

An adult careers service at last!

In the current climate, the launch of the new National Careers Service in England¹ is a cheering ray of light in a gloomy world. Despite fierce constraints on public spending, the Government has secured the resources, and political will, and the Skills Funding Agency is now funding a service, which provides online and phone guidance to adults and young people, and face to face guidance to people over 19, through a network of contractors and subcontractors, at over 3250 locations across England.

This is more surprising since, for most of the last 40 years, adult guidance has been very much the poor relation to guidance for young people. Experimental services in the 1970s, notably in Belfast, Bradford and London, demonstrated the demand and began testing needs, but with almost no resource, compared to the universal, fully funded, careers service delivered by Local Authorities for all young people (which usually excluded adults). The Open University pioneered provision of "educational guidance" for its own students, potential students, and sometimes more widely, and became a major supporter of the campaign for better adult guidance.

In the 1980s a report by the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education led the Thatcher Government to create the Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education (UDACE) with an initial remit to prepare proposals for a national adult guidance service. This in turn led to the creation of the National Educational Guidance Initiative, which tested approaches, and produced support material for expanding services, until the money ran out! We then saw attempts to form a united front between all the professional and lobbying groups, through the National Guidance Council, founded under the wing of the RSA, which created the Matrix standards, which continue to define what is an adequate service, but the Council itself died shortly thereafter.

In recent years, the picture has begun to change. Under the nextstep banner, telephone and online services have grown rapidly, especially for adults. The Labour Government announced plans for a new adult service, and funded pilot networks, while integrating all

¹ The "nation" is England only, alternative arrangements apply in the Devolved Administrations

support services for young people under the "Connexions" banner. However, bringing together Careers, Youth and Social Work into a single institutional structure proved difficult, resources forced targeting, which led to a perception (at least in some areas) of a stigmatised service. In 2010 the incoming Government decided to close Connexions, and transfer responsibility for young peoples' careers work to Headteachers (but without additional funding, and with only very limited guidance, delivered very late in the day, on the nature of the responsibility. The result been widespread concern about the future for young people. Independent Connexions services are closing, at time of high youth unemployment, while responsibility for future provision rests with Headteachers , who face competing resource demands, and (despite a statutory duty to offer impartial careers guidance) cannot be impartial over career guidance issues which bear on the reputation of their schools, and the viability of their sixth forms . Meanwhile, the experienced professional workforce is leaking away to more secure career paths. It is ironic that, as one commentator put it, "we have replaced a world class service for young people and a rag bag of bits and pieces for adults, with a rag bag for young people, and a world class service for adults".

In this context, the launch of the new service is a major step forward, and builds on a very solid, foundation in the old nextstep services. However there remain challenges, some of which the Minister (John Hayes) himself identified at the launch of the service. One of these is the need to demonstrate benefit. There are many calls on Government funds: why is this a better investment than other things? It is not difficult to make a case in principle that good guidance enables people to make informed choices, to find ways of living and working which satisfy their aspirations and needs and enable them to make a full contribution to society. It is much more difficult to demonstrate that what is provided achieves this. Many careers professionals would argue that really good guidance produces results over decades, not months, but Government can't wait that long to evaluate its investment. Asking individuals also has limited value: when asked, most people have difficulty remembering ever receiving any careers guidance, but a half hour conversation thirty years ago would need to be very remarkable to be remembered at all. The advice may have been important, but those who remember it are likely to be those

for whom it was exceptionally helpful, or disastrously unhelpful. There is clearly work to be done to find good models of measurement.

A second challenge is targeting, since many of those in most need are furthest from the service, and resources will always be limited. The service already has over 3000 locations, but how do we ensure that they are accessible, at the right times and in the right forms? There are no limits on access to the web and telephone services, but most adults are only entitled to a single face to face session with a guidance professional. Many will need more, and while there are potential solutions through good integration of face to face and helpline strands, the temptation may be to focus increasingly on the most excluded groups, which eventually creates a "ghetto" service which only deals with those groups. Furthermore, needs relate only loosely to the common target groups: a redundant 54 year old professional may appear more "advantaged", than an unemployed 30 year old with no qualifications, but the social and economic impact of his or her long term unemployment may be as great. Similarly the "career" choices of people who are not in or seeking, paid work also matter, both to individual wellbeing and to dependents and communities.

A third challenge is about growing quality. This includes creating a more coherent and independent profession, and Government has supported the moves to merge the existing professional bodies into a new "Career Development Institute" to set standards for professionals practising in this field. Here there are ongoing debates about the position of people without graduate level qualifications in guidance (currently 85% of the NCS workforce), and about the distinctions between adult and young people's guidance. A further concern is to ensure that the new service can evolve and grow. Large Government services have a habit of becoming inflexible bureaucracies, yet it is vital that the NCS learns from experience. It has a massive potential to learn from the experience of millions of users, about what kinds of advice are most helpful, about the routes which people take and the value of particular courses and qualifications. Potentially it is a major intelligence source for the education and training community. Will it be able to realise this potential? Finally, the Government is keen to present its work as a seamless "all age" service, although, in reality, the service for young people will be extremely limited. While an all age service has advantages in terms of service continuity for clients and effective

deployment of resources, there are also arguments against. For more than 30 years there has been a debate about how far adult guidance, for those who have experience of adult life and employment, is different from guidance for those who are negotiating initial entry into adult life and work. The National Association for Adult Guidance (NAEGA) was formed by adult practitioners who believed that there was a real distinction, and it still has over 1000 members, signed up to this view. Furthermore, history suggests that in "all age" services, adults tend to be marginalised by the political support for young people's services. Just at the moment, the Government's decision to devolve responsibility for young people's guidance to Headteachers, means that the tables are turned, but for how long?

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