Working Relationships between Careers Services Within and Outside Higher Education

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ABSTRACT The relationships between Careers Service Organisations and Higher Education Careers Advisory Services have in recent years been made more volatile by competitive pressures induced through quasi-market reforms. Within a lifelong learning agenda, however, there have been moves towards closer working between the two sets of services. The extent of current links is reviewed, and their nature is analysed in relation to students pre-entry, on-course and post-exit, in relation to adult guidance, and in relation to activities which cross-cut these areas of work—labour-market information, quality standards, and staff development. The scope for further development of these links is discussed.

Introduction

Careers Service Organisations (CSOs) and Higher Education Careers Advisory Services (HECASs) are the two longest-established structures of career guidance professionals in the United Kingdom, dating their origins back to the turn of the twentieth century (see Watts et al., 1996). They are also, in an important sense, complementary to one another. The role of the CSOs, enshrined in legislation, is to offer a statutory career guidance and placement service to young people. Currently this includes all full-time students, part-time students on courses commonly undergone by persons in order to fit them for employment, and anyone else aged under 21 who has left education or full-time training up to two years earlier (DfEE, 1995). Higher education students are however explicitly excluded from this provision. There are two rationales for such exclusion: one is the autonomy of higher education institutions; the other is the fact that most such institutions have historically provided specialist career guidance and placement services for their own students. In other words, the existence of the HECASs is part of the reason for limiting the Careers Service Companies’ statutory remit, on the grounds that the HECASs’ complementary provision completes the notion of a student entitlement.

In recent decades there has been some convergence between the two sets of services. In particular, the creation of the polytechnics in the mid-1960s meant that the statutory Careers Service for a period developed a base within the higher
education system. Polytechnics were under the control of Local Education Authorities, and many were serviced by the LEA Careers Service. However, when the polytechnics were granted independent corporate status in the early 1980s, many of the staff involved moved over to the institutions’ own pay-roll. At the same time, the growing concern with professionalism within HECASs meant that the Diploma in Careers Guidance—the traditional professional qualification within the statutory Careers Service—began to be given more attention in recruitment to HECAS careers adviser posts, and movement from the Careers Service into HECASs became a more common career route. By the early 1990s, over half of higher education careers advisers had previously worked as careers officers within the statutory Careers Service (Kidd et al., 1993).

In the early 1990s, the political context to relationships between CSOs and HECASs became more volatile. Following the Trade Union Reform and Employment Relations Act 1993, the Careers Service was contracted out to CSOs. Part of the intention behind this contracting-out, as stated by Ministers in the relevant debates in Parliament, was to encourage enterprise in developing services for non-statutory clients (Watts, 1998). Moreover, the political preoccupation with quasi-markets led to consideration being given to the adoption of such mechanisms in relation to career guidance within higher education. The Confederation of British Industry (1994) controversially suggested that all higher education students should be given a guidance credit which could be used to purchase provision from a number of services, including a careers service in their own or another institution, or the local CSO.

The CBI’s idea was not pursued, but some higher education institutions began to look at the alternative possibility of ‘outsourcing’ their careers service, along with other student and administrative services. Options discussed in a few institutions included contracting out the careers service to an employment agency or to a CSO. Arguments advanced for the latter included their contacts with small and medium-sized enterprises and their knowledge of local labour markets; it was also argued that that the graduate labour market was no longer as segmented as it used to be, and the case for career guidance in higher education being a specialist activity was therefore not as strong as previously.

In the event, only a few small institutions examined this option with serious intent. Such debates however excited the expansionist interest of some CSOs, and produced defensive responses on the part of some HECASs to what they regarded as predatory designs. They also led to a recognition that the key argument against outsourcing was the distinctive benefits of embedding careers services within higher education institutions—including their links with the institution’s strategic aims and policies and with the curriculum (Watts, 1997, p.25).

