

The impact of 14-19 reforms on the career guidance profession in England

Final Report

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BACKGROUND

The provision of career guidance (CG) is more central to public policy across the globe than ever before (Watts & Sultana, 2004). In England, its importance is highlighted by recent reforms in 14-19 education, training and youth support. The introduction of new Diplomas and expanded apprenticeships in particular means that young people's choices are more complex, and posed at an earlier age. Policy is driving forward further articulation of 14-19 education and training with regards to the needs of employers and the labour market (Foster, 2005; Leitch, 2006). At the same time, legislation is being introduced to increase the age of compulsory participation in learning to 18, and a strong, parallel policy focus is on reducing the proportion of 16-19 year olds who are classified as 'NEET' (not in education, employment and training).

There is substantial evidence in England that high quality career guidance can support young people to navigate more successfully the shifting landscapes of education and training systems (e.g. Audit Commission, 1993; Morris et al., 2000, 2001; NAO, 2004; DfES, 2005). However, in 2001, the government subsumed it into a new, generic national youth support service, Connexions. All careers advisers (CAs) were designated as 'personal advisers' (PAs) and expected to undertake a more generic role. Subsequent evidence shows that Connexions was not adequately resourced to deliver a universal service alongside targeting the 'NEET' group (e.g. NAO, 2004; DfES, 2005; Hayward et al., 2005, 2006). A catalogue of concerns has been raised about the weakening of career guidance provision, including in government commissioned research reports (e.g. Foskett et al., 2004; DfES, 2005). Such concerns include a lack of infrastructure (Watts, 2006), a loss of employer liaison work (Fuller et al, 2005a, 2005b), and the inflation of the 'NEET' group (Morris, 2003; NAO, 2004). These studies have drawn mainly on the perspectives of external stakeholders, but there has been remarkably little evidence about the state of the career guidance profession itself, or the experiences of CG-trained PAs in Connexions. It is this serious gap in knowledge that the project addresses.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

- (1) *To map the current state of the career guidance profession in England and evaluate the impact upon it of 14-19 reforms*
- (2) *To enhance understanding of continuity and change in the roles, identities and practices of careers advisers in the social and policy contexts of their lives and work.*
- (3) *To contribute to the development of theory about the effects of policy change on the dynamics of participation in professional communities of practice.*
- (4) *To inform policy and practice about infrastructural support and professional development needs to maximise the effectiveness of career guidance in the 14-19 sector.*

METHODS

The mixed-methods research began with a survey (see nominated output) of Connexions service providers to obtain baseline data on professional capacity, focused on staffing, training and qualifications. Qualitative research was mainly based in three local Connexions services in

the North of England, where we conducted semi-structured 'career history' interviews with up to 6 personal advisers (PAs) initially trained as careers advisers (n = 17). PAs also kept time-use diaries, innovatively linked to professional values through measures of the perceived degree of career guidance and of satisfaction for each activity. We also interviewed 2 senior managers, and 2 local stakeholders (post-16 providers and local authority representatives) for each site. Interviews were also held with 9 CG-trained PAs who had quit Connexions, and with 6 national stakeholders representing policy makers, employers, training providers and key professional bodies. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a narrative, interpretive methodology (Moustakas, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1995) recommended for the study of continuity and change in professional lives and careers (Collin & Young, 2000). The research findings are further warranted by strong confirmatory feedback from national dissemination to practitioners and managers from a large number of Connexions services.

RESULTS

Within the remit of this report, we focus on the core data generated by the survey and by interviews with Connexions staff and ex-PAs. Data from other stakeholders support this analysis, and will provide opportunities for further analysis and publication.

(i) Surveying a disrupted service.

We conducted a national survey (Feb-April 2008) to establish baseline data about the career guidance profession within Connexions (see nominated output 1 for detail). The post-devolvement status of responding services broadly matched the categories and proportions found nationally by McGowan et al (2009). The response rate (37%, 27 of 72 possible employing services at the time) was much lower than we anticipated, largely due to the extent of disruption caused by Connexions' devolvement. We conclude that the devolvement of the national Connexions service caused significant disruption and some loss of staff through redundancy or disillusion. Furthermore, there was no national or local collation of information about staff levels and expertise, and therefore no reliable data for policy makers to assess the adequacy of professional capacity for delivering young people's statutory entitlement to career guidance.

