunderstanding (e.g. accurate information about entry requirements to a particular occupation may be higher, or lower, than believed). When LMI is challenging, or even shocking (e.g. illustrating that a career ambition is not, for some reason, attainable), it needs to be used sensitively. The practitioner will also need to understand how to help the client handle the disequilibrium that comes with the information and interpret its meaning for their own situation. Within this context, it is hard to dispute the transformative potential of LMI in guidance.

Different types of LMI, in different formats are, therefore, required for guidance practice. Additionally, skills of giving information need to be developed to a high level to prevent LMI being given in an inappropriate, perhaps damaging manner. But exactly what types of LMI do career guidance practitioners say they need and what challenges have to be overcome to meet these requirements? The next section details the process that informed the structure and content of the NGRF website resource, and considers some of the limitations to providing what is required.

### **Researching collating and presenting LMI: the researcher's perspective**

The LMI available on the NGRF website (LMI Future Trends) has been

developed through a lengthy consultation process with practitioners, managers, trainers, researchers and employer-led organisations, particularly the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). This process has been ongoing and continues to be an essential element of developing, extending and refining the content. Reconciling the specific requirements of the guidance community with what can be made available has been problematic, but with the help of SSCs, much of the information practitioners identified has now been made available.

Initial consultations into what LMI is essential, desirable and most useful for guidance identified the following: equal opportunities issues; local and regional data; self-employment figures; detailed occupational information (including career paths, entry points and salaries); qualification level of the workforce; current developments in education and training; and types of employers (such as the number of small and medium enterprises). These elements informed both the structure and content of LMI on the NGRF. Consultations also revealed that for the LMI to be useful to practitioners it had to: be up-to-date; based on sectoral and occupational trends; include summaries and key points; be accessible, detailed and specialist; collated and distilled from varied sources; connected and linked to other sources; and presented in different formats (graphical, statistical, verbal, etc.). Additionally, web-based LMI emerged as a key priority (Bimrose et al, 2005a; Bimrose and Orton, 2005).

LMI available currently on the NGRF website comprises 30 sectors and broad occupations. Each of these 30 areas consists of ten sub-sections: sector information; regional information; education and training; occupations; equal opportunities; research; links and sources; data and charts; summary; and discussion points. Additionally, a key points section provides an overview and signposts to the main content. Sector information includes data on: employment figures and trends; requirements; skill shortages and gaps; replacement demands; employment trends in sub-sectors; and economic profiles. Much has been adapted from sector profiles, forecasting publications, such as Wilson et al (2006), and specific SSC labour market assessments. Occupational data are available from similar sources. Information on education, training, qualifications and workforce development is also considered essential by guidance practitioners. Again, these data are available from many of the more developed SSCs and from professional associations. Regional data are produced by many agencies, including the Regional Development Agencies, Regional Observatories and the Office for National Statistics. Sector specific data for the regions is produced by some of the SSCs. Comparable data for a cross country analysis is difficult to find, but is becoming more readily available from the more established SSCs, including the four most established 'Pathfinder' SSCs (that is, Skillset, CITB-ConstructionSkills, e-skills UK and SEMTA). So, the process of investigating, constructing and reconciling LMI

from different sources has been challenging. Particular difficulties have been experienced in attempting to address the need for local labour market information (LLMI), LMI with an equal opportunities dimension and salary scales. Yet another challenge relates to keeping LMI up-to-date.

Throughout the consultation process, career guidance practitioners have consistently requested LLMI. However, this is extremely difficult to collect and maintain, with inconsistencies existing in what is collected and updated at a local level. Whilst LLMI sources are available online (such as NOMIS and Neighbourhood Statistics), they require well-developed research skills to access and interpret the data. A further difficulty with LLMI is that it is often disaggregated to a level which is statistically unreliable and cannot be published. LLMI is often known and shared at local level, but cannot be collated and maintained on an online resource without the help of practitioners.

LMI with an equal opportunities dimension is also problematic because, with the exception of gender, this type of information is simply incomplete or unavailable. Data on minority ethnic groups and people with disabilities are available from national surveys (e.g. the Labour Force Survey), but are often statistically unreliable, as numbers are small. Consequently, these data are not published. SSCs are overcoming this by administering their own workforce surveys. Age profiles of sectors and occupations are also starting to become available. Data on sexual orientation or religion/belief is uncommon and limited to small-scale surveys.

Although considered useful by career practitioners, salary scales are difficult to find, date quickly and vary between contexts, even within the same occupational area. Some professional associations will detail salary scales and average gross weekly earnings, so linking the NGRF website to these sources is one reliable method of meeting this need.

Finally, the issue of currency of LMI presents a challenge. During consultation with practitioners for the NGRF website, regular updating was requested (i.e. 6 months or annually). However, this is simply not possible as trend and forecasting data is predominantly undertaken biennially, as it is time-consuming and resource-intensive.

LMI Future Trends on the NGRF website is compiled by a process of collation, distillation and editing using various sources that are available both online and in hard copy. The reliability and robustness of the data is scrutinised. This is crucial as many practitioners do not have the skills or time to interpret or verify the data by checking provenance, classifications (such as defining sectors by specific SIC<sup>i</sup> and/or SOC<sup>ii</sup> codes) and source dates (Bimrose et al, 2005a). The

remit of SSCs is often broader encompassing more SIC codes than would be expected or used in forecasting models<sup>iii</sup>. Consequently, sources have to be carefully selected and warnings about usage included where appropriate. As LMI Future Trends is compiled from various sources, it can sometimes appear to be inconsistent and limited. The first versions of the sectors were very much reliant on what was freely available, but with the help of the SSCs, this is now changing.

The work of updating the LMI available on the NGRF website has been and represents a successful process of not only ensuring comprehensive and current data, but LMI that is relevant to guidance practice.

Working with SSCs to update and extend the LMI available on the NGRF website has involved several stages and the approach used was first piloted with Skillset. It has involved several iterations of researching, writing, editing and reviewing. Through this process, a highly beneficial and reciprocal relationship has been developed. This has ensured that accurate and comprehensive LMI is presented in new ways so that it is relevant to guidance practice. This is an example of transforming practice by providing accessible LMI that is not only endorsed by sector specialists, but is also available in one central place.