A further set of debates which affected the relationship between CSOs and HECASs was the growing interest in moving towards a more integrated and student-driven lifelong learning system, in which the boundaries between further and higher education would be increasingly blurred, and individuals would move much more flexibly in and out of different institutions. It was argued that such a lifelong learning system would need to be supported by lifelong access to career
guidance. Providing such access could be achieved by extending the statutory role of the CSOs, perhaps working in partnership with others where appropriate; alternatively, it could be achieved through a multiple-provider model based either on a collaborative approach or on a competitive market approach. A lifelong guidance service of this kind—possibly incorporating an element of fee payment by clients—could be seen as complementing services based within higher education institutions, as was already the case in relation to schools and colleges. Alternatively, HECASs could see themselves as key players or partners in providing such a lifelong guidance service. A review of strategic directions for careers services in higher education discussed a range of options along these lines (Watts, 1997).

The Dearing Report on *Higher Education in the Learning Society* addressed some of these matters. It recommended that ‘institutions of higher education, over the medium term, integrate their services more fully into academic affairs and that the provision of careers education and guidance is reviewed periodically by the Quality Assurance Agency’; and that ‘the Government, in the medium to long term, should integrate careers advice for lifelong learning, to complement services based inside higher education institutions (NCIHE, 1997, recommendation 11). The official response to this recommendation stated that ‘the Government will be addressing, with interested parties, the scope for closer working between careers services within and outside higher education’ (DfEE, 1998a, p.17).

As a first step towards implementing the Dearing Report’s recommendation, a mapping study was conducted to review existing forms of cross-sectoral collaboration and to identify and analyse good practice and factors facilitating or impeding such good practice. The study was jointly supported by the Department for Education and Employment, by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, and by the Careers Services National Association. It included a postal survey of all CSOs and HECASs in England, Wales and Scotland, carried out in August–September 1998. Of the 99 CSOs approached, 77 (78%) responded; of the 149 HECASs approached, 96 (64%) responded. In addition, case-studies of five examples of good or interesting practice were carried out in November–December 1998: these covered North Wales, Edinburgh, Sheffield, Surrey and St Helens (Lancashire). This paper reports the main results of the study: the full results have been published elsewhere in report form (Watts et al., 1999).

**Extent of Links**

The postal survey indicated that the vast majority of CSOs and HECASs had some links with one another at local level and that many had multiple links; around one in ten, however, had no links. The quality of links was perceived to vary greatly, though at least 7 out of 10 were felt to be ‘good’ or better. The most common form of link was informal networking, at senior management and/or practitioner level. Formal meetings were frequent in over a quarter of cases, but non-existent in others. Joint initiatives and project development work were fairly common; joint training and staff development somewhat less so.

The purposes of the links are outlined in Table 1. Of the six purposes identified
on our questionnaire, all were ticked by over half of both groups, with the exception of ‘guidance support for higher education students in further education institutions’, which was a feature of only a minority of the links. The most salient purposes from the perspective of CSOs were ‘guidance support for prospective higher education students’ (82%) and ‘guidance support for graduates seeking employment or other work-related opportunities’ (74%); whereas the most salient from the perspective of HECASs were ‘guidance support for unemployed graduates’ (70%) and ‘collaboration in guidance networks to develop local strategies for adult guidance’ (66%).

Both CSOs and HECASs tended to be more dissatisfied than satisfied with current working links. CSOs tended to be a little more favourable to links with HECASs than did HECASs to links with CSOs: less satisfied with the absence of links, more sanguine about the links that existed, and more proactive in developing such links. The magnitude of such differences was not however great.

The main factor facilitating good working links was trusting relationships, followed by informal discussions, joint initiatives/projects, and shared agendas. A number of CSOs and HECASs had developed formal agreements, some of which related to specific initiatives, some to demarcation rules in particular areas of work, and some to all areas of work. Views on the value of such agreements varied: some felt they were valuable; others that they could be counter-productive. Other facilitating factors included: formal representation on boards/committees; some HECAS staff being former CSO staff; the availability of funding opportunities for joint bids; and HECASs being located in higher education institutions that favoured local community links.

