Challenging Notions of Career

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This discussion paper was produced for a workshop at the Guidance and Lifelong Learning conference on 3rd April 2001.

This session will present and examine the argument that the traditional notions of career, that have underpinned guidance theories and practice, are now open to challenge. This argument is woven from several strands.

Guidance theories and practice have been primarily concerned with the labour market, whether easing the transition from school to work or, more recently, helping adults avoid or escape unemployment. The nature of organisations, where careers are played out, has not featured in mainstream guidance theory and practice, but has been in the domain of human resource management and development.

However, the lifelong perspective upon learning means that guidance theories and practice will have to adopt a lifelong perspective upon career. This will mean that they will have to encompass more than a knowledge of the nature of occupations, and develop an understanding of the nature and dynamics of organisations.

From this organisational perspective, two challenges immediately arise to the traditional understanding of career. First, employers make a different interpretation of 'career' from those in the guidance field. It is not solely about fulfilling the employee's needs: employers see - and manage -the individual's career in terms of how it meets organisational needs. Second, there are several stakeholders in the individual's career, among them the employer, the individual's manager, whose own career may be dependent upon the success of subordinates and colleagues.

The way organisations are structured and operate, and hence how they configure and utilise their labour, is changing. Some of these changes - virtual organisations, team-working, knowledge management - have implications not only for individual's careers but also for the construct of career. It is often no longer appropriate to regard an individual's career as discrete, as predictable, as long-term.

These perspectives upon career suggest not only that changes in the world of work are challenging our notions of career but, perhaps more importantly, that those notions have hitherto been partial and blinkered. The construct of career has to be 'reframed' (Collin & Young, 2000) to enable us to recognise that career is:

- relational
- political
- ambivalent
- rhetorical

Moreover, for the future, we perhaps need to look at career in terms of projects, and attend to the 'subjective' as well as the 'objective' career.

Traditional understandings of career have been constructed through, and buttressed by, orthodox social science, with its distinction between objective and subjective. However, new approaches in the social sciences, sometimes referred to by the shorthand 'postmodern', are both initiating and facilitating these new ways of looking at career:

- constructionism
- contextualism
- relational approaches
- chaos theory, etc.
- indigenous psychologies

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Foundations for Lifelong Learning and Guidance

Ken Roberts

Youth: still the priority group

The case for lifelong learning (and guidance) is convincing but easily over-hyped. Our priority must still be to get the foundations right. There has been a modest decline in the mean length of time that men spend in each of their jobs, partly compensated by an increase among women (Denny, 1999). There was never a time when most people held jobs for life. In the 1970s, Paul Willis's lads mocked careers advisers who were urging them to think carefully about their career choices when the time came for them to leave school. The lads knew full well that if they did not fancy their first jobs they would simply move on. On the other hand, there are still plenty of long-term careers in education, medicine, the law, car repairs, house building and so on.

There has certainly been a cultural shift. This will be partly a response to the sheer pace of de-industrialisation since the 1970s and the simultaneous advent of ICT. The historical parallels are the agricultural revolution that swept labour from the land 200 years ago, and the advent of electricity a century later. Latterly globalisation has forced firms, even multi-nationals, and national governments, to acknowledge that they can be helpless in the face of economic tides. Even so, employees worry not so much about the likelihood that they will lose their own jobs as the consequences should this occur (Burchell *et al.*, 1999). Inequalities have widened. Pressure on employees has increased. So have the costs of failure.

However, it is young people's, not older workers', career situations that have changed most dramatically. Transitions from education into employment have been extended. Biographies have been individualised. Outcomes from all routes through education and training have become less predictable. Hence the growth in demand for guidance - recurrent guidance. Families and teachers, as ever, are usually the first ports of call. Families and friends remain the strongest influences, but they do not necessarily have answers to young people's queries. Older workers who change their jobs may

have employers, trade unions, professional associations and informal networks through which to obtain advice. Moreover, they have the experience to understand the labour market and how to go about unearthing relevant job information. It is young people who are most likely to seek professional assistance. And their short-term choices still have long-term consequences. Labour market flexibility has not changed this. The opportunities for further education and training that individuals are likely to be offered continue to depend on the use that they made of their earlier opportunities. Job mobility is usually within occupational class boundaries. So the expansion of adult education and training does not squash demand for childhood and youth training and education. These foundations are as influential as ever. Youth remains the priority group for education and for career guidance.

Joined-up guidance

There is a persuasive case for seamless guidance which Connexions, if properly implemented in England, should deliver. I will leave aside exactly how and why Connexions was imagined then implemented in government apparatuses. The case for joined-up guidance is this: it is not just the transition from education to

employment, but the entire transition to adulthood, that has lengthened and become more complicated than in the past. So more young people have problems on which they seek guidance - about housing, health, legal and lifestyle matters.

When asked, young people 'vote' for one-stop guidance. They would, wouldn't they? What they have in mind is not just a common nameplate, but a single place, maybe just one person, who will do everything. A hard fact is that such arrangements are unlikely to deliver the quality service that young people expect. It is more realistic to think in terms of access to all kinds of advice, then actual assistance, being through, rather than directly from, a generic personal adviser. That said, Connexions can be a step forward provided three conditions are met.

First, career guidance must be the professionals' generic skill. Why? This is the type of advice that all young people need recurrently, and all the other problems that young people present usually have career implications. Second, the service should be flexible as regards age limits. This is simply because there is now so much variety in the ages at which youth transitions are made. Indeed, while youth should be the priority group, and while there may well be priority groups among young people, the service, like higher education, could be available to all ages. Third, the service should be for all young people, and seen to be so. Those at risk of becoming status zero - dropping-out of education, training and employment - can be the priority group. They always were the recipients of most attention from career advisers until someone else decided that the priority was to have everyone action-planned. But we know that the best way to help the vulnerable

is to keep them in the mainstream - to treat offenders in the community rather than institutions, and to keep slow learners in ordinary schools. Connexions will be stigmatised rapidly if it operates as a specialist referral point for especially difficult cases. The service will be best-placed to assist the disadvantaged if it is well-used by advantaged young people. In any case, all categories of young people need, and seek, career guidance.

Building on strengths

Things could be worse than now. Britain does not have the world's worst youth transition regime. There are weaknesses, structural weaknesses, that guidance cannot cure. There is still high unemployment in some regions. Around a fifth of young people still leave school deficient in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. This is serious handicap in the labour market, and in life in general. Around a quarter of all jobs require little in the way of skill, training or formal qualifications, though they may demand tacit social skills. There is still plenty of donkey work in this high-tech age. Young people will take such jobs on a part-time basis while continuing to study. They may also do the jobs as temporary stop-gaps. But they are unwilling to spend lifetimes in them. Some young people believe, not without cause, that they are able to retain more security and respect from a combination of welfare and the second economies. Another structural problem is that recent changes in the financial support system for students have transformed our universities into purveyors of de facto part-time higher education. A further problem is that the NVQs that were introduced in the 1980s are not working satisfactorily. They have joined the long stream of failed initiatives: YOP in the 1970s, YTS in the 1980s, and TECs and Youth Credits in the 1990s. At no time during the last 30 years has there been a shortage of policy initiatives aimed at young people. This stream is still flowing strongly. We need fewer but better initiatives, aimed at curing weakness and building on our strengths.

Academic education is one strength. The qualifications have clout in the labour market at home and are respected internationally. We have widened access to the academic mainstream, and GNVQs are being assimilated into it. Excellent! But it is not in the best interests of every young person to attempt university. We need, and we have, a parallel employment-based route into the workforce. Britain's employers are rather good at training, albeit not for the general good but strictly for their own purposes. The leading firms have training centres that are better-staffed and better-equipped than further education colleges, even universities. These are the foundations for an effective twenty-first century youth transition regime.