### **Making LMI available for career guidance: an employer's perspective**

As independent, employer-led organisations licensed by government to tackle the skills and productivity needs of their sector, SSCs are the guardians of definitive industry LMI. SSCs know their sectors best. They work closely with their employers to collect accurate and up-to-date understanding of the jobs, skills requirements, entry routes and preferred qualifications for their sectors. SSCs also have an accurate understanding of a wide range of occupations, including the little known employment opportunities. It is clearly in employers' interests to make information about their industries available to the guidance community, so that careers practitioners in turn are able to feel confident that their practice is based on accurate, reliable and comprehensive LMI.

Skillset, the SSC for the audio visual industries, is currently leading on a project funded by the Department for Education and Skills that aims to bring industry and information, advice and guidance services closer together. The project emerged from the results of recent research undertaken by the Sector Skills Development Agency's (SSDA) cross sector board (now the Business Skills Board), and the Warwick Institute of Employment Research (IER). Specifically, IER researched the information, advice and guidance services currently offered through SSCs and how these could be developed to further complement local and national provision for adults (Bimrose et al, 2005b). Findings revealed

different levels of activity and commitment to information, advice and guidance across SSCs, but as a minimum service offer, it was concluded that all SSCs could provide current and accurate LMI for guidance. Consequently, this potential contribution from the Sector Skills Councils to a universal career service is currently being piloted and evaluated. It also links to the extended information, advice and guidance telephone helpline service being delivered by Ufi learndirect. Findings from the pilot will feed directly into the current review of information, advice and guidance provision for adults as proposed in the Skills Strategy (HM Government, 2005).

The first part of this government funded initiative requires that SSCs determine how, exactly, information, advice and guidance supports their sectors' skills priorities. Second, they will work collaboratively to ensure that relevant LMI is disseminated effectively to the guidance community. Third, they will offer ongoing support to career practitioners using LMI to offer an enhanced service to clients. In order that the second objective is met, the existing LMI for careers practitioners on the NGRF website will be audited on a sector-by-sector basis. Then LMI will be collected and published to fill the gaps identified. To meet the third objective, continuous professional development will be offered to practitioners from the guidance community. This will comprise a series of regional workshops to assist with the interpretation and application of LMI during guidance sessions with clients. The workshop template will also be made available to advisers online, thus reaching a wider audience.

Throughout the project, each SSC will upload additional and more detailed occupational information onto their websites. Additionally, they will plan and deliver their own information, advice and guidance services to complement local and national provision, by offering a further point of contact for clients requiring more in-depth, specialist information on particular industries. Links can also be made with existing regional initiatives and related European developments.

Three groups of SSCs are participating, all at different stages of developing their information, advice and guidance services. The first comprises the four Pathfinder Sector Skills Councils: Skillset, SEMTA, e-skills UK and CITB-ConstructionSkills, which have the most developed services. The second group consists of six SSCs, developing their information, advice and guidance function: Skillfast-UK, COGENT, SkillsActive, Skills for Health, LANTRA and Skills for Logistics. Finally, the third grouping involves two SSCs tasked with developing their Sector Skills Agreements to fit within the project and the overall Skills Strategy Review timescales. These are Skills for Justice and Improve.

Overall, this initiative will ensure that career practitioners in publicly-funded

careers agencies will be supported in their work by providing easy access to the most authoritative source of industry LMI on the NGRF website. This initiative will also provide a training framework that will eventually be used by other SSCs across the Skills for Business Network.

## **Conclusion**

LMI is a crucial feature of career guidance. Clients like it and practitioners need it. Used skilfully, it has the potential to enhance the guidance process in a multitude of ways, though various challenges have to be overcome so that practitioners can use LMI effectively in their work. Reliable, high quality, up-to-date, comprehensive, industry-based LMI needs to be easily accessible. Practitioners need to be equipped with the skills to mediate and interpret LMI in a manner that meets the varied needs of their clients and is also consistent with the theoretical approach that informs their practice. And they need to understand that not all of the LMI they require exists. Until recently, there has been no national resource for LMI for guidance. The partnership between researchers developing the National Guidance Research Forum website based at the Warwick Institute for Employment Research and the Sector Skills Councils represents a unique working relationship. This relationship has ensured that the LMI that is required for career guidance practice is available and can be easily accessed.

The National Guidance Research Forum website can be accessed at:  
<http://www.guidance-research.org>

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<sup>i</sup>SIC (Standard Industrial Classification) are used for classifying business establishments and other statistical units by the type of economic activity in which they are engaged.

<sup>ii</sup>SOC (Standard Occupational Classification) classifies occupations by the kind of work performed (job), and the competent performance of the tasks and duties (skill).

<sup>iii</sup>For instance, e-skills UK SSC includes IT, telecommunications and contact centres (SIC codes 22.33, 64.2, 72, 74.86), compared to Working Futures (2005) which has forecasts for 'computing services' (SIC code 72) and 'communications' (SIC code 64).

# Chapter Eight

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## Disconnecting Connexions

A.G. Watts

### Abstract

This paper provides a critical commentary on the policy proposals relating to career guidance contained in the Youth Green Paper and the Government's subsequent consultation response. It seeks to place the proposals in an historical context, reviewing in particular the flaws in the design of the Connexions Service, and the impact of Connexions on the delivery of career education and guidance. It also examines national and international research evidence relevant to the proposals. It concludes that the Green Paper ignored this evidence, and that implementation of its proposals is likely to further undermine effective career guidance practice.

### Introduction

The models of career guidance practice for young people in the UK have been built on a partnership between, on the one hand, provision made within schools and colleges, and on the other, the external contribution provided by the Careers Service, now the Connexions Service. Many countries have had only one of these forms of provision. The UK has had the merits of both, with the distinctive advantages that each of them brings.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the partnership model remains strongly in place. Indeed, it is being used as the base for building a genuinely all-age career guidance service (Watts, 2006). But in England, the model has been significantly eroded under Connexions. Now, with the publication of the End to End Review of Careers Education and Guidance (DfES, 2005a), the Youth Matters Green Paper (HM Government, 2005), and the Government's response to the consultation on the Green Paper (DfES, 2006), its future has been placed seriously at risk – not by design, but by default.