Factors hindering good working links fell into three main groups. The first were internal constraints: lack of time and resources; and management pressures to focus on ‘core business’. The second were policy pressures: some government policies were seen to encourage competition rather than collaboration; the Government’s current ‘refocusing’ agenda for the Careers Service (see later) was perceived to
reduce the attention CSOs gave to HE-related work; and funding for adult guidance in general and for new graduates in particular was seen to be inadequate and inconsistent. The third were perceptual factors: HECAS suspicions of the expansionist ambitions of some CSOs; differences in organisational culture, links to HECAS suspicions that CSOs were driven by profit-making considerations (though conversely some CSOs were concerned about pressures towards fee-charging within HECASs); and reciprocal doubts about each other’s professionalism.

**Analysing the Links**

To examine the nature of the working links between CSOs and HECASs in more depth, we found it useful to classify them by using a typology adopted in a number of previous studies (Miller *et al.*, 1983; Watts *et al.*, 1994, 1997):

- **Communication**—where no working patterns are changed, but efforts are made to help services to understand what each other offers so that they can, for example, cross-ref clients appropriately.
- **Co-operation**—where two or more services co-operate on some joint task.
- **Co-ordination**—where two or more services alter their working patterns to bring them more closely into line with one another, while remaining within their existing professional boundaries.
- **Cross-fertilisation**—where efforts are made to encourage services to share and exchange skills, and in effect to work across professional boundaries in ways that may re-draw the boundaries themselves.
- **Integration**—where the cross-fertilisation process is developed to a point which means that the boundaries between the different services disappear altogether.

In analysing the tensions between collaboration and competition, we drew distinctions between:

- **Areas of perceived complementarity**—where there is due recognition of potential benefits from establishing links between activities that are contiguous to, but separate from, one another.
- **Uncontested territory**—where the area of work is acknowledged as the responsibility of one side, and any involvement of the other side is recognised as supporting this work.
- **Areas of perceived incursion**—where one side perceives the other as intruding upon its specialist area of work.
- **Contested territory**—where it is recognised that both sides have potential claim on a particular area of work.
- **Open territory**—where it is recognised that there are needs for services which neither side is yet in a position to meet.

In some cases, perceptions in these terms may vary between the two parties: for example, a particular area may be regarded as contested territory by one party, but as incursion by the other.

Such perceptions are likely to be influenced by the *salience* of the area of work to
the parties involved. Where one party regards a particular activity as being part of its core business, it is likely to view any major movement of the other party into this area as being an incursion; where however the activity is more marginal to its main concerns, it is more likely to be open to collaborative approaches. On the other hand, the more marginal an activity is to the service’s main concerns, the less likely it is that resources will be committed to building collaborative links. This suggests that it may be in areas of medium rather than high or low salience that effective collaboration is most likely to occur.

It is important to note that there may be differences in these respects not only between but also within the two groups. This is particularly true in the case of HECASs, which are based in a wide variety of institutions (from large traditional universities to small colleges of higher education, and including unique institutions like the Open University), and vary from reasonably well-resourced services with a wide range of activities, to small services struggling to offer a minimal service to their own students (see Watts, 1997). CSOs tend to be more uniform in terms of their core Government contract, though they too can vary a great deal in terms of what they do outside this.

In examining the links in these terms, we propose to analyse them mainly in relation to particular target-groups. We will look first at services to students pre-entry, on-course, and post-exit. We will then look at the wider issues relating to adult guidance. Finally, we will look at a number of activities which cross-cut these different areas of work: labour-market information, quality standards, and staff development.

**Pre-entry Guidance**

Pre-entry work with students coming direct (or almost direct) from school or college is part of the core business of CSOs, for whom most such students are part of their statutory client-group. The CSOs’ main higher education links in this respect tended to be not with HECASs but with other parts of higher education institutions. Over half of HECASs saw themselves as providing guidance support for such students. In the vast majority of cases, however, this was not individual guidance, but was limited to co-operation in such events as higher education fairs—mainly providing information on the graduate labour market in order to help students in their course choices. Students and parents are now demanding more such information, as a result of the introduction of student loans and fees. HECAS support of this nature was, in general, welcomed by CSOs.

