

**The Role of the Personal Adviser -
Concepts and Issues**

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The role of the Personal Adviser is a key element of a number of current Government programmes and proposals. The role appears however to be defined in varying ways in different policy documents. An analysis is provided of these definitions, and of some precursors. A number of key elements in the role are identified, together with some underlying issues. It is suggested that there are at least four possible models of implementation - first-in-line adviser, nominated specialist, additional generalist, and multi-skilled generalist - and that these have very different implications for the competences required of a Personal Adviser. If the concept is to be effectively implemented and supported, greater clarity is needed.

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Current proposals

1 The Learning to Succeed White Paper (DfEE, 1999d, p.50) announced that its Connexions strategy, designed to ensure that far more young people continue in education and training until they are at least 19, would include making support "continuous from age 13-19 - through dedicated personal advisers". It indicated that this would build on the learning mentors announced in the DfEE's Excellence in Cities report (DfEE, 1999b), and that "for some, that will mean reaching out and bringing them back into learning". This is to be linked to a proposed "new support service for young people . . . improving the coherence of what is currently provided through organisations such as the Careers Service, parts of the Youth Service and a range of other specialist agencies" (DfEE, 1999d, p.51).

2 The Social Exclusion Unit report Bridging the Gap (SEU, 1999) amplifies these proposals. It indicates the Government's intention to "create a new service to provide support to young people between 13 and 19" (p.78). Among the list of tasks which "might be undertaken by a single service" (p.80) is "providing a network of Personal Advisers to provide a single point of contact for each young person and ensure that someone has an overview of each young person's ambitions and needs". The Personal Advisers "will refer young people to specialised services for particular needs such as health, drug treatment or housing". This is contrasted with the present situation where there is "no universal provision". Two current exemplars are mentioned: the "pre-16 learning mentors being introduced into schools in some inner city areas as part of Excellence in Cities"; and the "Careers Service developing Personal Adviser as part of the post-16 Learning Gateway" (p.81).

Current exemplars

3 The learning mentor role in Excellence in Cities, currently confined to six inner-city areas, is defined as including participation in "the comprehensive assessment of all secondary age children in the EiC areas entering or returning to school, and in progress checks at the end of Years 7 and 9", so identifying "those who would benefit most from a Learning Mentor". They should then "devote the majority of their time to those needing extra support to realise their full potential". Their role in relation to these pupils will include:

a "Working with others, (to) draw up and implement an action plan."

b "To develop a 1:1 mentoring relationship . . . aimed at achieving the goals defined in the action plan."

c "To maintain regular contact with families/carers . . . to keep them informed of the child's needs and progress, and to secure positive family support and involvement."

d To "promote the effective exchange of information between the various local authority and other external support agencies", acting as "the single point of contact for accessing these specialist support services, for example, the Social and Youth Services, the Educational Welfare Service, the Probation and Careers Services".

e "To liaise with post-16 Gateway Personal Advisers to ensure that KS4 children at serious risk of dropping out of education/ training at 16 have an identified programme of post-compulsory training or education." It is anticipated that "secondary schools in the target cities will have an average of two Learning Mentors per school depending on pupil numbers and an analysis of need". They "may be appointed from a wide variety of backgrounds, including teachers, social workers, youth workers and education welfare officers"; they may also have a "counselling" background or "HR back-grounds from the private sector". It is regarded as important "that they are seen by young people as focusing on their needs as individuals, and not simply as additional members of school staff": accordingly, "they should not within the same school have both a mentoring and a teaching relationship with pupils" (DfEE, 1999c).

4 Within the Learning Gateway scheme, the role of the Personal Adviser is defined as being "perhaps the single most important feature" of the scheme. Their role is to "provide help on a caseworker basis including initial assessment, guidance, planning and support and continuing monitoring, review and support". Their main purposes are to:

a "work with young people to diagnose their individual needs and agree an Individual Development Plan";

b "arrange mentoring support, including peer mentors, as appropriate";

c "act as a broker to local agencies providing specialist support";

d "monitor and review all clients, arranging continuing support as necessary, as they progress beyond the 'front end'".