From a career guidance perspective, the key features of the Green Paper are eight-fold:

- Career guidance is subsumed within a generic concept of 'information, advice and guidance' (IAG), which covers choices relating not only to learning and work but also to leisure, health, relationships, smoking, alcohol and drugs.
- A clear distinction is drawn between 'universal IAG' and 'targeted support'.
- The primary responsibility for 'universal IAG' is allocated, via local

authorities, to schools and colleges, in collaboration with the new Children's Trusts.

- There is encouragement for schools and colleges to agree local arrangements on a collaborative basis; but they will reserve the right to make their own arrangements, subject to meeting quality standards.
- Schools/colleges and Children's Trusts can, if they wish, buy in services from Connexions or other providers.
- Connexions is effectively to disappear as a national service, though some local services will remain, and local authorities are encouraged to retain the Connexions brand.
- Consideration is to be given to new arrangements for assuring the quality and impartiality of IAG through quality standards.
- All the new arrangements are to be in place by 2008.

The Government's subsequent consultation response essentially confirms these proposals. It ignores the requirement in the Education Act 1997 that schools should provide access to careers services. This requirement was designed to assure pupils' access to impartial advice. The 1997 Act currently remains on the Statute Book, but the principle underpinning the Act has clearly been abandoned. The emphasis now is on the IAG provided by the learning provider 'as an integral part of the learning experience' (DfES, 2006: para.6.5). There is a recognition that 'even young people may still have issues that they would prefer to discuss with someone unconnected to the school or college' (ibid: para.6.6), but this is weakly framed, and implicitly left for such young people to seek out; its phrasing suggests that it is more concerned with confidentiality related to private matters than with impartial career guidance. Impartiality is now to be secured not by access to an external service but through the application of quality standards and 'progression measures' to internal school/college provision. In this critical sense, the basis of the partnership model has been abandoned.

It seems, then, that England is moving towards what is at its core a school/college-based guidance model, and towards subsuming career guidance even further within generic services, at a time when – as we shall see later – international evidence has clearly indicated the weaknesses of both of these models. Certainly there is support for collaborative arrangements at local level. There are still opportunities to secure local arrangements that preserve important elements of the partnership between schools and external careers services. But the partnership model is no longer the national policy framework for the provision of career education and guidance to young people in England.

To understand how this has happened, it is necessary to review briefly the history of Connexions, and how the Careers Service was subsumed within it.

**Connexions: the design flaws**

Connexions was well-intentioned. But its design flaws were evident from its outset (for a fuller analysis, see Watts, 2001).

The original aim of Connexions was to bring together the various youth, social and other services involved in meeting the needs of young people who had dropped out of formal education, training and employment (the so-called 'NEET' group), or were at risk of doing so. But the Careers Service was the only service totally subsumed within the new structure. The reason was that the Careers Service was the only relevant budget controlled by central government, and therefore the only budget that the Government could readily get hold of. The cover rationale was to avoid stigmatisation. Thus Malcolm Wicks, the relevant junior Minister at the time, quoted in Parliament from Richard Titmuss: 'If poor people's services are just for poor people, they tend to be poor services.' Accordingly, Malcolm Wicks said: 'it will be a universal service for all people, because that is the most civilised and dignified way of giving support to the most disadvantaged' (Hansard, 27 June 2000). In other words, the universal service was a second-order consideration: Connexions was to be universal only as a means to achieving its targeted ends.

Thus the reality is that Connexions has been a targeted service housed within a minimal universal service – or, put more provocatively, cloaked within the garb of a universal service. If one wants a genuinely 'universal but targeted' service, the only logically coherent way to plan it is first to design the universal service and then to add the extra elements that are needed to ensure that the distinctive needs of the targeted group are addressed. Connexions was designed precisely the other way round. Its key design features were all based on the needs of the targeted group. This has been evident in:

- Its holistic approach. For the targeted group, this makes total sense: their educational and vocational problems are integrally connected to their personal and social problems, which often have to be addressed first. For a universal service, however, a holistic service is simply not deliverable. Connexions has found it difficult even to provide a career guidance interview for many young people: the extent of such interviews has been significantly reduced (Ofsted, 2005). One way of making sense of such a situation in resource terms is to take the view that, for most young people, information is sufficient. But career choices are complex and deeply personal; the notion that they can be addressed adequately by accessing information on the Web is risible. An alternative rationalisation is that, if parents want more, they can pay for it. This implies an abandonment of the principle of universal provision, and of career guidance as a public as well as a private good.

- Subsuming the role of the Careers Adviser within that of the Personal Adviser. This has represented, in the eyes of many career guidance practitioners, a direct attack on their professionalism. But it has been necessary so that the under-provision of the universal service within Connexions could be disguised and managed. Its consequence is that young people do not know whether the Personal Adviser they are working with has been trained professionally in career guidance, or not.
- Its performance measures. These have all related to the targeted group. Special attention has been given to reducing the size of the NEET group. Much publicity has been given to the success of Connexions in this respect, but this may have been due in significant part to extraneous factors like the state of the economy; it could boomerang if the economy goes into recession. Meanwhile, there have been no performance measures for the universal service. Since performance measures are designed to drive performance, it is hardly surprising that the universal service has been eroded.

I and others pointed out these and other design flaws at the inception of Connexions (see Watts, 2001), arguing that if they were recognised, steps could be taken to ameliorate them. In the event, many of the administrative decisions that have been made have exacerbated the flaws rather than addressed them.

Practitioners have tried to make sense of these decisions, and have done some valiant work. There has indeed been much innovative action within Connexions, though largely with the targeted group. Connexions has certainly, for example, strengthened partnership working (see Coles et al, 2004). And the involvement of young people in the design of services has been a significant advance, which has produced valuable benefits. It is important that such lessons are sustained, whatever the operational model for the delivery of services may be in future.

But unchecked, the damage caused by the flaws within Connexions is likely to grow. This is because of the continuing dynamics within the structures of Connexions. The resources available for work with the targeted group are inadequate, and probably always will be, because such work can consume whatever resources are provided for it. And it is the targeted group that is the sole focus of concern for most of the members of Connexions Partnerships. From their point-of-view, any universal services take away resources from the young people who need them most.

These dynamics are now being exacerbated by the integration of Connexions into Children's Trusts. This means that career guidance is being subsumed not just within the social exclusion agenda but also within the child protection agenda. Inevitably, the main focus of Children's Trusts will be on the early years.