Ours is superior to the opportunities available in North America where ambitious young people have no real alternative but to graduate high school then college, however meaningless they find the curricula. The British system is likely to prove superior to Germany's in twenty-first century conditions. Germany's corporatist system is less flexible than Britain's. It over-trains, which is costly for young people, their families and businesses (Roberts & Foti, 2000).

A third strength is Britain's vocational guidance. This enables the other parts of the system to operate effectively. Where is the evidence? Transitions are completed faster, at less expense, than in any other economically advanced country (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2000). Serious unemployment is concentrated among the least qualified, and even in the difficult labour market conditions of the 1980s it was not a major problem for other groups of young people. Things are different in other countries.

Connexions is not required to remedy weaknesses in Britain's career education and advice, but to extend the same quality of support to other parts of young people's lives. These are the foundations from which lifelong learning and guidance can follow.

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The Strengths and Limitations of Career Guidance

Phil Hodkinson

Current upheavals in guidance provision, taking different forms in the different parts of the UK, provide the opportunity to rethink the role of guidance in contemporary society. This is necessary because the current climate, in England at any rate, presents a dual attack on professional career guidance provision. On the one hand, it is routinely expected to achieve things that it cannot in ways that risk undermining good guidance practice. On the other hand, there are serious threats to large tranches of provision with a rapid increase in the numbers of amateur or under-trained counsellors/guiders under labels such as mentor or personal adviser.

In facing up to the challenges and opportunities of this brave new world, it is important to identify clearly what the strengths and limitations of career guidance are. Realistic strategies can then be adopted to protect and enhance appropriate provision. This can help avoid the trap of the 1980s and 1990s where unrealistic expectations were set and tacitly accepted, for example, that guidance could somehow ensure 'right' career decisions, improve retention and achievement rates, or reduce unemployment. This sort of over-expectation then opened the door to attacks claiming that guidance had failed, for example, in the Social Exclusion Unit report *Bridging the Gap* (1999).

The limitations of guidance

I begin with the limitations, for in the past, the guidance community may have been guilty of exaggerating what can be achieved. I will identify five key limitations. Of course, there are others.

1. Guidance cannot produce technically rational decision making or linear careers

Research upon the ways career decisions are made shows that they are pragmatically rational (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996; Ball *et al.*, 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000). They are based upon partial information, they are partly emotional and partly tacit, they are influenced by serendipity, they are sometimes whimsical, and they change over time, sometimes quite rapidly. Guidance can help refine and improve this pragmatic process but it is extremely unlikely to fundamentally change its nature. Guidance based upon pure or technical rationality, ideas which implicitly or explicitly underpin much policy and some of the traditional theories used in guidance practice, is more likely to fail. This is because the assumptions and practices of the guidance providers are at odds with the realities of the decision making processes adopted by the people they are trying to help.

Also, the view of career as a straightforwardly linear or developmental process is untenable for many people. For example, we know that many women's careers take different shapes and forms from those of men with different patterns, sequences, problems, opportunities and interests (Bimrose, 2001a,b). Many adults of both genders have followed career paths that are partly erratic and unpredictable, and where it is impossible to separate out education and employment from many other aspects of life (Arthur, *et al.*,1999; Collin & Young, 2000). Guidance which is conceived of as a once and for all intervention to get clients on the right track will be inadequate for many people.

2. Professional guidance is marginal in people's lives

Even the best professional guidance is marginal in most people's careers and career decision making. Other influences on decisions are often stronger – their deeply held belief systems about themselves and about what careers are desirable or acceptable; the situations they find themselves in; serendipity; relations with family, peers, teachers and employers; messages from the media, etc. Also, it is very difficult to time guidance interventions - the decision making process is often lengthy; changes in interests appear to render previous guidance irrelevant; the amount of time spent with a professional is very limited; clients often do not know when guidance would be helpful; and providers have to balance erratic, uneven and potentially unlimited individual needs/demands against the planned allocation of scarce resources.

3. Guidance cannot step outside social and economic inequalities

Guidance practice currently emphasises individual activity. But social life remains strongly influenced by deep, some would say deepening, structural inequalities (Ball *et al.*, 2000). Both what Ken Roberts (1975) termed the opportunity structures of individuals and the ways in which people see the world are strongly influenced by these structural inequalities, combining in what I have previously termed their 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996). Often, their careers are influenced by other players with more power than they have such as employers and admissions tutors or movements and climates outside their control. Examples of the latter might be institutional racism and gender prejudice or high local unemployment and a changing labour market.

4. Good guidance does not ensure good outcomes

For a combination of these and other reasons, even the best guidance cannot ensure good or desirable outcomes. Additionally, what is 'desirable' is a value judgement. Who decides? The client? The employer? The education provider? The DfES? The Employment Service? For example, my own research suggests that dropping out of an FE or HE course is not always inappropriate and that completing such a course does not ensure that an earlier career plan stays on track (Hodkinson & Bloomer, in press). Yet completion is currently an almost unquestioned criterion of educational and guidance success. The research also shows that, even for an individual, what counts as a desirable outcome changes over time, as their interests and circumstances alter, in partly unpredictable ways.

5. The effectiveness of guidance professionals is constrained by the policy and funding climate in which they work

This is obvious, but two aspects of the recent and current contexts for guidance provision in England are worth a brief exploration, in the light of what has been previously said. In the recent past, guidance provision was skewed by the need to produce reams of action plans, drawn up to a specified formula, in order to get funding. This approach made simplistic assumptions that decision making is/should be always geared towards a clearly identified objective despite the research evidence, already cited, that shows many decisions/careers do not work in that way. The current policy approaches to guidance have moved away from that bureaucratic naivety but have replaced it with a strengthened policing regime geared at getting everyone to complete education successfully and to be employed. The fact that this is backed up by training materials that stress client-centred activity does little to ameliorate the restrictive nature of the overall approach. This situation presents a serious challenge to guidance predicated on notions of empowerment or self-actualisation, and risks the identification of guidance professionals as 'part of the problem' by many of the very people they are trying to help. If this happens, the impact of guidance will be significantly undermined.

The strengths of guidance

It would be easy to end my analysis here, with doom, gloom and irrelevance. If we were to accept uncritically the official government version of guidance, its purpose and its outcomes, there would be little more to be said for it is largely unachievable. To counter such pessimism, we need a more realistic account of what professional guidance *can* achieve. The starting point is to recognise that nothing said thus far implies either that people are powerless in their own lives or that they cannot be helped. One way of analysing what guidance can do is to examine the mirror images of those five limitations. I do so from an explicit value position: that guidance can be most effective when it places the client's position, perceptions and interests at the centre rather than the achievement of government objectives. I am not personally interested in turning the guidance community into a better police force for full employment or the reduction of social welfare payments – partly, but only partly, because it would not work.

I. Pragmatically rational decision making can be enhanced, and support need not be restricted to actually making decisions

One way people make sense of their careers and career decision making is through discussion with others. This can help make tacit and emotional dimensions more apparent as well as facilitating clearer analysis and thinking. This is routinely done with various significant others. Professional guidance has a role to play where clients are receptive. It brings expertise about the nature of education and labour markets, knowledge of where information can be acquired and how to evaluate it and skill in improving decision-making. It is also potentially independent, though this independence is placed at risk by current emphases on government-determined outcomes. Such guidance can, at best, expand horizons and help change self-perceptions. It can also facilitate and support effective actions within those horizons. Interventions can be individualised, as in the classic guidance interview, or through group activities, be they seminars or workshops, including the use of approaches such as *The Real Game*. Guidance will be most effective if it is centred on the client's dispositions and interests, extending and carefully challenging them, and continues over time. This means that the focus will not always be a particular choice or decision.