The notion is that "each person in the Learning Gateway will be assigned to a Personal Adviser who will remain as principal source of information, advice and support for the young person until, and beyond if necessary, they move on to mainstream provision". It is noted that: "Personal Advisers will be appointed by

but not necessarily recruited from the Careers Service. They could come from one of a number of backgrounds: careers advice, youth work, social services, school or college teaching, probation service. They will be skilful in building relationships with young people and colleagues, in undertaking assessment and planning, and understanding the characteristics of disaffection and the range of special educational and training needs . . . The first requirement of the Personal Adviser will be to get alongside the young person and quickly build a relationship of trust" (DfEE, 1999a).

5 The concept of a Personal Adviser has also been a strong element of a number of recent government programmes, including the New Start programme (see Morgan & Hughes, in press) and various New Deal programmes within the Employment Service (see Finn, 1999). Evaluations of the New Deal Gateway acknowledge the value of the relationship between the young person and their Personal Adviser, noting that it is of "key importance irrespective of time on the programme" (Legard et al., 1998). It plays a particularly pivotal role "in winning the confidence and active participation of the clients", so that "the New Deal is generally viewed by clients as benevolent, designed to help them, and making a break with the benefit and job-search regime that had preceded it" (Atkinson, 1999, pp.13-14). Under the new "One" scheme, Personal Advisers are now being piloted for all new benefit claimants, as their main point of contact within the benefits system. Their role is both to provide access to and advice about appropriate benefits, and to improve employability through access to training, specialist support and intensive jobsearch (see van Doorn, 1999).

The DEMOS "youth broker" concept

6 Alongside its references to Personal Advisers, the Social Exclusion Unit report (see para.2 above) mentions that "many of the examples of best practice which show the way towards a comprehensive service employ staff with a range of professional backgrounds, such as careers officers, youth workers and counsellors". It adds: "Given the wide-ranging nature of the new service's functions, there will doubtless always be scope for a degree of specialism. However, DEMOS has recently published interesting proposals for a new professional group (their term is 'youth brokers')". It indicates as one of its follow-up actions that "the group which will be developing more detailed options for the advice and support service . . . will look at the merits of developing a new professional group along the lines of 'youth brokers'" (SEU, 1999, p.83).

7 The DEMOS notion of youth brokers is outlined in a report by Bentley and Gurumurthy (1999) which in turn drew from empirical work based on group consultation and individual interviews with young people (Bentley & Oakley, 1999). The concept of brokerage is defined as "helping to design, evaluate and secure combinations of activity and support that meets the full needs of any one young person". Youth brokers "would be based in schools, colleges, youth

centres, voluntary projects and other locations used frequently by young people". Their roles and responsibilities would include:

- a** "maintaining regular contact with young people";
- b** "collecting and analysing progress and outcome data: helping to sustain the knowledge and evidence base";
- c** "designing and actively brokering pathways";
- d** "reporting on the quality and coherence of pathways offered by different providers and partnerships";
- e** "assisting in training and monitoring the range of professionals and volunteers working with young people";
- f** "providing guidance, counselling and support";
- g** "acting as a source of information, referral and access to the range of services, opportunities and entitlements that a young person might need".

The proposal was that "this national service . . . would be independent of any one profession or body of institutions, and should not be created out of any of the existing bodies inspection or regulatory agencies". It "should be available at 14 and earlier for those at great risk", and "could be created through the long-term merger of the youth, careers and education welfare services" (Bentley & Gurumurthy, 1999, p.105). It would "act as a spine for the whole system and underpin the guarantee that society should offer to every young person, including those most at risk". It would also play a key role "in developing the scale and quality of mentoring programmes", making possible "the repeated offer of a mentor to any at-risk young person who wants one" as "a key part of the framework" (p.106).

Precursors

8 The notion of the Personal Adviser has some precursors. It has links with work in the 1980s on the first-in-line role of the tutor in vocational preparation (Miller, 1982) and on the concept of a "personal guidance base" (Miller, Taylor & Watts, 1983). It also has affinities with the Warnock Committee's (1978) unimplemented recommendation that the careers officer should be designated as a "named person" to whom handicapped young people (and their parents) could turn for help during the period after leaving school, advising them on which service to approach for help on a wide range of needs - including employment, health, and personal and social relationships. Finally, there are resonances of the "generic" model of practice which developed in the social services in the 1970s, following the report of the Seebohm Committee (1968), but was subsequently abandoned.