One factor which might limit any significant expansion of HECASs’ role in pre-entry guidance is that it could potentially present them with some difficulties in maintaining their impartiality, where they can be perceived as acting—overtly or tacitly—in a recruitment role on the part of their institution. This has been a major issue in further education (Payne & Edwards, 1997). The same issue arises in relation to access work with adults, as we shall see later. Clarity on impartiality is an important issue for all guidance providers.

With a few exceptions, pre-entry work as defined here was an area of high salience
for CSOs and of low salience for HECASs. For this and the other reasons indicated above, it could be viewed as uncontested CSO territory, with many HECASs adopting an unthreatening, usually low-key, supportive role.

On-Course Guidance

Career guidance to enrolled students is the core business of HECASs. In principle, therefore, it too is uncontested territory. Many CSOs recognised that they had no role in this area. The main general caveat to this was that, with more higher education students interested in local jobs in small and medium-sized organisations, there was some recognition that CSOs might have more contact with such organisations and be able to provide relevant local labour market information. In some respects this could be seen as paralleling the HECAS role in supplying graduate labour-market information to support CSOs’ pre-entry guidance.

There are however a number of groups of on-course students where the position is more complex. One is discontinuing students. A HECAS careers adviser in one of our case-studies mentioned that the service would want to see their institution’s own students who were discontinuing, but would refer to the CSO those who were local, as the CSO was probably the most appropriate provider of guidance and placement support. Such students are presumably likely to be seeking entry to further education, re-entry to higher education, or non-graduate jobs, all of which might be viewed as CSO rather than HECAS terrain. Moreover, many of them could be regarded as still falling into the CSO’s core client group. Not all CSOs, however, appeared to accept this: one HECAS reported the local CSO as displaying

‘... a reluctance to accept referrals, such as withdrawing students that do not readily fit into careers company official categories.’

Discontinuing students are potentially a very large group, amounting to up to 10% of higher education students per year (HEFCE, 1997).

A second problematic group is further education students in higher education institutions. In one of our case-studies, non-matriculated students on the university’s modular programme were deemed as low-priority by the HECAS and often had to be referred to the local CSO or elsewhere; in another, however, it was clear that FE students were not regarded by the service as part of the CSO’s statutory client-group where they were based within an HE institution. There appear to be no clear official guidelines in this area. There is a danger, therefore, that such students are currently falling between the two positions.

The same is true of the third category: higher education students in further education institutions. Although CSOs’ core-contract remit in FE colleges is in principle fairly broad, in practice the funding is more restricted. A CSO manager in one of our case-studies defined it as covering ‘students up to the age of 19 who are FEFC-funded’; a manager in another reported that local colleges bought in extra time from the CSO to ‘beef up’ their guidance programmes. Higher education students in such colleges are formally excluded from the statutory client-group. As an extension of its ‘beefing-up’ arrangement, however, a CSO in a further case-study had been given a
contract to provide guidance to the college’s franchised HE students; a close working relationship between the CSO and the local HECAS meant that the HECAS had been happy for relevant CSO staff to:

‘... raid the careers information room for key resources because we both knew they were not setting up a HE careers library.’

In this instance the local HECAS was not based in the franchising institution, which was located some distance away: it seemed therefore to be viewed as a one-off situation, meriting a specific pragmatic response.

Some universities, on the other hand, have clear policies for offering guidance support to their franchised students. Table 1 shows that, of the HECASs replying to our questionnaire, 35% listed guidance support for higher education students in further education institutions as one of the purposes of their working links with CSOs. In 1999/2000 the Higher Education Funding Council for England funded 41,000 full-time and 38,000 part-time students in further education colleges (figures from HEFCE); there are also many other students not funded by HEFCE.

In addition, there is one example in our data of a higher education institution contracting out its careers service to a CSO. Surrey Institute of Art and Design had formerly, as an LEA art college, made use of the local LEA Careers Service. Following incorporation, it felt that, as a small institution, it did not have the infrastructure to support setting up its own careers service. Since 1994, it had accordingly had a formal contract with Surrey Careers Services to provide a career guidance service to all its students. Both sides saw benefits to this arrangement: the Institute in having external professional staff linked to a large careers guidance organisation; the CSO in enabling its staff to gain training and expertise in the higher education sector. It appeared, however, to be an isolated case.