The government's original proposal for Connexions promised employment of between 15,000 and 20,000 PAs by 2003 (Holmes, 2004). Extrapolations from our data suggest that overall employee numbers nationally fall somewhere between 5,169 and 12,816: even at best, falling clearly short of the original target. Recruitment in the first three years of Connexions favoured those with non-careers specialisms, given the need to broaden the skills mix within the new provision. However, some services reported difficulties recruiting and retaining practitioners with professional career guidance qualifications (PCGQs). In some cases, services have addressed this by training staff in-house towards National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) (see following section). There did not appear to be a mass exodus of experienced careers advisers when Connexions was launched, as might have been anticipated; but devolvement and lack of ring-fencing of funds for career guidance may lead to a loss of front-line practitioners. Future losses may, however, be difficult to ascertain, since services transferred to a new employer (a local authority or competing Connexions service or careers company) are obliged to hand over only minimal information about their personnel.

The survey data showed that 66% of PAs employed in services delivering the full Connexions remit held PCGQs. We defined PCGQs as: the traditional, university-based Diploma/Qualification in Career Guidance (DipCG/QCG), and the work-based NVQ Level 4 in

Advice and Guidance, introduced in the mid-1990s. However, the numbers of PAs with PCGQs may have been over-reported because of different interpretations of what counts as such a qualification. Our qualitative data confirms that this is confused and contested. Changes in the NVQ in Advice and Guidance and the introduction of the NVQ in Learning, Development and Support Services have produced qualifications focused on more *generic* forms of guidance around a range of young people's educational and social issues, and may entail little specialist knowledge about *career* guidance. This indicates a need for greater clarity about this distinction, and recognition that professional capacity to deliver *career guidance* requires adequately specialised initial training.

(ii) Local contexts: contradictions and tensions

In looking across the qualitative data, the local contexts appeared fraught with contradictions and tensions. These can be thought of in terms of three areas of the service: resource framing, managerial framing, and professional framing. The latter is considered in depth in later sections of the report, but here we discuss resource and managerial framing.

Resource framing: First, the understaffing of the service meant individual PAs carried very large caseloads. Education-based PAs (EPAs) were overwhelmed:

In [one school], I have a caseload from Year 9 to Year 11, of over about 3,000 students. In [another school], over 1,000. It just cannot work – those ones who are universal are not having equal opportunity of service. (IY, PA, p16)

Community-based PAs working with the 'intensive needs' group had between 60-80 clients (rather than 10-20 as originally envisaged). The promise of holistic long-term relationships with young people was impossible to achieve in these conditions. Indeed, the 'targeted' service appeared to be as much under pressure as the 'universal' service. Yet despite limited and reduced resources for career guidance within Connexions, there was an increasing demand for it, particularly because new 14-19 Diplomas entail a career guidance process. Whilst services had coped with the introduction of the first few Diploma subjects, it was unclear whether they could resource increasing Diploma lines and applicants in future.

Second, despite problems delivering a universal *career guidance* service for all young people, Connexions was viewed by other agencies as a 'universal' service in the different terms of providing for *all the needs* of young people in the NEET group, and other services sometimes refused to take referrals from PAs. Yet the resources and tools available to PAs were focused largely on tracking and surveillance of young people rather than on social support. Also, Connexions could offer no direct provision for housing, drug rehabilitation or mental health needs, for example; even facilitating entry to education, training and employment was difficult, given a lack of available places.

Third, there was considerable concern in the two services taken in-house by LAs that their funding, no longer ring-fenced, would be diverted to other competing priorities (this had already happened in one service).

Managerial framing: First, Connexions services were strongly focused by government policy and funding régimes on reducing NEET figures. However, PAs largely felt these targets were unrealistic. Moreover, many PAs and some senior managers also believed that this approach was counterproductive; and that NEET numbers were being inflated by the lack of adequate

career guidance for 'mainstream' young people, and inappropriate placement of 'NEET' youth to meet targets. Both of these problems were perceived to increase drop-out and related social and educational problems.

Second, there could be confusion either within a service, and/or on the part of external partners, about whether the role of the PA is to *deliver* or to *broker* a broad range of services for young people:

Their roles are becoming – boundaries are a bit unclear – so a social worker may expect Connexions to do something, when we would have thought that was a social worker's role. (SC, PA, p9)

Third, supervision (provided by line managers) was also a contentious issue. Some felt that the frequency of supervision was inadequate. Many also complained that supervision tended to be managerial and disciplinary rather than clinical and supportive – relating to the meeting of targets rather than to concerns for professional practice. As a result, most PAs tended to rely on their peers rather than managers for aspects of supervision relating to clinical support and professional knowledge and practice.