What we know about the non-linear nature of many careers reinforces this point. Guidance practitioners need to be aware of complex, varied and partly unpredictable forms of career that clients live (Arthur *et al.*, 1999; Collins and Young, 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Ball *et al.*, 2000; Bimrose, 2001a) and be sufficiently familiar with a range of alternative ways of conceptualising and theorising career. This should help them sustain and/or develop the ability to respond to different assumptions, needs and interests of different clients, or of the same client at different times. The 'one career model fits all' need not and should not underpin guidance practice. For example, progression can be seen as the next move from here rather than the first step towards there and guidance need not necessarily be linked to any move at all.

2. Marginal interventions can make a difference

Professional guidance is marginal in many people's lives but that does not mean it cannot be beneficial. For example, what is marginal in the overall scheme of the life course could be significant at a particular moment in time. The significance will depend partly upon the calibre of the intervention and partly upon how the client perceives it. An often under-estimated part of professional guidance expertise is the ability to judge the type of intervention most likely to be of value to a particular client or group of clients at a particular time. Another key determinant of impact may be the extent to which an intervention supplements other influences on the client's life. This poses a problem in the current audit society for the most effective guidance is often effective because it becomes inseparable from such other factors and is thus largely invisible. In my own research,

young people have much clearer memories of guidance that grated against their own perceptions and intended pathways or that became irrelevant because of subsequent changes in circumstance than of that which supported and helped. This tends only to be recalled if it was a dramatic decision-making moment, an epiphany, and this is rarely the case.

3. Structural inequalities do not mean that individuals cannot be helped

No matter how limited are a person's opportunity structures, there are always, or almost always, things they can do individually or in mutually supportive groups to influence their own situation. Guidance can sometimes be valuable in supporting that process. However, it is only a slight over-simplification to claim that those who most need support often have least room for manoeuvre. Those 'gains' that can be achieved may be slight and quite different from the sorts of outcome demanded by the current system. One thing that the planning of the new Connexions Service got right was to recognise that support in these circumstances needs to be on-going over a long period of time and depends upon effective inter-personal relationships. However, it also requires realistic ambitions, and a willingness to continue support when things do not change, go wrong, or radically alter direction. More research and deeper professional thinking is needed to identify ways in which those things that individual or local community support does well in such circumstances can be maximised. This will include the ability to respond to varying individual and group needs, intentions and situations, rather focussing on limited outcomes. For example, how can we help young pregnant women to become good mothers or students to drop out of courses or career plans constructively if that is what they want/need to do? How can adults be supported in difficult career changes, either forced or self-initiated?

Ironically, it is in this context of structural constraint that guidance may well have most to offer. It is one of the few services which, at least in principle, can devote considerable attention to the idiosyncratic experiences, needs, wants and opportunities of particular individuals or local community groups on their own terms. Many teachers, for example, have always found this difficult because they normally see students or pupils predominantly as groups, and always with a tightly prescribed arena of interest, focussed upon the area/topic/subject being studied. Guidance can start with the actual person, but needs to do so in a way that is always mindful of the unequal structural contexts and broader social patterns within which those individuals live their lives.

4. Good guidance need not be directed at pre-determined career outcomes

Guidance practitioners do not have to be like insurance brokers helping clients to choose between rival career-options as if they were products. Nor do they have to be focussed upon helping clients achieve pre-ordained goals such as finishing a qualification or getting a job. It is arguable that a much more productive way of seeing the role relates to traditional objectives of increased self-esteem and self-actualisation – provided, once more, that structural inequalities are recognised and addressed rather than ignored. There are liberal and radical versions of this empowerment model and the latter should not be over-looked. What, for example, can guidance professionals do, in order to support disadvantaged groups in society, such as many women and/or members of ethnic minorities? This raises visions of a service with a fundamentally different remit to that currently assumed by policy makers, where group activity and community support is as significant as individual counselling, and where aspects of government policy can be legitimately seen as being sometimes part of the problem rather than always part of the solution. For

example, it is hard to see how many young Afro-Caribbean men can be helped without an explicit recognition of racial inequality and institutional racism, or young women without addressing issues such as gender stereo-typing and sexual harassment (Bimrose, 2001a). How can we help the unemployed in many sink estates and deprived inner-city communities without recognising with them that decent jobs are few and far between and that they may have good reasons to turn down some jobs, for example because conditions of employment are so poor? The current emphasis on networking and working with local communities is a step in the right direction but may well not go far enough.

5. Policies can be changed and much achieved in adverse circumstances

For guidance to become really effective, some significant policy changes are needed, at least in England. It is up to all of us to try to influence the policy making process to the best of our ability. A necessary if obviously not sufficient requirement for doing that is a clear understanding of what can be achieved. In relation to policy making, the position of guidance providers is very similar to that of some of the clients they work with in relation to the labour market. Like the clients, providers have little direct influence over the situation in which they find themselves, but they do have some. For reasons I understand, the guidance community, in the recent past has sometimes appeared to endorse some unrealistic policy expectations. This could happen again with Connexions and should be strongly, if subtly, resisted.

More importantly, no matter how unrealistic and unhelpful are the policy structures or how deep-seated and difficult are the social inequalities in society, it is still possible for good guidance practitioners to have an influence for the better on some of the people they work with. The problem is that guidance professionals cannot achieve most of what they wish to or are instructed to, and the differences they do make are often unrecognised. That is the real danger of the audit society in which we now live: there is an almost unchallenged assumption that if it cannot be measured against pre-determined objectives, then it doesn't exist. But that is reductionist nonsense. Good guidance helps some of the people, some of the time, in a wide variety of ways, in a world of fewer certainties than was often the case in the past. We have to think beyond the seductive but dangerous 'all or nothing' vision of hard-pressed politicians, policy makers and some managers, and recognise partial successes in guidance as valuable achievements.

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What Goes On in Adult Guidance? - A Qualitative Investigation of Practice

Stewart Lines

This small scale pilot study into the nature and practice of adult guidance interviews arose as the result of three strands of influence: first of all the author's involvement with the teaching of guidance theory; secondly the nature of a number of questions that are being asked about the place of vocational guidance in today's world; and finally a growing interest in the application of qualitative research methods to understanding guidance processes.

Introduction

The author has a long term involvement in the initial training of careers advisers and as part of this has published occasional papers on the nature of guidance and guidance theory (Lines, 1998, 1997, 1996, 1994, 1993). In this training, guidance theory has had its traditional place, i.e. students are made familiar with various theoretical perspectives and are then expected to apply these to their practice. In other words, the training and learning are theory led and this supposedly enables students new to the field to orientate themselves and to start developing their skills. Some authors have recently begun to question the efficacy of this approach (Collin, 1996) and furthermore there is also evidence that these theories are quickly modified or abandoned as students move into professional practice and begin to develop their own approaches (Watson, 1994). The traditional role of theory then is beginning to be questioned. However, whether or not it has a value in the

initial orientation to a field, it is certainly true that with some notable exceptions (Wilden & La Gro, 1998; Clarke, 1994) there has been little research into exactly what does go on in actual guidance interviews.

The second strand of influence has been the recent publication of a number of papers which have debated the changing role of guidance today (e.g. Brown, 1999; Fielding, 1999; Roberts, 1997; Collin &Watts, 1996). These writers argue that traditional approaches to guidance are increasingly inadequate in a rapidly changing and uncertain world. If this is so, and the nature of vocational guidance does indeed have to alter in order to be relevant in a new scenario, then it becomes vital to be clear about how it is practised now in order that changes and developments can be based upon actuality rather than upon supposition.