The Government is also proposing further 'workforce reform', with the Personal Adviser now being merged into a new generic worker (to bring together elements of educational welfare, youth work and Personal Adviser roles). The predictable result will be that career guidance in general, and Careers Advisers in particular, will be further marginalised.

More recently, the debate has got further caught up in the moral panic about the 'yobbish' behaviour of young people. The five-year strategy for education trailed a 'new, integrated youth offer' (DfES, 2004:73) and emphasised the role that schools would play in implementing this offer. This is an important focus of the Youth Matters Green Paper.

So what has happened is that career guidance has been sequentially subsumed within three other agendas: social inclusion, child protection, and addressing 'yobbish' behaviour. All demand 'integration' of services. Integration is a dangerous concept. Unlike such concepts as co-ordination and collaboration, it implies removal of boundaries. This means that services are placed at the mercy of the latest political whim, and lose the professionalism that alone can assure their quality and their sustainability.

### **The end-to-end review**

In the light of widely expressed concerns on these matters, there was a broad welcome when the Government, early in 2004, set up an end-to-end review of career education and guidance in schools, colleges and Connexions. The key conclusions of the review were three-fold:

- That career education and guidance provision should not be part of provision to combat social exclusion.
- That Connexions cannot deliver both of these forms of provision, partly because of inadequate resources, and partly because of its incapacity to influence schools and colleges.
- That the current arrangements are not sustainable.

These conclusions were supported by a research study on Connexions by a team from De Montfort, Bristol and Derby Universities, which concluded that Connexions looked more like two services than one, and was resourced inadequately to meet the demands of both universal and targeted provision (Hoggarth and Smith, 2004).

The review's diagnosis was clear, cogent and well-grounded. But its prescription did not follow from its diagnosis. Its main conclusion was that 'schools are best placed to bring about improvement in CEG provision'. This conclusion did not emerge from any clear argument or considered rejection of

alternatives. Indeed, it was undermined by much evidence within the review itself (for a detailed critique, see Watts, 2005b). Alternatives such as strengthening the partnership model and moving towards an all-age service were not rejected: they were not even considered. This stemmed from the review's limited terms of reference, and from preconceived views adopted within DfES.

The nature of these views had already been made evident when, prior to the publication of the review, a front-page article appeared in the Times Educational Supplement (28 January 2005) indicating that Ministers had decided to dismantle the Connexions Service. Two main policy options were mentioned in the article:

- To hand control to Children's Trusts.
- To pass the Connexions resources to schools and colleges.

The favoured option, as the leaks continued, was that Connexions would be split into two, with the 'social inclusion' funding (calculated, interestingly, as 60% of the whole) to go to Children's Trusts, and the remainder (40%) to schools and colleges.

This proposal has been somewhat modified in the Green Paper. There is support for maintaining 'high-performing' Connexions services; there is encouragement for schools and colleges to plan their services in clusters, with Local Authorities playing an important role; and there are possibilities for schools and colleges to buy-in careers services from outside. But the bottom line is that the Green Paper places ultimate service-purchasing powers in the hands of schools and colleges, and permits them if they so wish to provide all their services internally.

### **Reviewing the options**

The notion of passing resources to schools and colleges means that England is effectively moving to a school/college-based career guidance model. This, ironically, is happening at the very time when the OECD (2004), on the basis of an extensive review of career guidance systems in many countries, has indicated conclusively the limitations of such a model, in three respects:

- Its weak links with the labour market, and its tendency to view educational choices as ends in themselves without attention to their longer-term career implications.
- Its lack of impartiality, and the tendency for schools to promote their own provision rather than college- or work-based routes.
- Its lack of consistency: the policy levers on schools and colleges to deliver

services in this area tend to be weak, and services to be patchy both in extent and in quality.

OECD accordingly pointed out the merits of a delivery model based on a partnership between schools and colleges on the one hand, and on the other, an external service that is closer to the labour market and is able to provide impartial guidance at a consistent standard. This is, of course, precisely the model that the UK has had in the past.

It is also the model that the rest of the UK has retained. In Scotland and Wales, as mentioned earlier, careers services have been strengthened by restructuring them as all-age services, with a strong national identity (Careers Scotland and Careers Wales respectively); Northern Ireland is moving in a broadly similar direction (McCarthy and Millar, 2006). My independent review of Careers Scotland, benchmarked against the OECD Career Guidance Policy Review, concluded that the practices it is adopting are comparable to leading good practice across the world, and that it has the potential to be a world-leading public career planning service (Watts, 2005a). An independent review of Careers Wales (Moulson and Prail, 2004) was similarly very positive. The positive conclusions of these two reviews contrast markedly with the negative conclusions of the 'end-to end review' in England.

In my view, the proposal to split Connexions was well-grounded, and in line with the analysis in the end-to-end review and in the De Montfort/Bristol/Derby evaluation report (Hoggarth and Smith, 2004). The strongest case, however, is for the career guidance funding to go not to schools and colleges but to an new all-age career guidance service, constructed along the lines of the services in Scotland and Wales. This could provide a spine, as it does in those countries, for strengthening services for adults as well as young people, and for assuring continuity between the two, with the synergy and cost savings this would involve. There could then be strong links at operational level between this service and the social-inclusion work of Children's Trusts.

A proposal along these lines was adopted by the Conservative Party in its manifesto for the 2005 General Election. It was also, ironically, very close to the proposal in a Labour Party paper (known as the Byers/Gee paper), which only failed to be published prior to the 1997 General Election because John Major called the election earlier than expected. After the 1997 election, David Blunkett promised to publish the paper; but he never did. Instead, the debate became overtaken by the social exclusion debate, first through the 'focusing agenda' and then with the establishment of Connexions. Had John Major waited a few more days, the paper would have been published as a Labour Party document, and the subsequent history would have been very different (for a fuller account,



see Watts, 2001).