It would seem then that the main contested territory in services to students on-course appears at the interface between further and higher education. In many cases, such issues are resolved amicably and flexibly through co-operation. In some instances, however, because these areas adjoin their core activities, HECASs are anxious about conceding ground. There was evidence, for example, that the Surrey case-study was regarded by some AGCAS members as a form of ‘take-over’ which represented a dangerous precedent.

Many CSOs appeared to have no wider ambitions to offer services to higher education students. Some, however, did. Several expressed awareness of the very limited careers services which some higher education institutions offered to their students:

‘No clear strategic direction and ring-fenced budget in university funding to careers services, leading to poor staffing ratios generally and poor focus.’

Some felt that, given additional resources, they could offer at least as good a service themselves:

‘The concept of separate university-based services is outdated.’
It was felt that this would offer benefits in terms of greater continuity of guidance provision and more effective feedback to earlier stages.

In a few cases, CSO ambitions had been made public, to the annoyance of local HECASs:

‘One aspect of the way in which some local careers companies operate which severely impedes good working relationships is the inclusion in their business plans of the desire to run HE services!’

‘Local careers company published its corporate plan including a commitment to “offer guidance services to HE students” without consultation.’

The fear of ‘take-over’ ambitions on the part of some CSOs has clearly been a major impediment to the development of effective working links between CSOs and HECASs, even in areas where there is no evidence of the local CSO harbouring such ambitions.

Post-Exit Guidance

A further contested area is that of guidance offered to graduates within the couple of years following graduation. There is evidence that more students are now deferring serious attention to job-hunting until after they have completed their degrees, and that many students now take longer to stabilise in an initial career direction. Many HECASs accordingly make their services available free of charge to their graduates for a period of up to three years or even longer; a few, however, do not (Watts, 1997, p. 45).

The position is complicated by the fact that many graduates move back to their home area or elsewhere at some distance from their place of study. Accordingly, a ‘mutual aid’ scheme has been established by AGCAS under which HECASs have agreed to offer what services they can to each other’s graduates (and current students) for three years post-graduation. Recent practice, however, has varied considerably, from the University of London which has charged for all services to such users, to others which have offered a free service to all-comers, the only restriction being that they might not have access to full careers adviser interviews during busy times. An unpublished AGCAS survey in 1994 suggested that the great majority fell towards the latter end of this spectrum. Nonetheless, the diversity of views on this—and the very different situations faced by services in densely-populated and thinly-populated areas—has made it difficult to promote the ‘mutual aid’ provision as a standard nationally-available service (ibid, pp. 45–46).

Some CSOs clearly viewed unemployed graduates as part of HECASs’ responsibility. As one HECAS said:

[We do] not see X as a competitor in that they refer all unemployed graduates here. This has produced a clear line of demarcation which allows each organisation to work well together.
Sometimes there might be exceptions to this on geographical grounds. A CSO reported that:

The only ones we would see would tend to be the ones who just could not travel … it could be a 60 to 70 mile journey to … the local university.

Some CSOs, however, felt it was clear that HECASs were unable to cope with the demand:

Our staff regularly see unemployed graduates who feel left high and dry by their HEI.

A number were keen to offer services to recent graduates themselves. Some, for example, ran jobclubs, or provided a wider range of services. In some cases this was welcomed by HECASs:

[‘We] alone cannot meet local graduate guidance needs.’

Other HECASs, however, regarded such CSO services as representing incursions into their territory:

‘Predatory moves by X to get involved with graduate guidance without talking to us about it.’

‘… careers companies … tout for business in areas such as guidance for new and recent graduates even where they themselves are aware that the local HE service is the logical provider.’

On the other hand, it was clear that some CSOs were unable to cope either, particularly where they were not able to secure extra funding to provide services to such students:

‘Demand by graduates for guidance is becoming too great for us to handle given existing resources.’