Finally, Audrey Collin in her article examining the tensions between theory and practice makes a strong case for abandoning traditional positivist modes of research and theorising as a basis for understanding and developing practice:

'However, academic research and theory will almost always come too late to be practical, so counsellors must also engage in their own research and theorising. The newly developing interpretive and collaborative research methodologies, many of them compatible with counsellors' values, will ease this task for them.' (Collin, 1996, p.77).

This study then has arisen from a desire to find out what the basis of practice might be and to try to examine it without using the lens of theory. For this reason a data led interpretive approach was chosen in order that the interviews could tell their own story. The author wished to address two broad research questions:

- Is an interpretive analysis capable of casting light on what is happening in practice?

- What do the guidance interviews of experienced practitioners look like?

Some underpinning assumptions

In any study which uses interview data it is always important to be clear about the assumptions being made about the meaning and status of the data and its analysis. At one extreme somebody adopting a positivist stance would assume that it is possible for an interview to give access to the 'real' circumstances of the participants' world if the interview construction and conditions are carefully controlled. At the other extreme, somebody taking a social constructionist stance would argue that an interview is a construction of the two participants and that it is specific to a particular context and cannot tell us much about their social worlds outside of the interview. The stance taken in this study is the same as that identified by Miller and Glassner as being part way between these two positions, i.e. an interactionist stance (Miller & Glassner, 1997, p.99).

Researchers adopting this position do not accept the positivist view that there is a direct link between the interview and the 'real' world but as Miller and Glassner argue they do not accept the social constructionist stance either:

'Interactionist research starts from a belief that people create and maintain meaningful worlds. To assume that realities beyond the interview context cannot be tapped into and explored is to grant narrative omnipotence.' (Miller & Glassner, 1997, p.102).

The author then recognises that interview participants actively construct the interview but takes the view that nevertheless analysing the text can still give us some useful information about their social worlds. After all, if talk gives us no access to someone's world then it is pointless.

The role of the analyst is also acknowledged here. In the same way that an interview is a construction of the participants, it is recognised that an analysis is a construction of the analyst and is inevitably influenced by their own assumptions and experience. This research then cannot establish 'the truth' about what is happening in interviews but it can establish 'a truth'. Whether this 'truth' constructed by the author resonated with the practitioners involved in the study is discussed below and the extent to which this was the case partly addresses the first of the aims outlined above.

Setting up the research

In considering which careers advisers to approach to be involved an early decision was made to use adult guidance interviews. It was felt that a greater range of issues would be likely to be raised by adults than by younger people and in a pilot study involving a small number of interviews the greater the variety in the data the better the chance of exploring a larger number of themes.

Careers Plus - Gyrfâu a Mwy, a North Wales careers company, was approached which had a well established adult guidance team and an initial meeting was arranged. The aims of the project were outlined and the team was asked whether or not they would be willing to participate by providing recordings of some of their interviews which could then be transcribed for analysis. Interviews would only be recorded with the client's permission and if the client or adviser changed their mind at any stage the tapes would be erased.

The sample

The team contained people who had varying amounts of experience and who had trained originally on different courses or via the NVQ route. The advisers were requested to select interviews with a variety of clients where they felt that the interview focused on guidance issues. More specific guidelines than this were felt to be inadvisable in an exploratory data led study where inevitably the significance of any particular criterion could not be known in advance. Recordings of interviews which turned out to be essentially requests for information or for help with the construction of CVs were not used.

Following the logic of qualitative research there was no need to aim for a representative or probability sample. The aim of this small-scale pilot study was to test a method of analysis and to see what it could produce which would be of interest. In the end ten tapes were provided by four different advisers and this article is based on the initial analysis of the first six of these to be submitted and transcribed. On average the interviews were between 50 minutes and one hour in length.

Analysis and results

The method of analysis which was initially chosen to interrogate the data was a version of thematic analysis outlined by Margot Ely (Ely et al., 1997, p.206). This involves an attempt to categorise the data into manageable units of meaning. This could be a phrase, a sentence or sometimes a single word. Themes which connect these categories are then sought. In this approach, it is understood that themes do not reside in the data but emerge from the interaction between the data and the analyst.

The analysis can be pursued in a number of ways. Commonly with interview transcripts, themes are sought which connect more than one interview. The pattern of these themes is presented with supporting evidence by the analyst to represent the 'meaning' of the whole set of data represented by all the transcripts. In this case the author initially attempted just such an approach but almost straight away ran into difficulties. At an early stage it proved to be impossible to find connecting themes across the different interviews. Each attempt produced results that either contained too little data to be useful or so much data that the resulting theme was unhelpfully vague. At this point the effort to deal with all the transcripts simultaneously was abandoned. Instead, one transcript at a time was worked on in order to produce a condensed version or 'vignette' of the whole of that particular interaction. Such an approach to analysis is discussed further by Kvale (1996, p.193). Typically, these vignettes reduced 70 to 80 pages of transcript to about 3 or 4 pages. The aim was to express the essence of that interaction as understood by the analyst in such a way that it would contain enough information to enable a reader to follow the interview process. An excerpt from the start of one of these analyses is given below for illustrative purposes.

Initial analysis - tape one

This is a client (CL) who prior to taking a career break to start a family had had twelve years' work experience. She is in the process of planning her return to work and is trying to decide how best to do this and what sort of work to consider. Much of the interview is spent trying to tease out what she now expects from a job.

It is very important to this client that her future work will be enjoyable. She is enjoying her current attempts to learn about computers and wants to find a setting for this that fulfils some very definite criteria.

CL "I'd like to work on my own ... after hours in a bank. ... Then I don't have to think too much or deal with people ... I've done that for twelve years before ... I fancied a complete change. ... I miss the people. But it's all the hassle you get with it you know ... I've done it all and I've had enough of it ... I want a change ... I do miss the people ..."

These initial exchanges seem to be about what she is trying to avoid and what she also misses. There is some evidence of her ambivalent feelings towards her previous work setting:

CL "The pressures were high you know. It all came back to you ..."

And later:

CL "... because I'm over them people it was my responsibility to make sure they were right ... it was good fun, I enjoyed it ..."

The careers adviser continued to try and discern exactly what it was that she had liked and the client made a number of statements which revealed something of this.

NB. " ... " indicates that the analyst has omitted part of this sentence in the process of selecting those units of meaning which best seem to represent the pattern emerging from the text.

Each vignette then consists of a mixture of description, evidence in the form of extracts of dialogue from both parties and interpretive statements from the analyst.

It is recognised that inevitably products such as this are the result of a subjective process. However, each vignette was produced after many readings and re-readings of each transcript and as stated above is not an attempt to present 'the truth' of the interaction but to arrive at a representation of 'a truth'. On completion, each result was read for clarity of meaning by colleagues who were not involved in either the research or the professional world of guidance. A sterner test, of course, was provided by the reactions of the advisers involved in the interviews as discussed further below.

Following the production of the first vignettes, the author began to explore the possibility of connections between these representations of six different interviews. In each case, a metaphor was sought in order to summarise the essence of that particular analysis and also an attempt was made to identify any issues that had not been addressed which were felt to be potentially important.

The results of this exercise are presented below.

Interview one - The careers adviser as *Magician*, i.e. being expected by the client to pull the ideal job out of the hat and trying to fulfil these expectations. The process issue not dealt with during the interview was thought to be that of *Client Confidence*.

Interview two - The careers adviser as *Excuse*, i.e. allowing the client to avoid commitment to a decision. The process issue not dealt with during the interview in this case then was *Decision Readiness*.

Interview three - The careers adviser as *Protector*, i.e. protecting the client from her own feelings and trying to shield her from conflict with her mother. The process issue which was thought not to be dealt with on this occasion was *Vocational Maturity*.