But now it seems clear that the Government has rejected this all-age model. It has also, apparently, abandoned the 60-40 split, which was the best guarantee of establishing some boundaries around the career guidance provision. In doing so, and in integrating career guidance within a holistic concept of 'information, advice and guidance', it has ignored another clear finding of the OECD review: the risk of career guidance in schools being marginalised within a broad concept of guidance. This and the parallel World Bank review (Watts and Fretwell, 2004) indicated that many countries had guidance systems based on holistic roles covering personal and social as well as educational and vocational guidance. In such schools, there was consistent evidence that career guidance tended to get marginalised and 'crowded out', because the pressing nature of the personal and behavioural problems of a minority of young people meant that the guidance counsellors spent much of their time on these problems, at the expense of the help needed by all young people in relation to their educational and vocational choices. In Norway, the OECD report noted with interest, the career guidance role was being split off, partly to protect its resourcing, and partly to address its distinctive competence requirements, including knowledge of the labour market. Again, England seems to be going in precisely the opposite direction.

Career choices – i.e. choices relating to learning and work – are generically different from those relating to personal and social matters. They are public as well as private choices, in the sense that they determine the core roles that individuals play in the public domain. When people move into educational institutions or into workplaces, they move into public spaces. The roles they play there prepare them for, and then deliver, the core public roles through which they contribute to the societies of which they are part. These roles have implications for their wider lifestyles, and are affected by these lifestyles; but they are not just lifestyle choices. They are affected by opportunity structures and labour market demand as well as by personal preference; they also have implications for the efficiency and effectiveness of these structures, which is why they are of particular relevance to public policy. It is because, in these senses, they are public as well as private choices that guidance relating to them is a public as well as a private good. Career guidance should be linked to wider guidance services, but should not be subsumed within them.

So, if funding is to go to schools, there are at least three questions that need to be posed:

- Will it be ring-fenced (unlike, for example, the current funding for enterprise education)?

- If so, how precisely will the 'ring' be defined?
- What quality constraints will there be on determining how the money is spent?

The notion is that the schools should be encouraged to buy back services from Connexions and other external services. But this has been tried in other countries, including the Netherlands and New Zealand. Experience there indicates that:

- Many schools choose to keep the money and provide their own services.
- Where they do buy in services, they do so on their terms. In the OECD review of career guidance in the Netherlands, there was evidence that a couple of schools had cancelled their contracts with an external agency because it had advised some students that it might be in their best interests to leave the school and move elsewhere (OECD, 2002).

The same is likely to happen in England unless strong policy levers are used to prevent it.

A recent report on quality awards (Andrews, 2005) suggests one possible route: the funding could be made dependent on achievement of a national or nationally accredited quality award. The Green Paper indicated that consultation was to take place on 'how we might build on existing standards for careers education and guidance (including the careers education and guidance framework and the Matrix standards for adult guidance) to provide standards against which Ofsted could inspect' (HM Government, 2005: para.179). The Government's subsequent consultation response, however, indicates that the quality standards to be developed are to relate not to careers education and guidance but to 'information, advice and guidance'. Moreover, if such standards are to bite, they have to be robust, and access to funding has to be dependent on meeting the standards; the Government's 'new relationship with schools', based on reducing rather than increasing the constraints on school autonomy, is likely, in effect, to preclude such levers. Finally, on the crucial issue of impartiality, it seems implausible that standards of this kind will deal effectively with the subtle ways in which partiality is transmitted within schools.

A further point to note is that the 'buy back' model is likely to encourage services to be packaged around psychometric measures, as they have in the private-school sector. This will drive back practice towards outdated 'matching' approaches, in place of the collaborative developmental approach that has characterised the partnership model at its best.

**Evidence?**

What, then, is the evidence to support the current proposals? A senior civil servant, in arguing the case in a meeting with representatives of career guidance professionals held in January 2005, referred to the 'Southampton research'. He claimed this research demonstrated that the learning-choice and career guidance young people needed could be provided as effectively (and more cost-efficiently) by teachers or other in-school staff given limited training. The view apparently was that young people got their career advice mainly from teachers and parents, with no strong evidence of value for money or effectiveness of advice from independent expert career guidance. The Southampton evidence was invoked to support the proposal to pass the funding to schools and colleges.

The only research that this civil servant could have had in mind was that conducted by Professor Nick Fosskett and his colleagues. This research provides no evidence to support these assertions. On the contrary, the two reports in question (Fosskett, Dyke and Maringe, 2004; Lumby, Fosskett and Maringe, 2003) provide extensive evidence of:

- the limitations and weaknesses of the career advice and support received by school pupils from teachers and parents;
- in particular, the ways in which schools with sixth forms limit the information and guidance available to pupils at 16, to favour their own provision (adding to a large body of evidence, from Ofsted and others, on this point);
- accordingly, the importance of continuing to supplement this advice and support with more impartial and more expert guidance from a service external to schools;
- the need to increase the extent and accessibility of this external service.

This research, it is important to note, comprised evaluations of the partnership model after it had been eroded first through the so-called 'focusing agenda' (which encouraged careers services to give greater priority to 'at risk' young people) and then through the establishment of Connexions. Despite the erosion, the evaluations showed that the benefits of the partnership model remained evident, particularly in schools where the partnership between schools and the external service was strongest. The key policy issue raised by the research was how to apply the partnership model effectively to all schools, drawing from earlier as well as current practice.

The 'Southampton research' thus provided no evidence whatever to support the abandonment of the partnership model; indeed, it supported the strengthening of the model. Meanwhile, no reference was made to the

important research carried out by the NFER in the mid-1990s, when the Careers Service was still operating as an entity (Morris, Lines and Golden, 1999). This found that pupils' career-related skills were best developed where there was a close integration of programme delivery between schools and the providers of professional careers support. These findings corresponded closely to the real findings of the 'Southampton research'.

## Conclusion

The new Labour Government, when it came to power in 1997, asserted the importance of evidence-based policy (Cabinet Office, 1999). In relation to the future of career guidance, it has been prepared to ignore a major body of international evidence collected by an authoritative international organisation, to neglect a significant body of national research from NFER, and to misunderstand or misrepresent a parallel body of national evidence from Southampton University. Such comments do not only apply to the career guidance aspects of the Green Paper: from a wider youth service perspective. Coles (2005:15) has commented that 'this Green Paper is almost entirely an evidence-free zone'.

Ironically, in the wake of the Skills White Paper (DfES, 2005b), the Government has chosen to launch an open and wide-ranging review of adult guidance. The review includes a strong consultative process, and thorough reviews of the relevant research literature. But what is arguably the strongest policy option – an all-age service – has already been effectively precluded by decisions related to career guidance for young people: decisions which have been made without any such review process or evidence base.