Moreover, one CSO recognised that this was an area where co-operation with the HECAS was desirable:

‘… because the local labour market cannot offer opportunities which meet the needs of local graduates.’

Tensions in this area seemed to be exacerbated where fees were charged. One HECAS felt that the local CSO’s fee-charging policy impeded closer links:

‘X charges graduates—we do not as yet.’

Conversely, one CSO mentioned the growth of fee-charging by HECASs in the same terms:

‘Move to charging graduates of other institutions for services … would have negative effect on working relationship.’

On the other hand, some CSOs offering charged services still took care to explain the possibilities of free help within the mutual-aid scheme:
'We have a commercial service for recent graduates, but we always refer them to the universities in the area as they have a reciprocal arrangement with universities across the country.'

There were several examples of joint initiatives for recent graduates. These included, for example, a series of job-hunting seminars for unemployed graduates run by a CSO in association with two local HECASs. Several of the successful projects in the DfEE’s ‘Guidance for Graduates’ development programme were based on CSO/HECAS partnerships. Table 1 shows that guidance support for unemployed graduates was indeed the most common area of working links with CSOs named by HECASs.

A further complicating element in the post-exit area was the impact of the New Deal arrangements for young people aged 18–24. These arrangements varied considerably between localities. In one of our case-studies it was felt that the Employment Service personal advisers, now being trained up to NVQ Level 3 in guidance, were not referring graduates to either CSOs or HECASs, but were dealing with the graduates themselves. In another, however, the CSO was a lead agent for the Gateway element of the New Deal, and had made arrangements to sub-contract work relating to graduates to local HECASs (though no referrals had yet been made at the time of our visit). Similar arrangements were being considered in a third case-study.

It would thus seem that guidance post-exit is contested territory, with potential for competition but also for co-operation. Several services commented on the need for greater public funding for provision in this area.

**Adult Guidance**

The line between post-exit guidance and adult guidance is a blurred one. What HECASs view as post-exit guidance may be viewed by CSOs as part of adult guidance. One CSO indeed suggested that HECAS claims over post-exit work denied adult status to graduates:

‘Not being able to regard graduates as adults (in careers service terminology).’ Clearly, however, beyond the two or three years immediately following graduation, issues related to providing guidance to graduates become part of the wider issue of making guidance available to adults in general. This was, in many respects, viewed as open territory, in the sense that—as was pointed out by several services on both sides—no clear national strategy had yet emerged for responding to the demand for adult guidance. It was unclear how far such services were to be paid for by individuals or subsidised in some way; and if provision was to be made by several providers, how far their relationships were to be based on collaboration or on competition.

In the absence of a national strategy for adult guidance, some CSOs and some HECASs clearly regarded it as outside their terms of reference:

‘It is university policy that the careers centre are not involved in non-core work.’
‘It is not the local careers companies who are providing services to adults in this area.’

Others were keen to develop services for adults, but many were still struggling to find effective means of doing so.

Over the years, efforts have been made in many areas of the country to form networks of adult guidance providers. Table 1 shows that two-thirds both of CSOs and of HECASs referred to collaboration with one another in such networks. The networks commonly also included representatives from Training and Enterprise Councils (in Scotland, Local Enterprise Companies), Local Education Authorities, the Open University, colleges of further education, training providers, and the voluntary sector—as well as, increasingly, the Employment Service. They usually met periodically and often produced local directories of adult guidance providers. They also provided frameworks for accessing funding for adult guidance, including European funding linked to social priority areas.

Some networks have been managed by TECs, which have routed funding to the member services on a per capita basis—sometimes limited to unemployed or un-waged adults, but sometimes with broader terms of reference. In some cases membership of the network has been limited to organisations meeting specified quality standards. Where HECASs have been members of such networks, there has been a tendency for graduates to be referred to them, though often clients have been free to approach whichever agency they chose. A few HECASs felt that the TEC was prejudiced against them:

‘Our TEC owns/manages the local CS—so the TEC is more inclined to support them than us.’