Interview four - The careers adviser as *Gatekeeper*, i.e. providing information after exploring its relevance for that client but not discussing that decision first. The process issue here was felt to be *Adviser Transparency/Negotiation*.

Interview five - The careers adviser as *Motivator*, i.e. taking on the responsibility for encouraging the client to sort themselves out and take some definite action. The process issue in this interview was felt to be a repeating pattern of initial *Client Compliance* followed shortly afterwards by *Client Resistance*.

Interview six - The careers adviser as *Fixer*, i.e. actively pushing for resolutions to client concerns at the expense of a full exploration of those concerns. The process issue here was a repeating pattern of *Client Reservations* followed shortly afterwards by *Adviser Reassurance*.

The author fully appreciates that this summary will have to be taken on trust given the nature and extent of the data but the interpretations offered above did resonate with the practitioners involved.

For the sake of further discussion let us assume that the reader is willing to work with these interpretations. What if anything can be learnt from these about the nature of guidance practice or about the efficacy of this method of analysis?

Discussion

There are of number of potentially significant points emerging from this analysis:

- From only six interviews there is evidence of a wide variation in the patterns of interaction and in the assumptions underpinning them. This is in contrast to the findings of a recent study on adult guidance carried out by the Guidance Council (NACCEG, 1999). This was based on the results of focus groups rather than actual practice and one of the conclusions arrived at was that guidance seekers could be categorised into only four types and that these would be looking for one of eight types of interview. In the interviews analysed there is evidence that those looking for help do not fall into neat categories and the interviews themselves demonstrate that you cannot easily separate for example job search guidance, personal development guidance and learning guidance (NACCEG, 1999, p.38-39). Indeed if there is such a great variety of issues in only six interviews it is very likely that the analysis of a greater number would throw up evidence of even more complexity.

- A common theme across all six interviews is that the advisers tend to focus on the content of the 'problems' and often fail to deal with the process issues identified above. Given that these advisers have considerable experience between them and have not all had the same training it would seem likely that this tendency is at least partly due to factors external to the interview itself. The pressure to agree definite outcomes to guidance encounters is likely to discourage practitioners from departing too much from the content issues raised as is the finite amount of time available. However, it could also be due to assumptions and beliefs held by both advisers and clients which may be operating out of their awareness, e.g. a client's belief that the ideal job is out there somewhere or an adviser's desire to find answers to everyone's problems. Anyone carrying out a familiar pattern of work over a period of time is bound to operate at least partly in this way. One of the benefits of this exercise is that it gives participants a chance to look at patterns of interaction and assumption that may have fallen into unawareness over time. By definition these will be difficult to take account of without the luxury of retrospective analysis. This type of analysis then can make it possible for an adviser to surface and examine their routine assumptions and thus develop their practice. Although only one team of advisers was involved in this study it seems very unlikely that their failure to deal with certain process issues in these interviews is unique to them. There is no reason to suspect that their practice is significantly different from that of any other team.

- The results of this initial analysis were fed back to the team involved in order to see whether the themes identified resonated with their own experience. A workshop was held where the vignettes and themes were shared and discussed. Staff who recognised their own work were asked not to reveal this to the other participants. This was so that the focus could be on the issues raised rather than on why a particular adviser had acted in a particular way. As the issues raised were general the author wanted to avoid putting people in a position where their first instinct would to defend their actions. The result of the debate was interesting in that people who had not been involved in the

interview being discussed at any particular moment frequently recognised patterns and situations that applied to their own work. Overall, they felt that the exercise had enabled them to gain perspectives on their work which would not otherwise have been possible and the response to the feedback was very positive.

Conclusions

Tentative conclusions can be drawn from this small-scale study. Firstly, it would seem that there is evidence that an interpretive approach to understanding practice can produce meanings which have value to others not directly involved in the analysis.

Secondly, this type of approach is capable of illuminating practice without resorting automatically to theory. A wider application of it or related methods could provide some understanding of what is actually going on in guidance which would be a helpful start to developing the new approaches which may be necessary in a rapidly changing setting.

Thirdly, judging by the response of the participants such an approach could prove to be a very useful tool for professional development.

It is recognised that this is a very partial and limited attempt to begin to develop new ways of understanding practice. For example, the views of the clients have not been analysed in this project. Also considerations of time and money meant that it was very much led by the researcher rather than being a collaborative effort. However, the author would argue that it has at least provided enough evidence to justify exploring this type of approach in more depth.

Finally, it is acknowledged that none of this would have been possible without advisers brave enough to put their work on the line and the author is deeply indebted to them for their help and forbearance.

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Positive Guidance and Uncertainty: responding to the career guidance needs of people living with HIV/AIDS

Vivienne Barker and Tricia Sharpe

The introduction of new drug treatments has opened up the prospect of improved health and prolonged life expectancy for many people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). For some this has led to a renewed energy and enthusiasm to consider their future, explore opportunities and make life choices. This paper draws on the findings of a longitudinal research study which evaluated an initiative set up to provide PLWHA with training, education, volunteering and self development opportunities. Their accounts point to the complex issues facing PLWHA, including the impact of health uncertainty on their decision making. The authors suggest that living with continuing uncertainty, which for some PLWHA has resulted in a step by step approach to planning, has implications for the provision of initial guidance and ongoing support.

Introduction

Career guidance is reaching a wider range of clients than ever before, which presents practitioners with different and challenging demands (Collin, 2000). Guidance practitioners working in different contexts are acquiring new skills and taking a reflective approach to both their practice and its theoretical underpinnings in order to respond appropriately to the differing and changing needs of their clients. If evidence-based strategies for guidance are to be developed, these will need to be based on research of relevance to particular client groups. Guidance practitioners working with adults may have clients who are living with HIV/AIDS, yet there appears to be a lack of research undertaken or disseminated widely outside HIV agencies which can be used to inform career guidance practice. This paper seeks to present issues for consideration by guidance practitioners, including those who are taking on the role of Personal Adviser within the Connexions service, who may be working with PLWHA.

People living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) form a group of clients who may be at risk of or experience exclusion from opportunities for self development, the labour market and society. The reasons for this are many, including society's stigmatisation of HIV manifest, for example, in employers' reluctance to employ those who are HIV positive. Reliance on benefits can also exclude some PLWHA from opportunities to socialise and partake in self-development activities. Psychological reactions to HIV diagnosis can include fear, guilt, loss of self-esteem, reduced confidence, and insecurity, which can further result in exclusion and isolation. Decisions associated with treatment also present challenges, including dealing with the risks and uncertainties associated with rebuilding lives. These may be further complicated for adults by the consequences of experiencing long-term unemployment (Anderson & Weatherburn, 1998; Weatherburn, Kumari & Clarkson, 1999).

There is always a danger in presenting an over-simplistic view of a labelled group. PLWHA have complex needs that are changing and highly individual. HIV is not confined to those from a particular class, ethnic group, educational background, sexual orientation or gender. For instance, the perception that HIV will remain largely confined to male homosexuals, has recently been questioned by figures which show that almost 50% of all individuals newly diagnosed in 1999 had acquired HIV heterosexually (PHLS, 2000). For all those diagnosed:

'To learn that you are living with a fatal disease is never easy. To learn that the disease carries with it some of the most negative social connotations ever known is particularly difficult.' (Aggleton, 1996).

Combination therapy

New diagnoses in the UK of HIV infected individuals remain at over 2,500 per year. However, the death rate from AIDS dropped dramatically by two-thirds between 1995 and 1999 (PHLS, 2000). This downward trend coincided with the introduction of combination therapies which appear to have been effective for some in curbing the onset of AIDS and in reducing or eliminating the symptoms associated with HIV. Those who choose to start combination therapy treatment are not undertaking an easy option. The strict regime of drug taking and diet places restrictions on those who undergo this form of treatment. Further, it is not a cure or suitable for all and changes in the combinations of drugs may be needed with the possibility of the appearance of more or less temporary unpleasant and debilitating side effects.