Key roles

9 There would appear to be a number of key roles within these various schemes and proposals:

a An ongoing support role based on a trusting relationship.

b Providing information/advice/guidance on a variety of matters, based on a holistic view of the young person's needs.

c Providing supported referral to other agencies when better-informed or more-skilled help is needed.

d Where appropriate, acting as an advocate on the young person's behalf, and/or as a broker, in relation to other agencies and/or opportunity providers.

Issues

10 There are a number of issues linked to distinctions between the various current schemes and proposals:

a Are all young people to have a Personal Adviser (cf. para.2); or only those "at risk" (cf. paras. 3 and 4)?

bb Is the Personal Adviser to be based inside a particular institutional setting, with a responsibility while the young person is based in that setting (cf. para.3); or to be outside such settings, providing continuing support through transitions across various settings (cf. para.2)?

c Is the Personal Adviser to be a mentor (cf. para.3); or to make possible referral to a mentor (cf. para.7)?

d Linked to (c), is the young person to be able to select or reject their Personal Adviser (as is the case conventionally with mentors), or is the pairing of young people and Personal Advisers to be organisationally allocated?

e Is the Personal Adviser to act as an advocate for the young person; or to act as an intermediary between the young person and other agencies/institutional interests (which the word "broker" in paras.6 and 7 tends to suggest)?

f Is the Personal Adviser to be a multi-skilled individual who delivers a wide range of services to the young person; or to have a "first-in-line" role, providing some limited initial support and then referring the young person on to specialists who can provide more skilled support (cf. the contrasting models in para.8)?

g Is referral to be used only in the case of a relatively narrow range of specialist issues like "health, drug treatment or housing" (cf. para.2); or in relation to a much broader range of issues, including careers advice (cf. para.3)?

h Linked to (f) and (g), is the Personal Adviser to complement existing specialists; or to replace some of them (i.e. does the reference to "merger" in para.7, hinted at but not explicitly reiterated in the SEU (1999) report, refer to merger of services or of roles?)?

11 Many of these issues are linked. For example, if Personal Advisers are to be provided for all young people, including those who are successfully participating in education, training or employment, there would seem to be a strong argument for their Personal Adviser being based in their institution - as with the Personal Learning Planning (PLP) system being developed in Cambridgeshire (Clements et al., 1999) - particularly if the role is seen as being a "first-in-line" one.

Possible models

12 It would seem that there are at least four possible models of implementation here:

a A first-in-line adviser, who in most cases will be in an existing role (tutor, supervisor, etc.) but in some cases may need to be additional as in (c) below (cf. para.11).

b A nominated specialist with an additional generic role, within a team approach: this could be attached to a specific specialist role (cf. the Warnock concept in para.8) or could be framed in a more flexible way.

c A new additional generalist, to complement and make more effective use of existing specialist provision (cf. para.7).

d Merging some existing specialists into a multi-skilled generalist (cf. the Seebohm concept in para.8). Implications for competences required

13 The choice between these models, and the resolution of the issues outlined in para.10, have major implications for the competences required of Personal Advisers. The notion (common to most of the current schemes and proposals) that the Personal Adviser can be recruited from a variety of professional backgrounds suggests that the competences required are limited to those which are generic across all of these backgrounds. Unless therefore substantial additional training is to be provided, any erosion of existing roles (cf. para.10h) is likely to lead to a net loss of the expert help available to young people.

Conclusion

14 There is a risk at present that the concept of the Personal Adviser is being viewed as some kind of guidance panacea. The discussion above indicates that there are a variety of views on what the role comprises, and a variety of issues that it raises. If the concept is to be effectively implemented and supported, much greater clarity is needed. Thoughtful implementation could lead to a significant enhancement of current provision; careless implementation could lead to a serious (and possibly unintended) erosion of such provision. It is hoped that this paper will be helpful in stimulating the clarification process that is required.

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