Fourth, managerial framing also included that imposed by schools in which PAs had to work. There were strong perceptions that schools gave young people advice that was not impartial but driven by institutional interests. Careers education programmes had 'collapsed' in some schools, and the roles of school careers co-ordinators had been weakened, with some losing motivation and commitment. As a result, PAs felt they had little influence within the school, and that young people were unprepared for in-depth guidance interviews with them.

It emerged that some of the difficulties faced by CG-trained PAs could be mitigated by good practice in local service management through:

- security of adequate funding
- co-located multi-agency collaboration with other social services
- a clear commitment to the delivery of career guidance as a core aspect of Connexions' provision
- clarity about the PAs' role as brokers rather than deliverers of all youth support
- supportive rather than managerialist supervision
- a focus on client-centred mission and values rather than numerical targets
- schools' commitment to careers education and guidance

Whilst such measures did not appear to prevent the systemic problems encountered, they could enable PAs to cope better with them.

(iii) What do career guidance-trained PAs do? Time use and functions

In all three services studied the PA role is divided between EPAs (Education PAs) working mainly in schools and colleges, and CPAs (Community PAs) working mainly with young people categorised as NEET. There was little difference between EPAs and CPAs in time-use by activities, with both groups spending around one third of their time in client interviews, one fifth of their time on interview preparation and follow-up, and over 10% of their time on liaison with other agencies and institutions,

All CG-trained PAs reported that a minority of their overall time was strongly or wholly related to career guidance, but here there were stark contrasts: 39% for EPAs, and only 12% for CPAs. EPAs were more likely to be satisfied with the outcomes of activities related to career guidance, especially client interviews and CPD, than other activities, but there was no such correlation for CPAs. This may indicate a difference not only in client groups and practices, but also in professional values between the two groups of PAs, reflecting a broader set of concerns for CPAs, and a more specialised set for EPAs.

Integrating time-use data with the qualitative data, some strong themes emerged about the PAs' practices. Interview preparation and follow-up was often perceived as overly bureaucratic, limiting time with clients, and therefore frustrating. In particular, as already noted, PAs (especially CPAs) felt that increasing amounts of their time were spent *tracking* young people rather than directly *supporting* them. Most importantly, all PAs felt that there was insufficient time for them to deal with their caseloads.

Liaison activities reported were mainly with key workers from other services, school staff, and Connexions colleagues – contact with employers or other opportunity providers was minimal, and national employer representatives complained about this. School liaison usually entailed 'triage' of a cohort rather than development of the careers education programme, and PAs' careers education and groupwork activities were limited. EPAs also complained that they had very little time for researching the opportunity structure, an essential aspect of being able to deliver high-quality career guidance. Whilst some PAs had caseloads including disabled clients, there was no evidence of any equality initiatives (regarding disability, race, gender or other issues) in the accounts given.

Beyond the more overt functions revealed by PAs' time-use diaries, we also wished to investigate other aspects of their roles, identities and practices, and the professional framing which constitutes them. Our findings suggest that three areas of work were highly significant: identity work, emotional labour, and ethical labour. All three appear closely linked to professional capacity.

(iv) Identity work

Castells (2004) notes that roles are defined by social norms expressed through institutions, whilst identities produce meaning for persons through processes of individuation. Therefore roles 'become identities only when and if social actors internalize them, and construct meaning around this internalization' (pp.6-7).

A prime element of Connexions policy was the formation of a new profession of personal advisers. The PA role was supposed to include an holistic approach and long-term trusting relationships with young people, as well as the brokerage of multiple services through 'one-stop shops'. However, the lack of clarity in policy documents on this role (Watts, 1999), and the tensions in linking it to targets for employability (Colley, 2001, 2003), made its internalisation difficult.

All CG-trained EPAs and ex-PAs strongly resisted the PA role as 'jack of all trades and master of none' (WC, PA, p7):

When I came into the [*Connexions*] service, careers was more or less a dirty word. [...] I can remember managers telling people off for calling themselves careers advisers.
(AP, PA, p1)

I think I've tried, in that school, to still be seen as being careers, because I think if I'd opened it up to more things, then I wouldn't be able to do what I do because [...] I wouldn't be doing any careers at all – because I would spend all my time dealing with other issues. (BK, PA, p9)

They felt that this new role was de-skilling:

I feel my knowledge is just trickling away all the time, that I'm just not on the ball with things. You want to follow things up and update your knowledge, and it's like we don't get that anymore. (PJ, PA, p10)

... a great deal of time [*in Connexions*] was spent updating records. It just took away the focus of your work from helping supporting young people in education and work too – highly bureaucratic and, yes, de-skilled. (LJ, ex-PA, p5)