There is no single, distinctive experience arising from the use of combination therapy. PLWHA have diverse experiences and views of the future. However, many have benefited from greatly improved health, to the extent that they have sought guidance from HIV agencies concerning opportunities for learning, employment, training and volunteering. Others not on combination therapy or failing to gain from it were also reported as rethinking their future possibilities and did not see these solely in terms of decline

(Anderson *et al.*, 2000). Combination therapy has affected the views held by PLWHA about life.

The Positive Futures Initiative

In 1998, as a response to the changing needs of their service users, a partnership was formed between a number of HIV agencies in London. Their aim was to work collaboratively to 'enhance the quality of life of PLWHA by ensuring access to services in education, training, informal learning, volunteering and self development'. This was realised through the introduction and development of the 'Positive Futures Initiative' (PFI) scheme, which aimed to provide PLWHA with information, advice and guidance about opportunities both within the participating HIV agencies and provided by outside mainstream providers. It was envisaged that enquirers to any HIV agency within the Initiative would be signposted to appropriate opportunities in the scheme or referred to an adult guidance worker employed by the PFI.

The study

This study was undertaken for the Elton John Aids Foundation to evaluate the PFI from the viewpoints of service users. The study included exploring users' perceptions of how well their needs had been understood and met. Their views were sought at three points over a period of a year and the findings used by the PFI consortium team to inform the ongoing development of the Initiative. This paper concentrates on those findings concerned with approaches taken by participants to planning for the future and their views of support.

Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with 34 HIV positive volunteer participants, 12 were interviewed three times, 17 twice and 5 once. The participants, who were accessed through the PFI agencies, were keen to offer their views and experiences.[1]

Reasons for accessing the PFI

Reasons for accessing this service varied both in clarity and certainty between participants. Most participants interviewed had wanted to make a positive move towards returning to work or learning. The motivations of those who were planning to return to work varied. These included an improvement in health, inadequate benefits, a need to be useful, a desire to lead a 'normal' life, concern about others' perceptions of PLWHA receiving combination therapy still relying on benefits and an inner compulsion to do a worthwhile job with new found energy.

Others were not looking as far as the possibility of working. They viewed the PFI scheme as providing the means to access opportunities that would enable them to overcome isolation and the stress associated with boredom, to keep 'on top of life', to get a better outlook on life and to become positive about oneself.

Uncertainty and step by step planning

'If you don't know where you're going, you'll probably end up somewhere else.' (Campbell, 1974).

Uncertainty about the desirability, feasibility and timing of a return to work ran as a theme through many accounts. Although some had formulated ideas about their medium- to long-term future, many of the participants in the study considered that they could only plan in small steps and in the short-term. As Anderson and Weatherburn (1998) identified, for some PLWHA illness constrains life to dealing with the day-to-day and the therapies demand an unremitting attention to daily existence. In this study, some did not want to make specific plans beyond attending a first guidance interview or a first course. They expressed uncertainty and a reluctance to look beyond the short-term future, as their priority was to avoid potential sources of stress

(including setting themselves goals that may not be achievable), which they feared might trigger a deterioration in health. Some also expressed uncertainty and concerns about benefits, housing and disclosure of HIV status, which they felt would influence their decision about seeking paid employment in the future.

Planning has remained a core component of career guidance, where clients' indecision and uncertainty have traditionally been seen as 'problematic'. Clients' unwillingness to look beyond a first step does not appear to lie comfortably with a guidance process where clients are encouraged to seek out information, explore options, develop career ideas and plan possible progression routes. Although a step by step approach in which individuals are reluctant to look beyond a first step may be interpreted as self-limiting and narrow, some participants felt that they had gained from the initial action they had taken. Although many were still unsure about their next step, by the third interview, most felt that participating in the Initiative had had a positive impact on them through having improved or acquired skills or gained in the personal/social aspects of their lives.

However, this did not apply to all. Some PLWHA appeared to have taken a course of action impulsively without planning, understanding, anticipating possible consequences or considering how to deal with these. Availability of an opportunity, together with the acceptance of a view that to be doing something was preferable to doing nothing, appeared to be a sufficient incentive for some to embark on a course of action. Taking 'chance' opportunities to re-engage with the future (e.g. taking an IT course for some appeared to be a chance event) **may** provide additional experiences, beyond the acquisition of new skills, for instance increasing self-confidence through socialising, becoming less isolated and experiencing encouragement and support from others. However, on reflection, some

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[1] The reduction in numbers over the lifetime of the study was primarily due to participants moving, resulting in an inability for the researchers to renew contact, rather than an expressed desire to withdraw.

considered that the opportunities they had undertaken had been inappropriate for them. A few had withdrawn and not known how to re-engage with considering their future. We suggest that encouraging PLWHA to access opportunities on the basis that the action and experience can **necessarily** generate future goals or result in personal growth has limitations.

Mitchell, Levin & Krumboltz (1999) suggest that clients need to be encouraged to explore and approach new opportunities with an open mind, to ask questions and to experiment. They propose that clients can be assisted to develop skills of curiosity, persistence, flexibility, optimism and risk-taking in order to recognise, create and use chance events. Guidance, which takes into account the approach advocated by Mitchell *et al.* may enable PLWHA who express uncertainty to make proactive, rather than reactive first step decisions. A prerequisite for this to happen is a recognition of their uncertainty by those with whom they make their first contact in the PFI scheme and of a need for referral to guidance **beyond** the provision of information about specific courses on offer.

'If you always know where you're going, you may never end up somewhere else.' (Gelatt, 1989).

Krumboltz (1992) argues, in relation to all clients, that indecision about making definite long-term plans is actually more sensible than making firm commitments when the future is so uncertain. As Law (1996) observes, anticipating the consequences of actions taken is problematic. Learning to review, to make adjustments and changes in the light of experiences, altered priorities and new opportunities is likely to be central to planning in the future. Guidance practitioners working with PLWHA, who may see their future as uncertain along many dimensions, may help by encouraging them to recognise that being uncertain about the future is 'OK'. Setting goals need not be seen as a 'mill stone' or a potential source of defeat and stress if opportunities for review, adjustment and change are available. Discussing 'risk- taking' and possible strategies for 'risk- reduction' prior to a commitment to a possible course of action with those who lack self confidence may enable them to take positive first and subsequent steps forward.

PLWHA who contact the PFI scheme may also be experiencing the added complication of going through a process of re-adjusting to the idea of having a future at all. As Anderson & Weatherburn (1998) note, PLWHA who undergo combination therapy have varied and unique attitudes and approaches to considering the impact of those therapies on their future. Working with PLWHA clients from a basis of understanding how they view their present and to what extent they feel prepared to imagine, invent and plan for the future would appear to be central to any intervention which seeks to assist clients to move forward.

Initial support

Some PLWHA who participated in this study were concerned that their initial enthusiasm for becoming engaged in taking action towards the future needed to be recognised and addressed when they first approached the Positive Futures Initiative service. They were anxious to make a decision and take action while feeling well enough, before losing the initial impetus and, for some, the courage that it had taken for them to contact the service. The individual who is their first point of contact within a guidance service for PLWHA clients may need to consider with clients how they could be supported to maintain this enthusiasm if they are required to wait for access to guidance, a course or other opportunity.