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# Chapter Nine

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## Fact or fiction?

### Transforming careers evidence into action

Deirdre Hughes

#### Abstract

*Services designed to provide information, advice and guidance to young people and adults have been set a major challenge by government policymakers to provide evidence that demonstrates the extent to which different forms of provision yield positive returns. Some of the problems associated with assessing and measuring the quality and impact of career guidance interventions are explored, drawing on findings from European and other UK research. Possible strategies for developing sufficient robust data on the effectiveness of careers work is reviewed. Here, 21st century careers work is viewed as having to operate within a new and dynamic culture of intelligence gathering that manages to separate fact from fiction.*

#### Introduction

Services need to be available at times and in forms which will encourage all citizens to continue to develop their skills and competences throughout their lives, linked to changing needs in the labour market. Such services need to be viewed as an active tool, and individuals should be positively encouraged to use them.

(Resolution 9286/04 EDUC 109 SOC 234, 18 May 2004).

The search for meaningful and factual evidence that clearly demonstrates the social and economic benefits of career guidance is a world-wide phenomenon. During the 1990s, a strong case was made by Killeen et al (1992; 1999) for the economic value of career guidance, followed by a contrasting emphasis on the social benefits of career guidance'. This dual approach was designed to inform differing political parties on the merits of investing in the development of high-quality careers work. More recently, it has been argued that the benefits provided by career services must be made more explicit in order to retain and improve levels of current and future funding and that evidence-based practice should be developed that demonstrates the extent to which different forms of provision can yield positive returns for various recipients (Sampson et al, 2004; Mayston 2002, Hiebert, 2004, Magnusson and Lalande, 2005). Evidence-based practice (EBP) is a process of self-directed and lifelong learning in which caring about clients' requirements creates the need for information on diagnosis,



prognosis, responses and other factors impacting on individuals' career development. Being able to identify both 'quantifiable' and 'qualitative' service achievements is integral to the processes of resource allocation and setting of targets for service providers. Yet despite a proliferation of performance indicators and quality assurance measures developed and/or adopted by career guidance services throughout the UK, there still remains a 'fact or fiction debate' on the added-value of differing forms of guidance interventions. Policy-makers, practitioners and managers are inextricably linked in their pursuit of finding new evidence on what really works best for the consumer.

This chapter briefly examines the changing nature of information, advice and guidance services in the UK. In this context, it examines some of the problems associated with assessing and measuring the quality and impact of career guidance interventions, drawing on findings from European and other UK research on indicators and benchmarks in career guidance. The relationship between leadership in quality assurance and the lack of a common terminology to describe the impact derived from various guidance-related interventions, and how these both translate into staff training programmes are considered. It is argued that the securing of high quality, cost-effective services requires a more rigorous and systematic approach towards data collation and analysis, whereby practitioners and managers within organisations need to apply assessment techniques that are significantly more sophisticated than those presently used. Simply to rely on customer satisfaction is not enough. Practitioners and managers have to be innovative, resourceful and preventive in their approach to relationships with clients; this requires an organisational culture that is totally consumer *and* research focused.

### **The current state of play**

As part of a Career Guidance Policy Review (OECD, 2003) many strengths within the career guidance system in the UK were identified in comparison to other OECD countries. These included the extent and diversity of provision, the efforts made to make it widely accessible, the high level of innovation, the attention paid to quality, and an underpinning research and evaluation infrastructure. However, the review also indicated that with this diversity of provision comes the challenge of developing a coherent institutional framework, including government agencies and professional associations, to inform and support the development of high quality career guidance services. Policy-makers, managers and practitioners have attempted to reconcile the concept of managing 'diversity' in provision, by adopting both 'centralised' and 'localised' approaches to information, advice and guidance (IAG). For example, throughout the UK, large institutions such as Jobcentre Plus and learndirect ensure a high degree of coherence of provision in relation to employment services, labour market information and advice on learning opportunities. In Northern Ireland,

Wales and Scotland, careers companies deliver an all-age service, working in partnership with a variety of localised community and voluntary organisations to achieve coherence. In England separate institutional arrangements apply for young people and for adults, with formalised working links between Connexions, Children's Trust partnerships and nextstep contractors respectively creating new frameworks to support coherence and consistency.

The policy imperative to provide high-quality and easily accessible IAG services for young people and adults, allied to the growth of increasingly sophisticated technical means of delivery, has resulted in the use of a variety of delivery methods within differing delivery settings. Current methods include delivery through:

- face-to-face interactions, on a one-to-one basis and/or through group session activities rooted in 'discrete' careers provision or 'embedded' within curriculum, training, workplace and/or community settings;
- technically mediated counsellor-client interactions, on either a synchronous (e.g. telephone) or asynchronous (e.g. e-mail or text) basis; and
- standardised ICT-based services, through dedicated or allied career learning websites which can be repeatedly used by different users.

The use of information and communication technologies (ICT), including websites, telephone helplines and e-mail, offers individuals new and extended access to information, advice and guidance provision. Watts (1997) indicates that the ICT relationship to this form of provision can be viewed in three ways; it can be seen as a *tool*, extending the range of service available; as an *alternative* replacing other elements of the service; or as an *agent for change*, providing an opportunity to review the basic design of provision. He also argues that such technologies 'can also make it easier to match service resources to demand flows (e.g. reducing or avoiding waiting times on the part of both counsellor and client – thus with e-mail guidance, for instance, there are no no-shows and no wasted time between clients' (Watts & Dent, 2006, p.182). This implication of cost efficiency savings and improved productivity resonates strongly with HM Treasury demands for greater accountability in the public sector. For the guidance practitioner and/or manager, the new 21st century imperative is to embrace accountability by providing evidence beyond basic 'throughputs' and 'outcomes' that demonstrate scarce resources are being deployed to maximum effect.