A couple of HECASs felt positively excluded:

‘There is total inflexibility with regard to adult guidance in that in effect the HE services are excluded from being considered as providers.’

‘I have lobbied the TEC and the careers service to allow funding for graduates to be interviewed in our HEI CAS to no avail’

In a few cases, the HECAS was involved but resource constraints limited the extent of its involvement. Thus one university which offered its own students an entitlement to a short 15-minute signposting interview, but not necessarily a confidential booked interview, felt that it could offer only the former to local adult guidance clients.

Several HECASs took the view that adult guidance was an area where links with CSOs could be particularly fruitful, on a mutually beneficial basis:

‘Network arrangements which bring shared resources and training from TEC are good because you gain without having to give away your competitive position.’

Some HECASs felt it was important to assert their distinctive expertise within such arrangements:
‘Safeguarding our position as the graduate specialists is important.’

A further way of viewing adult guidance from a HECAS perspective is as part of lifelong learning. One HECAS manager saw adult guidance provision as a university’s ‘loss leader’ because

‘... by maintaining a good relationship with their local graduate population an institution is more likely to be able to invite them to take up CPD opportunities.’

In other words, within a lifelong learning perspective, adult guidance becomes a dimension of pre-entry guidance.

Adult guidance represents the major area of open territory in the relationships between CSOs and HECASs. Within a conventional model of young people progressing from school/college into higher education, it constitutes an extraneous area for both groups. Within a lifelong learning model, however, it could extend and reconstruct their core business in a radical and challenging way.

**Labour-Market Information**

Cross-cutting these various areas of work were links relating to labour-market information. These included three main elements: information on specific vacancies, more general links with employers, and broader information on labour market trends.

There appeared to be some sharing of vacancy information and employer contacts. In one of our case-studies, for example, the HECAS sent copies of all its locally-produced vacancy bulletins to the local CSO. In another, arrangements for exchanging information on employers offering graduate vacancies were being discussed. A few HECASs felt that CSOs had more to gain than HECASs from such arrangements. On the other hand, other HECASs felt they had much to gain too:

‘Students and graduate clients need improved access to local jobs.’

This was particularly the case in view of the Dearing Report’s recommendation on expanding opportunities for undergraduate work experience (NCIHE, 1997, recommendation 19).

An important source of labour-market information is the follow-up survey of graduate destinations carried out by HECASs. Several CSOs reported that they valued this information:

‘... LMI clearly key to decisions in choosing careers and HEIs have the information first hand from graduates.’

One felt that the presentation and availability of the information could be improved:

‘We would appreciate clearer destination information but understand this is difficult for HEIs to provide.’

In some respects the HECAS surveys complement the school/college destination surveys carried out by CSOs. Some CSOs made a point of sharing the results of the
latter with all local HECASs. Tracking of young people by CSOs is now receiving greater attention both nationally and locally. At present this does not usually extend to higher education. In one of our case-studies, however, the CSO regularly carried out its own survey of local graduates. In two other case-studies, the local CSO felt that there was much to be gained from extending tracking studies to cover higher education, particularly with more students entering higher education locally. It was pointed out that this would be particularly important if the funding model for higher education became more like that in further education, with attention given to student retention, drop-out rates, and progression.

In broader terms, there was recognition on both sides that there was in principle a great deal of complementarity between the databases and information resources held by CSOs and HECASs, with potential benefits on both sides from greater sharing. On the other hand, it was noted that this could raise difficult issues of intellectual property rights. The increasing use of the Internet for information was recounting these issues. One CSO felt there was a:

‘...need to share information, in particular to make better use of Internet systems linking websites.’

In one of our case-studies, the CSO and the HECAS were both involved in the development of websites on labour-market information: it had been agreed that the planning of the two sites would be co-ordinated and that reciprocal links would be built between them.

Staff Development

In general, the structures of initial training and of staff development for CSOs and HECASs tend to be separate from one another. Certainly a substantial number of HECAS staff come from a CSO background. But once they are working in a HECAS, most of their training is provided within AGCAS networks.