Following an initial enquiry, a range of possible appropriate next steps could be offered. Optional activities which provide a means of continuing the initial contact made with the guidance provision may help to sustain interest and motivation. For instance, the study showed that some participants had felt nervous about having a discussion with a guidance worker and confused about their thoughts and what to say. Providing a pre-guidance proforma for them to complete may act as an aide memoire for them to refer to in a guidance interview and as a means for them to begin the process of clarifying their thoughts - a starting point from which to discuss their future. Others might value having access to information or to those who are attending course(s) and are willing to discuss it with them.

Continuing support

Of those who embarked on a course, a few had experienced periods of ill health between the first and second interviews with the researcher. Despite missing course sessions, they had felt supported by the tutor and/or their PFI contact and managed to continue. For some who withdrew, intervening and urgent life events (for example, moving accommodation or experiencing difficulties with benefits) left them feeling that they did not have the physical resources to deal with '... more than one thing at a time ...'. They felt that dropping out of a course and subsequently losing contact with the PFI scheme seemed to be the only option at the time.

Savickas (1997) proposes that practitioners need to help clients to develop into the person they want to be, rather than to view their future in terms of a 'linear continuum of developmental tasks'. This appears to be particularly relevant for some people living with HIV (PLWHIV) who are going through a process of re-evaluating their lives alongside which financial, personal and social

insecurity, together with uncertainty about their future health may present them with 'foreground' dilemmas of a more immediate nature. Participating in a new course of action, e.g. volunteering or undertaking a course may increase physical and psychological stresses, resulting in less energy and personal resources on which to draw to cope with other life stresses which may arise. If guidance practitioners are concerned with helping PLWHA clients to 'become', then this process could be facilitated by the provision of support mechanisms when issues arise.

Having access to support when needed would appear to be of particular importance for individuals who are taking a step by step approach to looking to the future. Although the need expressed for further support varied in both type and level between individuals, not all felt that they could always take the initiative to seek support and would have valued being followed-up. Some wanted to be offered an opportunity to refer back for further guidance about the next step they might take or how to change direction if an experience was not meeting their needs. A mechanism for follow-up agreed with individual clients would enable providers to initiate an offer of guidance at specific transition points which can be anticipated, e.g. when coming to the end of a course of action. Transition points which are not predictable, e.g. dropping out from a course or placement, might be anticipated as possible scenarios with clients and possible re-contact arrangements agreed.

A holistic approach

Career guidance practitioners who work with adults are well aware of the multiple dimensions and interconnected aspects of their clients' lives, which affect how they view their future plans. Proponents of a systems approach to helping (Egan *et al.*, 1979; Hansen, 2000) point to the importance of helpers recognising that what happens in one part of a client's life affects other parts. Some participants in our study found achieving a balance between maintaining their health, whilst engaging in additional, new activities as well as having sufficient energy to cope with day- to- day problems could be a delicate one.

In this study, the suggestion was made that a holistic approach to life planning could be usefully incorporated into the PFI scheme to assist PLWHA in exploring how they might accommodate and manage issues specifically related to living with HIV and when engaging in new activities. For instance, this might include opportunities to consider positive strategies for maintaining energy levels through managing stress, keeping fit and diet management. Part of effective guidance provision could include helping individuals to identify options and making choices about different lifestyles which could enable PLWHA to make positive moves towards taking control and managing their future.

Conclusions

The PFI scheme was a ground-breaking service requiring a re-orientation in HIV agency service user provision and the scheme has continued to develop. (It has recently been re-named Positive Futures, Positive Lives). Through their accounts the participants in this research have raised issues which have wider implications for guidance with PLWHA. Positive guidance to help PLWHA to face the future requires that practitioners are prepared to understand the uncertainties and concerns of this client group. Approaches from this study which appear to be particularly relevant are:

- providing opportunities to prepare for the initial guidance interview
- helping clients to work with strategies for planning with which they feel they can cope
- providing opportunities to access support from the first contact onwards
- agreeing the type and timing of follow-up and subsequent support initiated by the guidance provider.

Further, PLWHA who lack confidence may need help to consider risk-taking by having the opportunity to anticipate potential consequences before commitment to action and know that they can have access to support to deal with these. The complex and individual issues which PLWHA face would benefit from practitioners adopting a holistic approach rather than one which is narrowly focused on guidance into work, volunteering or learning if they are be helped to face the future with confidence.

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Managing the Reality Gap - Reconciling Student Choice with Employer Demand

Jude Belsham

Central London's voracious labour market demands a constant supply of new recruits to meet its needs. Over one and a half million people work here – more than half of them commuters travelling in from the suburbs and beyond. A quarter of jobs change hands every year, and employment has been growing steadily since 1993. Employers recruiting in this dynamic market have access to highly skilled, highly educated and qualified people, half of them qualified to NVQ Level 4 or above. So they can generally afford to be choosy.

Most young people currently at school in the capital will ultimately make their entrance into this labour market. There will be plenty of opportunities – and plenty of competition. How well are educators and guidance professionals preparing them for the reality of this challenging market? Are young people working towards jobs they can hope to attain – or are they chasing dreams?

This paper draws on various pieces of research, in particular studies undertaken by FOCUS Central London exploring demand for labour and skills, employers' recruitment practices, and the expectations and aspirations of young people working towards their GCSE exams.

The view from the market-place

There is no doubt that job-hunters in central London face tough competition. Each job advertised in the press attracts 28 hopeful applicants on average – more than one in ten has over 50 people eager to fill it. Candidates can expect at least one interview – most likely face-to-face, and nearly half of them will be interviewed a second or third time. One in ten will face an 'away-day' and almost one in twenty, a psychometric test. Though qualifications and at least some work experience will be important to get through the first sift and be invited for interview, what clinches the job will nearly always be the employers' views as to the candidate's skills and attributes. This mix of qualifications, experience, skills and attributes characterising successful applicants needs to be borne in mind by those involved in developing careers education and guidance and work-related learning.

The view from the classroom

The view from the classroom is overwhelmingly optimistic. Young people are ambitious for their future – and appear confident about success in their exams.

A recent study looked at the ambitions and expectations of Year 11 students in twenty-five central London schools, the majority of which were identified as having pass rates below 30% A*-C GCSEs in 1998. Twenty-two of the schools returned a total of 1,413 completed student questionnaires; telephone interviews were held with 21 careers co-ordinators.

The schools were culturally mixed, with up to sixty different languages spoken by pupils attending them. Languages quoted included Bengali, Punjabi, Turkish, Arabic, Portuguese, Spanish, Greek and Russian. Many schools had recently enrolled refugee children and a high percentage of

pupils were on free school meals (e.g. 60% or more). Not surprisingly, high proportions of students were from low paid, low skilled and/or one parent families – many had parents on social security, some of whom were unable to work because of language difficulties.

As well as exploring students' expectations about their forthcoming exams and their career aspirations, one of the main research objectives was to determine their awareness and understanding of non-traditional post-16 options – in particular Modern Apprenticeships (MAs).

The results reveal a picture which is both reassuring and worrying.

Basis for optimism?

The young people had extremely high expectations about their GCSE results. 70% of those who answered the question about their forthcoming exams expected to get five or more A*-Cs. On average, the young people predicted that they would gain five to six GCSEs.

Sadly, this optimism was likely to be unrealistic in many cases since the participating schools' average performance was 27% achieving 5+ good grades. Which begs the question why so many had so clearly unrealistic expectations about the chances of exam success. Whilst the evidence that students are aiming high is encouraging, expectations surely need to be tempered with realism?

Fewer than half (41%) had heard of MAs. Students who had expressed an *interest* in MAs were rather less optimistic about their results; roughly a half (53%) expected to gain 5+ A*-Cs; least hopeful of all were those who had *chosen* the MA route – just 22% anticipated this outcome.