Many who had worked in careers services explained that they had always sought to explore young people's wider social needs, and had had well-developed networks for referring them on to other services for support; but they resisted expectations that, as PAs, they would give advice on matters such as sexual health; they felt that the short training courses offered on such issues did not equip them adequately, and their advice would therefore be inexpert. Indeed, understanding the boundaries of one's own professional competence, and referring clients on when these are reached, is a key element of CG expertise (Repetto, 2008). At the same time, some raised strong concerns about inexpert career guidance being given by PAs without specialist CG training, and argued that this was damaging young people's progression and potentially increasing the number entering the 'NEET' group. By contrast, CG-trained CPAs were happier to embrace the broader remit of Connexions and the notion of the PA role as wider than that of a careers adviser. There was, however, an overwhelming consensus that others outside Connexions were confused about the PA role, and many PAs felt they had to work continuously to convey their understanding of the role to others.

Following Lave and Wenger (1991), these matters of identity can be seen as closely allied to those of professional capacity: since learning entails processes of becoming a member of a community of practice, it is therefore enabled or constrained by the system of social relations within each such community. Colley et al (2007) argued, in relation to committed FE teachers quitting their profession, that this could result in a process of 'unbecoming', where individuals' professional identity could no longer find expression within a regime of working life severely constricted by national and local policies, and they quit the profession. Our data deepens such an analysis, since it offers examples of different degrees of becoming, unbecoming and not-becoming:

- '*Partial unbecoming*': many EPAs felt their established 'being' under erosion, through gradual de-skilling (loss of knowledge about labour markets and HE entry in particular).
- '*Not-becoming*': two PAs, who had gone straight into CPA roles in Connexions after their initial CG training, felt they had never actually become careers advisers.
- '*Total unbecoming*': some ex-PAs had quit career guidance altogether.
- '*(Re)becoming*': most ex-PAs had left Connexions for another CG sector, working as specialist careers advisers.

This suggests that capacity is being lost from the 14-19 CG sector through both turnover and de-skilling. Importantly, many of those interviewed also believed that participation in a

community of practice populated and managed by CG specialists was essential to their on-going informal CPD and to the maintenance of high-quality practice. PAs in one area argued that this would be undermined if (as proposed by their local authority) they had to work as individuals in multi-professional teams, with no infrastructural location for them to come together with fellow CG specialists, or managed by people who had little understanding of CG. There is a risk, therefore, that some Connexions services may attract concentrations of CG-specialist staff, whilst others lose CG capacity, potentially creating a 'postcode lottery' in terms of CG provision for young people.

(v) Emotional labour

Hochschild's (1983) seminal definition of emotional labour is that it 'requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (p.7). Many such studies address contexts of customer or public service, and the task of producing 'proper' feelings in the customer/client, focusing on negative consequences of stress and burn-out. In this project, CPAs in particular gave such accounts of the emotional demands of working with severely disadvantaged young people:

...last week, I had this homeless person. I went away on Thursday, having got to the point where he was going to spend the night on the streets, and [I] felt dreadful, absolutely dreadful, because I don't work Fridays, and I thought 'Should I phone Friday night?', and 'No, don't phone Friday, I might hear worse', so I didn't. I had a couple of bad nights. (BM, PA, p6)

Far more often, however, PAs gave accounts of coping with continual frustrations and affronts. They had to retain a professional demeanour in the face of 'micro-aggressions' (Pierce, 1970) against their professional status, such as not being allocated space at a parents' evening, or being told by non-CG practitioners to undertake inappropriate careers-related activities with a young person. PAs had to contain frustration about the increase of bureaucratic work within their role, which they perceived as reducing time they could spend helping clients. They also experienced frustration with the size of their caseloads, and disappointment about its effect on the quality of their work with clients. A number of PAs and ex-PAs talked of supervision and other meetings with managers, where these frustrations boiled over into anger and open conflict (often relating to ethical issues, see below). At the same time, some PAs committed to staying in Connexions spoke of their enjoyment of working with young people – in spite of these difficulties – as a key reason for staying.

This suggests that some capacity is being lost because of the intensity of emotional labour demanded. One PA left Connexions during the project because of burn-out; conflicts with management had prompted decisions by others to quit Connexions.

(vi) Ethical labour

Cribb (2005) has argued that managerialism in public services encourages 'ethical drift' – the ritualistic meeting or manipulation of targets – posing ethical dilemmas for practitioners, who "...need to continually make decisions about when to conscientiously object, when to comply and when to adopt a stance of 'principled infidelity'" (pp.7-8). Such decision-making is a form

of work within a division of labour for ethical responsibility, related to role-construction and positioning within the field prior to individual practitioners' entry into that role.

