From Careers Adviser to Personal Adviser: what is the impact of 14-19 policy reforms on the career guidance profession in England?

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When New Labour came to power in 1997, a clear change in youth policy was signalled for England. The Social Exclusion Unit published *Bridging the Gap* (1999), a document which highlighted the numbers of 16-19 year olds not participating in education, employment or training (‘NEET’), criticised careers services, and proposed a new, ‘joined-up’ approach to supporting young people. In particular, it put forward the idea of a ‘youth broker’, based at a ‘one-stop shop’, who could help those facing multiple social and educational difficulties to navigate a bewildering array of services. Careers services were already being encouraged to re-focus on the ‘hardest to help’, and in 2001, they were integrated wholesale into the newly-formed *Connexions* youth support service, along with professionals seconded from elsewhere – youth services, social services, and education welfare. The idea of the ‘youth broker’ was implemented through the creation of a new professional role, the Personal Adviser (PA), which careers advisers had to adopt. These moves were controversial at the time (Watts, 2001), but just seven years later, *Connexions* has been disbanded as a national service, and devolved into local authorities’ Children’s and Young People’s Services. The forms that local *Connexions* services are taking vary widely across the country, and provision now looks even more different from the national careers services still retained elsewhere in the UK (Watts and McGowan, 2007).

David Peck’s excellent history of careers services (2004) teaches us that this is far from the first time that the career guidance profession has been repositioned in the youth policy landscape. Arguably, though, this is the most substantial repositioning that has happened, and there is indeed much argument about it (see, for example, Mulvey, 2006). Research by the National Audit Office (2004) and an End-to-End Review of Careers Education and Guidance (DfES, 2005) showed that *Connexions* was valued by the clients with whom it worked, but was under-resourced for providing a universal career guidance service in addition to its targeted work with ‘NEET’ clients. Ironically, this could potentially fuel the growth of ‘NEET’ among young people who might not otherwise have been ‘at risk’, by leading to post-16 course-switching and drop-out. Yet the transfer to local authorities, without ring-fenced funding, could reduce resources for *Connexions* – and career guidance provision within it – further still. Other research has raised concerns in this context about unchallenged pressure from schools with post-16 provision to persuade their pupils to stay on, the low numbers of staff suitably qualified to lead careers education in schools, a lack of employer liaison work that careers services used to do, and the disappearance of initiatives to combat social inequalities such as gender stereotyping and race discrimination. These concerns are particularly significant at a time when young people’s learning options and career choices are becoming more critical, at an earlier age than ever before, with the introduction of the new Diplomas.
On the whole, however, there has been remarkably little research – especially research that is independent of government – about the changes that have taken place on the ground since Connexions replaced careers services. One area that has not been studied adequately at all is the effect of these changes on the career guidance profession itself – on the Careers Advisers (CAs) who have been redesignated as PAs (though see Artaraz, 2006, for one interesting account). While some might dismiss the views of professionals simply as ‘vested interests’, or failure to ‘modernise’ in line with New Labour’s vision for joined-up public services, there are strong reasons for understanding how professionals respond to such thoroughgoing policy change. There is a long tradition in educational research of understanding practice through researching the perspectives of practitioners themselves. Most importantly, professionals’ roles, identities and practices may significantly influence not only institutional capacity, but also the productivity (or counter-productivity) of service outcomes, and the long-term sustainability of policy initiatives (Rist, 1998).

In response to these concerns, our team at Manchester Metropolitan University recently won funding from the UK Economic and Social Research Council (Grant No. RES-000-22-2588) for a small, one-year project to investigate the impact of these reforms on the career guidance profession in England. The proposal was developed through wide consultation with the field, which also enabled us to establish a broad-based advisory group to support the research team. A basic premise of the study is that, without attention to the voices and experiences of the profession itself, efforts to enhance the contribution of career guidance in the 14-19 sector will not have an adequate evidence base. The key aims of the research, then, are to:

• map the current state of the career guidance profession in England and evaluate the impact upon it of 14-19 reforms;
• enhance understanding of continuity and change in the roles, identities and practices of careers advisers; and
• inform policy and practice about infrastructural support and professional development needs to maximise the effectiveness of career guidance in the 14-19 sector.

We want to find out what it has meant for Careers Advisers to become Personal Advisers; how their worked has evolved; what has happened to their knowledge and skills in the process; how this has affected their professional identity and status; and what they perceive their support and development needs to be for the future. We also want to explore some of the broader implications for professional learning and development, by asking questions such as:

• what happens to professionals’ expertise when their ‘community of practice’ is disrupted, and its boundaries become blurred or re-defined?
• are we seeing processes of re-professionalisation and/or de-professionalisation going on?
• how can we understand the emotional, ethical and socio-political implications for practitioners when a profession is re-positioned in this way?

The research is using a range of methods to investigate these issues. Firstly, we are conducting a national survey to ascertain numbers, turnover and continuing professional development for qualified CAs in Connexions services. This has been challenging, as services have been on the cusp of devolvement to local authorities, and early results show a disturbing lack of available data in many areas. The project
will disseminate a briefing when these results have been fully analysed. Secondly, we are going to be reviewing and analysing relevant policy documents, to try and understand how these represent the changes that have taken place, and the future that they herald. What meanings are given to terms like ‘integrated support’, ‘universal service’, or ‘multi-agency professional’? Where does career guidance sit within broader notions of ‘IAG’? And what are the implications of these discourses? In addition, we plan to interview six national stakeholders in career guidance, representing the profession itself, policy-makers, and employers and other opportunity providers, to explore these contextual themes.

Thirdly, we are developing in-depth case studies with three Connexions services in Greater Manchester. Our partner services in the project each represent quite different models of career guidance provision and of new structural arrangements in relation to the local authority. For each of these services, we are interviewing six qualified CAs, two senior managers, and two local stakeholders. We also hope to interview a total of nine CAs who have chosen to quit Connexions. The sample of CAs is stratified according to length of time since completing their career guidance qualification, to try and capture any differences related to changes in initial training and expectations of their professional role. Our discussions with them will include an important element of life history narration, in order to explore both continuity and change in their own careers, identify the considerations that influence their decision to remain in or leave Connexions, and locate these issues in the social and policy contexts of their lives and work. In exploring their professional development, we want to look not only at formal provision of training courses, but also at less formal learning opportunities in the workplace, such as support and supervision, team-based interactions, work activities, and opportunities for reflection.

Finally, with the Connexions CAs, we plan to conduct an exercise with time-use diaries. When used in a qualitative way, such diaries can go beyond merely assessing how CAs ’budget’ their time (how and where they spend it, and who they spend it with), to gain a sense of the extent to which they judge these activities to constitute specialist career guidance, and the values they associate with them. As the time-use diaries will only provide a snap-shot of two weeks’ work for each person, a de-briefing interview will compare their results with the annual cycle of CAs’ work. The Chief Executives of those Connexions services involved should be thanked for allowing us access to their services, as should those individuals who have volunteered to take part in the research.

The project is still in its early stages, but we will be producing briefings and articles throughout the research, and holding workshops to present interim findings at the ICG conference on 13th and 14th November. Feedback from delegates at those workshops will make an important contribution to shaping the final findings and recommendations, so we hope that as many of you as possible will attend, and we look forward to meeting you there.

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References