Expectations varied according to ethnic group: Asian students were the most ambitious, with 78% anticipating 5+ A*-Cs; white students the least – 60% expected to do well. The figure for black students and for 'other ethnic groups' was 72% and 65% respectively.

It will come as no surprise that most (79%) expected to go on to study for A levels or Advanced GNVQ, and over 40% were hoping to take a degree in future. A quarter were looking to continue on an academic route even though they were unsure what course they might eventually pursue.

Classroom to boardroom

Career choices reflected exam expectations. Students were extremely ambitious in the kind of job they were hoping to land, especially compared with the skill levels of their parents' occupations.

Over half who named a specific job were aiming at an occupation which could be described as professional (39%) or managerial (14%). Only a third of fathers and a quarter of mothers were working at this level. Girls were especially ambitious. A little over three out of five girls wanted a professional or managerial job, compared with just over two in five of the boys.

Again, choice of career varied depending on ethnicity. There are striking differences between the choices of Asian young people and those in other groups. Asian students were especially ambitious: two out of three (64%) wanted a professional or managerial role compared with 48% of white respondents. Accordingly, Asian students were in a majority choosing occupational fields such as finance and computing, law, medicine (i.e. as a doctor) and science/engineering. (Particularly striking, was the fact that a third of Asian fathers were working in hospitality but no Asian young people had chosen a career in this field.) Black students were keen on the finance/IT and medical field generally, though less likely to mention a

particular job - or in the case of medicine, tending to mention nursing. White students were more likely than other groups to be considering a career in the Arts, especially art and design and media/journalism.

Career choices by students who were opting for an MA were quite distinct (though to some extent these reflect differences in choice based on ethnicity). The would-be apprentices were more likely to have chosen a career in fashion and beauty, sport and leisure or maintenance/manual work than the sample as a whole. Specific jobs mentioned included hairdresser, beautician, footballer and jobs in the building trade such as plasterer or carpenter.

A sizeable minority (between 15-20%) did not know what they wanted to do for a living, including one in five of students who were considering taking up an MA.

Choice or Hobson's Choice?

'Interest' and 'good money' are the most popular reasons for career choice, though here too there are gender and ethnic differences. Girls had gone for 'interest', boys for 'money'. Black and Asian students were also more motivated by money than white students.

The MA students were more likely than others to have based their choice on availability or on knowing someone in the same kind of work or on the absence of entry qualification requirements. All of which suggest that very little 'choice', much less 'informed choice', was involved. In common with the other youngsters in the survey, the 'apprentices' were not especially confident that an MA would develop generic skills applicable to a wide range of jobs. These young people were simply opting for what they believed they could get.

Underpinning the choice of post-16 option, academic routes had overwhelming support as the best way to gain the key skills needed for work. Two-thirds of all young people (and just under half the MA students) believed that A levels and a degree would provide such skills. Two out of three students who were interested in (but had not chosen to do) an MA said that being able to go on to do a degree on completion would increase their interest. Choice of the academic as opposed to the vocational route was generally based on perceptions about the kind of work available through work-related training, the advisability of going for 'solid' (i.e. academic) qualifications, the need to keep options open and the lower value and longer timescale associated with MAs.

The view from the staff room

Careers co-ordinators believe that in this 'buyers' market' most of their students will stay on in full-time education. Percentages quoted were in the region of 70-90%.

At a practical level, delivery of guidance depends on the experience, knowledge, networking capability and personal approach of individual careers co-ordinators. The ethos of the school is also a factor. Varying degrees of liberalism in the attitude to education generally, and to choice, determine the level of intervention adopted - and willingness to encourage 'realistic' career ambitions.

Two schools serve as an example of the differences observed. In one, the co-ordinator had been in post for a number of years, was experienced and knowledgeable and able to refer to a range of information sources (including about MAs) built up over a long time period. He was prepared to intervene by offering a range of vocational options to the young people he worked with. In the other, the newly appointed co-ordinator knew nothing about vocational routes.

Lacking knowledge, she fell back on advising college and full-time study, options she knew and felt comfortable with. Believing young people should be free to make their own choices, she did not try – or believe it was possible - to influence this process. Students at her school were most likely to have chosen A levels as their post-16 option. The school's average 5+ A*-C pass rate was just 17%.

Careers as side-show to the business of teaching?

The teachers responsible for careers education – usually known as careers co-ordinators - were likely to have an incentive allowance equivalent to a head of department but not a senior management level post. This suggests that the schools viewed careers guidance as a relatively low priority 'add-on' to more critical curriculum delivery. We know that students enter the decision-making process with preconceptions about the kind of further education options they are prepared to consider; these preconceptions are based on parental and peer group pressure, self-image and group identity. In the face of such deep-seated attitudes, genuine attempts to encourage objective decision-making must involve schools taking the issue as seriously as any other aspect of learning.

The academic/vocational divide

As their job title suggests, co-ordinators were responsible for amassing materials and resources rather than actual delivery which was generally undertaken by non-specialist, conscripted form tutors who had no training for the task – and in many cases, no enthusiasm. The work was carried out during large group tutorial sessions or as part of a PHSE programme.

According to the co-ordinators, the consensus among teachers is that training routes are for those who are unable or unwilling to pursue full-time study; that 'good' jobs no longer exist for 16 year olds – and that apprenticeships are only available within traditional, gender specific fields.

The reasons cited for low take-up of training included GNVQs (now called Vocational A levels) which students take if they want to go down the vocational route; lack of employer/training organisation visibility at careers fairs; high staff turnover in training organisations which makes continuity of contact difficult; the small number of apprenticeships available with some employers which makes widespread promotion inappropriate; the pressure for colleges to increase numbers.

They also believed that young people needed the best qualifications they could get – 'best' being those acquired via full-time study. Although aware that going for an apprenticeship is not 'dropping out', they still tended to lump these young people in with students who are likely to drop out or opt for low-skilled jobs without training. This is understandable in the light of the nature of apprentice 'frameworks' available which enable employers to take on young people without the 5+ A*-C grade GCSEs originally intended as the minimum entry level requirement. Small wonder that employers, teachers and students alike doubt the MA's parity with the rival A level option.

Too little, too late

In central London at least, the appeal of full-time education is compounded by the lack of information about specific alternatives. There is pressure for students to choose their post-16 option in November – well before the run-up to internal 'mocks' and the actual exam period. Keen to secure the funding attached to student numbers, colleges visit schools and vigorously promote their wares, whilst detailed information about the types of MA on offer is not available until the following April. By this time virtually all young people have made their decisions.

The role of the professional

Despite the bias towards conventional post 16 routes, schools are anxious that the careers service should provide one-to-one interviews for all Year 11 students. (Since September 1999 there has been a reduced service agreement between schools and careers services, limiting one-to-ones to students considered to be 'at risk' of dropping out.) However, careers teachers had often attempted to secure the kind of service which fitted with their personal view of careers education, making it difficult for the careers service to pursue a more up-to-date approach. In particular, teaching staff appear to be resistant to the idea of working with much younger pupils who may not yet have rigid preconceptions.

The view of the future

The Learning and Skills Council is now up and running, for the moment delivering contracts for education and training which reflect those of its predecessors. From 2002, this will change, as local LSC offices start delivering their strategic plans and assume responsibility for allocating sixth form funding. In this new, co-operative, complementary world of post-16 provision, the distinctions between academic and vocational options could gradually be eroded. The extent to which this is possible will depend on the availability of high quality learning opportunities, regardless of how these are labelled. It will depend on improving the understanding of students, parents and teachers of non-traditional 16+ routes. It will depend on employers recognising work-based learning as a means of recruiting and developing young people, and their own role in providing opportunities for career progression. It will also crucially depend on schools' willingness to encourage ambitious, yet *realistic* career aspirations.

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