PAs' offered many accounts of ethical dilemmas they face on a daily basis because of the way their role is constructed. Some EPAs worried about how to offer CG interviews universally to Year 11 pupils, when caseload size meant they had to resort either to inadequate 10-minute interviews, or group interviews which did not offer confidentiality. CPAs were confronted by dilemmas about which young people they could help, and to what extent. Across the sample, PAs and ex-PAs spoke of being pressured by managers to place young people in unsuitable destinations, not record young people as 'NEET', or even forge signatures, in order to meet targets:

You are kind of sidling them into a particular road: 'You **will** go to e2e [*a vocational preparation programme*], because we don't want you to become NEET!' You know what I mean? Not quite literally, but they are almost sort of shuffling them along this little-, to say, 'Look, you've not got a college place, you're not going to work so, ultimately, you need something to do, so how about this?' They seem to be saying, 'There you go, and that will tick another box', so they don't become NEET. (SB, PA, p.11)

Such dilemmas were a major concern for all those interviewed, producing further emotional stresses, and frequently cited by ex-PAs as a prime reason for leaving Connexions. One PA did not have their short-term contract renewed, and believed this was because of their insistence on client-centred *vs.* target-centred practice. It is important to recognise that individuals' responses to these dilemmas could vary at different times between compliance, conscientious objection and principled infidelity – individualised or collective. The more overt, consistent, and individualised the resistance, the more likely leaving Connexions (voluntarily or otherwise) seemed to be. This suggests that professional capacity is being undermined not only by the loss of CG-trained PAs, but also within the service by compromises of ethical behaviour driven by inappropriate targets.

(vii) Conclusions: the impact of Connexions on professional capacity in career guidance

These findings suggest that identity work, emotional labour and ethical labour are all related to professional capacity, both quantitatively and qualitatively. On the one hand, as Rikowski (2002) notes, doing any kind of work draws on existing capacity and can serve to enhance it through practice. Here, it is important to recognise that the arguments put forward by respondents cannot easily be dismissed as instances of vested interest or conservatism; but are mostly rooted in theoretical knowledge and practical experience of career guidance and its importance in helping young people make successful transitions; and in an ethical commitment to client-centred practice that underpinned personal commitments to remain in Connexions despite the difficulties. Theories of alienation (Brook, 2006, 2009) suggest that such resistance can be productive in ameliorating the effects of workplace conflict. On the other hand, such work can also result in negative effects: the loss of capacity through de-skilling, demoralisation and stress. All three kinds of work – on identity, feelings and ethics – contributed, often in combination, to PAs' departure from Connexions, and to a weakening of expertise within the service. Our findings suggest therefore that, since career guidance has been delivered through Connexions, there may have been a significant overall reduction in professional capacity to

deliver guidance for 14-19 year olds; and that the causes of this reduction need to be addressed to avoid further loss.

(viii) Recommendations

A number of recommendations follow from the projects' findings:

1. Policy-making should be based on the available evidence about the importance of career guidance for young people's transitions, and the most appropriate methods for its delivery.
2. There is a need either to increase the resources for Connexions, or to devolve some of its remit to other services. Further cuts in funding for career guidance should be avoided.
3. There should be a clear commitment by funders and managers to the delivery of career guidance as a core aspect of Connexions' provision.
4. Career guidance should focus on a client-centred mission and values, and any numerical targets should be congruent with such mission and values.
5. The delivery of career guidance should be carefully monitored – in terms both of quantity and quality – in local authorities, and action taken where they are not assuring an adequate service.
6. All providers of 14-19 career guidance should be required to provide data – at least annually – on numbers of staff, and their type and level of qualifications. These data should be publicly available, and monitored by the DCSF.
7. Clarity should be achieved about which qualifications can appropriately underpin the delivery of specialist career guidance, ensuring they are fit for purpose in line with international studies of CG knowledge and skills.
8. PA supervision should be clinical, supportive and regular. Managerial and disciplinary issues should be addressed by other means.
9. Policy levers should be exerted to ensure that all schools are committed to high-quality careers education and guidance.
10. The ethical dimensions of career guidance should be taken seriously by policy-makers, local authority managers, service managers, and professional bodies in this field. There is a need for wide-ranging public debate about the values and ethical standards of career guidance work, and the pressures upon these.
11. Policy-makers – nationally and locally – need to recognise the pre-conditions for on-going learning and professional development in the workplace. There is a need for local infrastructures which support communities of practice in career guidance, by facilitating regular professional contact between CG-specialist PAs, and providing management support from CG specialists.

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