From this, it is argued that resource allocation needs to be weighted according to user preferences. Taylor et al (2005) report strong interest from the general public in the potential use of electronic channels such as email, the internet and digital TV to access IAG services, with two-thirds of adults surveyed stating

they would be very or fairly interested. However, the research findings also highlighted that the 'one in three' who did not express any or very little interest in online IAG stated reasons such as 'a certain lack of confidence with technology per se'. For these individuals the technological solution does not apply given their preference for face-to-face contact. As a result, it is likely that a dual approach will remain necessary for the foreseeable future; however, the level of resource required to meet consumer demand is, as yet, unknown. Here it is argued that guidance professionals and their partner organisations, need to provide government policymakers and potential 'new investors' with sufficient robust data on the effectiveness of differing delivery methods.

### **The effectiveness of differing delivery methods**

Guidance policy reviews highlight that policy development for career guidance needs to be supported by data on the financial and human resources allocated to career guidance, on citizen need and demand for services, on user satisfaction, and on the outcomes and cost-effectiveness of career guidance. Research evidence does exist, mostly from the USA (Spokane and Oliver, 1983; Oliver and Spokane, 1988; Whiston et al, 1999; Brown & Ryan-Kane, 2000; Whiston, 2002; and Whiston et al, 2003), on the effectiveness of different delivery methods relative to the amount of client and practitioner time invested. These studies indicated that although one-to-one guidance brought about the greatest gain for the individual client in the shortest amount of his/her time invested, computer-based and class-based interventions were most effective in providing the greatest gain for the greatest number of clients per unit of practitioner time. It must be emphasised that most of these research studies did not include any systematic measurement of needs in terms of, for example, readiness for decision-making. Had they done so, it is possible that the size of the reported relative effectiveness of the intervention methods would have been affected.

Offer (2005) notes there is only minimal research evidence on the effectiveness and efficiency of career interventions by telephone and by e-mail. Although interventions by telephone often appear to be shorter than face-to-face interventions and this, combined with queuing facilities, is likely to result in the more efficient use staff time (Watts & Dent, 2002). The recently launched e-telephone guidance initiative in England, which is being subject to a major evaluation, should yield reliable evidence on this issue.

Also, throughout the UK, there is *significant* potential to learn from the experiences of the education sector and other major IAG providers such as Jobcentre Plus. For example, a government White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (2003), explicitly recognises the importance of the concept of 'value added'. It stated:

We have asked HEFCE to review current methodologies for recording student achievement and to develop more sophisticated ways of measuring “value added” – the distance travelled by the individual learner. (para. 4.9, p. 48).

The DfES has piloted a scheme for computing the value added that schools provide for pupils as they move from Key Stage 2 to GCSE/GNVQ level. The value added measure is based on comparing GCSE/GNVQ performance with the median - or middle - GCSE/GNVQ performance of other pupils with the same or similar prior attainment at Key Stage 2. For measuring its impact in successfully moving customers into jobs, Jobcentre Plus uses a sophisticated points system, with points allocated according to the employment or benefit status of the individual whether they belong to certain priority groups and whether they live in one of a number of geographical areas where unemployment is high. To a large extent, these parallel developments remain currently untapped by career guidance practitioners and managers of UK guidance services. It is most likely that without a greater emphasis on the longer-term impact of interventions, and in the absence of value for money and unit costs, services remain vulnerable in relation to their long-term sustainability.

### **Measuring the quality and impact of interventions**

The issue of measuring the quality and impact of career guidance interventions is multi-faceted and complex. Given that this is a human activity, which is mostly subject to degrees of unpredictability and uncertainty (particularly in relation to individual values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours), it is unsurprising that impact is difficult, if not sometimes impossible, to measure. There is a wide range of factors that influence individual career choice and decision-making that can impact on outcomes. Career guidance is frequently not a discrete input, but rather embedded in other contexts, such as learning provision, employer/employee relationships, workforce development strategies and/or within multi-strand initiatives. Comparing the evidence available in different studies is, therefore, problematic when the nature of career guidance, the depth of work undertaken and the nature of client groups all often vary considerably and there is no agreed set of outcome measures for career guidance, or common methods of collecting data (except in the case of a limited number of discrete programmes or areas of work). Sultana (2005) supports this proposition, highlighting the difficulty of seeking to isolate career guidance for the purposes of establishing causal relationships (e.g. between guidance provision and ‘drop-out’ rates). In a review of recent evaluation studies of IAG services, Hughes and Gratton (2006) report that the most commonly assessed variables were perceptions of the service/product and satisfaction ratings, with employment and education-related progression outcomes less common, and value for money and unit costs calculations the least common. Hillage et al

(2005) highlight the absence of a common set of agreed performance indicators and/or benchmarks for assessing and measuring the impact of IAG services, that is, different providers largely use their own customised systems. Therefore, it is argued strongly that services need to become more sophisticated in their approach to gathering useful data on the impact and cost of differing forms of interventions. In this context, the guidance practitioner must decide whether it is feasible to provide data that goes beyond the minimum requirements specified by their employer and/ or funder.

*A proliferation of quality assurance strategies and performance measures.*

Clearly, evidence-based practice has the potential to: improve the quality of services to customers; maximise efficiency and value for money; support the transparency and accountability of decision-making; empower practitioners and managers as well as nurturing self-directed learning for all staff. For evidence-based practice to be truly effective, two key elements must be in place: (i) access to relevant and reliable evidence of the critical factors affecting delivery and of what works best, and (ii) arrangements that ensure the evidence feeds into the decision-making and quality assurance processes, and results in appropriate action. Throughout the UK and further a field, differing quality-assurance models exist that have been developed and applied to the planning, management and delivery of career guidance services. These include approaches that seek to:

- (i) standardise the process of organisational self-assessment (Hillage et al, 2005);
- (ii) measure the effectiveness of IAG based upon 'ideal input' factors (Mayston, 2002);
- (iii) gather evidence to demonstrate accountability (Sampson et al, 2004);
- (iv) distinguish between the various input, process and outcome factors involved in the delivery of IAG (de Boer et al, 2005); and
- (v) apply a tri-variable model of quality assurance for IAG (Evangelista, 2003).

