

## **An Aspiration Nation: whither adult guidance?**

At a time of increasing volatility in labour markets, of high unemployment and extending working lives, it becomes ever more important that people make well informed decisions about their work and their lives. In the last 15 years, national politicians have taken a growing interest in the how people can be helped to do this. However, this interest has not often converted into a more effective, economic or rational range of services to adults or young people. As one of the leading international authorities on career guidance, Tony Watts, once observed: "we used to have a world class service for young people, and a ragbag of initiatives for adults, now we are beginning to build a world class service for adults, with a ragbag of services young people".

First the Labour Government decided to create, for the first time, a national adult service, incorporating face to face, online and phone components, and attracting millions of users. At the same time, driven by a commendable concern with social inclusion (and a less commendable hostility to Local Authorities), it merged a range of services for young people, including specialist careers services, into the multi functional "Connexions" service, and despite the efforts of many professionals and managers, rapidly demonstrated that a service targeted at the disadvantaged, rapidly becomes a disadvantaged service.

The incoming Coalition brought a new broom, a new and strongly committed Minister, John Hayes. Connexions was to be abolished, and a new all age National Careers Service (NCS) was to be launched, with a National Careers Council, as a "strong independent voice for careers" to advise the national service and Ministers. However, the plan fell at the first hurdle, when Education Ministers decided to give responsibility for careers work with school pupils to Headteachers, as part of a broader policy to give schools greater autonomy in many areas. From then on the Department for Education was notably absent from planning discussions on the new "all age" service. Although Headteachers were given a statutory duty to secure provision of careers guidance, for the first year they were given no guidance on how to do this, on standards of service, or appropriate qualifications for staff. Furthermore, the former Local Authority careers budget was swallowed into austerity cuts, leaving Headteachers no new resources to meet their new responsibilities, and reducing by two thirds the money earmarked for careers work as a whole. For young people, the result was predictable: there are pockets of good, original and creative practice, but overall the level and quality of the service has fallen, and what students get depends entirely on which school they go to. At its worst, school students are merely directed to websites, or guidance reflects the institutional interests of the school, rather than an objective assessment of the individual's needs.

Against this very negative background, adults have done relatively well. The "all age" service remains open to all adults. Everyone is entitled to one face to face session and unlimited access to online and phone support, and those in some disadvantaged groups are entitled to more support. In the last year the NCS reports that 650,000 adults have received face to face sessions and there have been 330,000 phone and web chat contacts with adults. Three quarters of these report progress in learning after 6 months, and 85% say they are "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the service. After this year's Spending Review the Government confirmed that it would maintain current levels of spending (in cash terms) on the NCS. However, the Government's general policy of not advertising Government services has meant that numbers have fallen, especially for phone and online contacts, by comparison with the previous Government's time, when the "Next Step" service was widely promoted with advertising campaigns. In some quarters there has also been concern that the "co-location" of NCS services in Jobcentres has led to a heavy emphasis on unemployed clients at the expense of others.

In another piece of good news, we have seen a long overdue convergence among the professionals providing career development services. In April 2013, after three years of preparation, four of the main professional associations (including the National Association for Educational Guidance for Adults, NAEGA) merged to form the Career Development Institute. The CDI aims to develop an inclusive approach to maintaining professional standards across all areas of career development work, overseeing qualifications and CPD and providing support to professionals and redress to aggrieved clients.

One of the Coalition's innovations was to create a National Careers Council, with a remit to advise on careers development as a whole, but especially on the work of the National Careers Service.

Although its members were appointed by the Secretary of State (for Business Innovation and Skills), they were expected to provide him with strong, authoritative independent advice, in a public annual report to Ministers, and their first report was published in June, as *An Aspirational Nation: creating a culture change in careers provision*.

For those concerned with adult guidance, it is, perhaps predictably, a disappointing read. On the positive side, it celebrates the scale of the adult service, it recommends restoring financial support for part-time courses for people with "equivalent level qualifications" at degree level (a restriction introduced by the Labour Government), and suggests the extension of the groups entitled to enhanced support, to include people over 50, who suffer disproportionate disadvantage on the labour market. Most importantly, it does not include an explicit recommendation for "rebalancing" the existing budget in favour of young people, which had been included in an earlier draft presented to Ministers, and which led to the resignation of two of the Council's most experienced members

(Heather Jackson and Tony Watts). It does not propose that the money previously committed to adult guidance should be used to replace the cuts made in the young people's budget, yet it includes many recommendations for improving services for young people, with no indication of where the money might come from.

However, the report says little about adult guidance. Most of the text is, understandably, concerned with the situation facing young people, which was described by Lord Baker (a former Secretary of State for Education) at the report's launch as "a disgrace". Yet it does not identify the source of the problem – the transfer of responsibility, without resources or support, to schools. At times it is unduly optimistic: it talks of 2500 "qualified" staff in the NCS, although by the standards proposed by the Career Development Institute (and endorsed by Ministers), the number is much smaller, and will not reach this level for some time, despite Government encouragement.

There are other serious weaknesses. For anyone working in careers guidance, the report's attitude to employers is seriously problematic. Employers have a very clear interest in the quality and scope of the service, and understandably, the report bases its argument for more and better careers support on labour market failure. Such failure is clearly economically wasteful, but many professionals will object to its assertion that employers are "the end customers" of the service. Good careers guidance matters at least as much because of the damage which poor career decisions do to individuals, whether it is the long term unemployed, or people stuck in jobs which give them little or no satisfaction. However, the report proposes the creation of an employer led Advisory Board for the NCS, with a role to "ensure that [the service] delivers value for money, and meets the needs of young people, adults and employers". It seems odd for the body created to carry out this role (the NCC, on which employers are already represented) to propose the creation of another body with an overlapping role, and it is not clear why employers should be in a better position to judge the needs of young people and adults than other parties already represented on the Council.

The report's recommendations are vague. The first and last are particularly problematic. Firstly, it proposes a "culture change in careers provision", as a means to address the well documented labour market inefficiencies of the present situation. However, it does not explain what is wrong with the current culture (that could not be fixed with adequate funding). Nor does it explain how a new "culture" might be different from the present one. Similarly, its last recommendation is that to achieve this culture change we need "to create a movement which include (sic) employers, education and career development professionals". Such a rhetorical exhortation to pursue such a nebulous goal seems hardly likely to produce enthusiasm, let alone action.

By contrast, there is much to commend in the detail of the report. Many of its proposals to improve services for young people are to be welcomed, yet without an analysis of funding requirements or

sources, they remain only rhetoric. At the launch of the report, it was not entirely surprising that many influential figures welcomed the report in glowing terms, since it does not require most of them to do anything. The Minister welcomed the report, but unsurprisingly offered no money to address its many detailed, and often worthy, recommendations.

Although the report makes an extensive, if partial, case for improving services, we are in a financial climate where Government is highly unlikely to spend any more money. Despite the grand rhetoric of the main recommendations, most of the detailed "practical steps" are for improvement of the existing machine, rather than radical change, and the evidence of the likely benefit of such changes is thin. The "strong independent voice for careers", which John Hayes proposed when he created the Council, might have chosen to present a radical new vision for careers work, as the report's title (*An Aspirational Nation*) implies. It might have chosen to challenge Government head on over resourcing, or it might have proposed a radical alternative approach consistent with a new "small state" world. But despite its remit, the Council seems to have chosen not to challenge its paymasters. What it has done instead, is propose a series of modest, worthy, but probably unfundable, improvements. Sadly, this report seems unlikely to produce either the radical change, or the technical improvements: it is an opportunity missed, for young people and adults.

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