Although these models differ in the detail of their content and application, there is a common underlying theme that quality assurance is typically a process of organizational self-assessment involving the evaluation of inputs and processes, such as staff and delivery methods, in relation to desired outcomes, such as client satisfaction and progression. In the UK, there is no shortage of quality standards in IAG, as evidenced through the matrix standard, Quality Assurance Authority (QAA) benchmarks for career education and guidance in higher education, and at least 27 individually kite marked standards designed to improve career education and guidance for young people and staff working in schools and colleges. However, the specific procedures of quality assurance change periodically. All of these require individuals to set up audit trails, cross

reference management information, gather client and curriculum data through a systematic means that will help prove that services are both impacting and effective. In some cases, it could be argued that the laborious process of constructing the evidence base, often tends to lead to a sense of 'portfolio achievement' and /or 'fatigue' on the part of those responsible for leading on the quality assurance initiative. Quality assurance is part of a continuous improvement cycle, therefore, it would be foolish to suggest that services do not take this beyond the formal assessment stage. However, the key question posed is to what extent is the range of data analysed and utilised beyond the quality 'assessment' phase? Basically, why do we still have a shortage of experiential evidence on the effectiveness of differing forms of interventions? Also, why do practitioners often report that their views are not always valued in this regard?

### **Vision and leadership**

Osseo-Asare et al (2005) identify 'leadership' as one of the critical success factors for sustaining continuous improvement in any organisation. They raise questions about the extent to which managers in leadership positions assess what they actually do at work in relation to managing scarce resources in order to achieve performance results. The importance of leadership as a critical quality assurance factor is further reinforced by the Chief Inspector for the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) who comments, in his 2004/2005 Annual Report, that in the best colleges the quality of provision is driven by strong leadership.

This illustrates a requirement to reinforce the notion of 'deliberate strategists' (Bounds et al, 1994): that is, a strategic approach to driving up the evidence base for careers work is more beneficial than one based on adhoc decisions or reactive strategies to new government policies. Academics such as Kreitner and Kinicki (1995); Greenberg and Baron (1997); Yukle (1994); Taffinder (1995) argue that this style of leadership is both desirable and necessary in competitive environments, requiring organisations to be capable of fast and, radical change. That is, those aspiring to be truly visionary and must be able to lead change rather than just follow it. Equally, the role of the policy-makers should not be under-estimated in this context. For example, Savickas (2001) asserts that policy-makers and practitioners view quality outcomes from two distinct vantage points: the former often view outcomes from a 'quantitative quality outcome' perspective; whilst the latter often start from a 'qualitative quality outcome' perspective. However, greater attention needs to be given to the organisational context, specifically, greater harmony must be achieved between the requirements and expectations of quality-assurance managers and the client-centred approach of the practitioner.

**Inconsistent terminology**

It is apparent that there is some confusion in relation to terminology used between policy-makers, chief executives, quality assurance managers practitioners, assessors, trainers and researchers. For example, Sultana draws upon key findings from a major European research study which examined indicators and benchmarks for career guidance. He concluded that words such as 'outputs' and 'outcomes' (not to mention the distinctions between 'information', 'advice' and 'guidance') have different meanings in different national contexts (e.g. in some contexts the distinction is made between process factors in the guidance interview, while in others the focus is purely on throughputs that are measurable in quantitative terms - such as placement in jobs or in training' (p. 2). From this, it is apparent that other terms such as *outputs*, *throughputs* and *productivity gains* also emerge in the parlance of quality assurance in career guidance.

Effective quality assurance of services involves having a clear sense of: (a) what is to be measured, including the relevant inputs, processes and outcomes; (b) what systems and procedures are in place for collecting and collating relevant data; and (c) what management and quality-assurance arrangements are in place to ensure that the data are acted upon in order to effect change and maintain quality of service. In other words, it is critically important to have the data to understand the relationship between inputs, processes and outcomes, to understand what works best and most cost-effectively, and to have the organisational wherewithal to transform this understanding into action. Before reaching the data gathering stage, those dedicated to continuous improvement must find more practical way of synthesising 'quality jargon' by making it more relevant to everyday practice. Here the aim is to promote shared responsibility and transfer power into the hands of trainers and their trainees, as well as practitioners and managers from within the organisation. This requires agreement and leadership on common terminology that should be used in formulating evidence-based policies and practices. Researchers have a particular duty to foster critical intelligence and to reduce an over-reliance on the science of policy 'opinion-management' that often develops unchecked or insufficiently challenged. Hiebert et al (2002) note that training to help information, advice and guidance providers to be more effective in addressing accountability is absent in most countries. Filling this gap is crucial if the links between such training and public policy are to be strengthened (McCarthy, 2004).

**Conclusion**

The career guidance profession faces a major challenge regarding the extent to which it has gathered and analysed data to show there are certain delivery strategies that, for the majority of clients, are more effective than others. Could



it be, for example, that an analysis of the data will reveal that certain strategies may *only* be truly effective relative to certain individuals or targets groups? Career practitioners have a major role to play in searching out this type of information and reporting on their key findings. From this, a clear message needs to be articulated to those responsible for funding career guidance.

The terminology used to describe quality assurance and how this links to evaluation or measurement of initiatives needs to be made not only more explicit, but also more consistent within and across organisations so that data can become more generalisable and comparable. This also relates to encouraging the adoption of similar approaches throughout the UK in order to increase the volume and quality of data collection. In this context, career professional associations working with specialist research units have great potential to create relevant and robust data sets to feed into policy developments at a national and international level.

Attention is needed to the extent to which those engaged in delivering career guidance activities are sufficiently trained in techniques of data gathering and analysis to help explain the impact of their work. Whilst the term 'quality' is seldom disputed, the terms 'measure' or 'performance indicator' may pose a potential threat to some, with the latter viewed as being punitive in intention, rather than being designed for the purpose of service evaluation and development. Accordingly, strategies to increase training and application of research techniques could help to achieve closer working links between policy-makers, managers and practitioners in order to ensure greater effectiveness. This is currently being addressed by some UK universities through new and dynamic continuous professional development programmes at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels.

For all of this to happen, there must be a collective ownership within the guidance community of an understanding of these links and a commitment to do something with that understanding. Sir John Sulston, the Nobel Prize Winning Scientist, who decoded the human genetic sequence, stated 'to find out you must be obsessed with knowing a part; to understand, you must see the whole'. Careers work should be viewed as operating in a new and dynamic culture of intelligence gathering. It should use common terms that apply to developing a critical mass of data and it should develop innovative training to address quality and impact measurement techniques that move well beyond customer satisfaction surveys. More fundamentally, practitioners and managers must jointly create a shared vision and take some positive steps to achieve this - only then will evidence be transformed into action.



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