Some of the initiatives outlined in earlier parts of this section have however included some opportunities for CSO and HECAS staff to be involved in training each other, or in joint staff development. In one of our case-studies, for example, CSO staff provided training for some HECAS staff in relation to their roles within local adult guidance and New Deal initiatives. In another, there were plans to involve HECAS staff in offering mentoring for other members of the adult guidance network. Such networks also offered opportunities for joint training sessions.

More generally, staff development was seen in some cases as a fertile area for further co-operation. One CSO mentioned that staff swaps were being considered for the future. At least one HECAS was already making use of CSO staff:

‘I couldn’t staff my service without utilising the careers advisers for part-time cover. This arrangement is with individual staff rather than a contract with the company but they are aware of the situation.’
Quality Standards

A final area where some links have tentatively been developed is in relation to quality standards. There are three dimensions to this.

The first is that a number of CSOs have been involved in developing and implementing local quality standards for career education and guidance programmes in schools and colleges. In one of our case-studies, it was intended that the local HECASs would play a significant role in this, with representation on the steering group and on the assessment team.

The second is that in some areas, public funding of adult guidance has been limited to organisations regarded as meeting specified quality standards. In some cases such standards were developed by TECs/LECs; increasingly, these have been influenced by the draft standards developed nationally by the National Advisory Council for Careers and Educational Guidance. CSOs and HECASs which were part of adult guidance networks in these areas had been subject to such standards. From 2001, all adult guidance providers which are members of local information, advice and guidance partnerships will be expected to possess the Guidance Council Quality Mark as a condition of grant (DfEE, 1998c).

The third is that the national standards developed by the Guidance Council have been designed to cover all sectors of career education and guidance provision. At the same time, CSOs are subject to government standards in relation to their core contract, while in higher education AGCAS is developing quality standards for HECASs. If these two sets of standards were harmonised with the Guidance Council standards, this could provide a strong influence for more broadly-based harmonisation between the two sets of services. Moreover, if the implementation mechanism for the standards includes a strong local component, there could be interesting questions about the respective roles of CSOs and HECASs—as the two most strongly professionalised services—in their local application.

Commentary

In terms of the framework outlined in the introduction to this section, it would seem that the main links established to date relate to communication, co-operation and co-ordination. Communication links include informal networking and formal meetings. Co-operation links include various joint initiatives and project development work. Co-ordination links, comprising some alteration of working patterns within existing professional boundaries, include arrangements in relation to New Deal and adult guidance. Communication links are common; the others a little less so.

More radical links, related to cross-fertilisation or integration, are much more rare. The one example of integration, in Surrey, is based on distinctive circumstances. Links related to staff development and quality standards could be regarded as forms of co-operation, but have the potential for cross-fertilisation—i.e., for facilitating work across professional boundaries in ways which may redraw the boundaries themselves. Activities in these areas are fairly limited at present, though with potential for growth.
On the tensions between collaboration and competition, it would seem that labour-market information is viewed widely (though not universally) as an area of perceived complementarity. CSO’s pre-entry guidance and HECASs’ on-course guidance are largely uncontested territory, though with some tensions related to perceived incursion from CSOs in relation to the latter. These tensions relate mainly to the interface between further and higher education, where there is some contested territory. The other major contested territory is post-exit guidance. Adult guidance is, in the main, viewed as open territory.

In our postal survey, services were asked to indicate whether they envisaged any significant developments during the next two years which would involve them and their corresponding local services working together. Over three-quarters of the CSOs, and over two-thirds of the HECASs, answered ‘yes’ or ‘possibly’. Much the largest category of responses—especially of CSOs—related to adult guidance. Some saw collaboration in this area as inevitable:

‘Closer collaboration inevitable in a move towards an “all-age” guidance service.’

Others thought it was conditional on policy initiatives:

‘Much will depend on the TEC’s structure of government funding, policies set up by RDAs, political drive towards a quality all-age guidance service.’

Reference was made to Learning Direct, to the University for Industry, to Individual Learning Accounts, and to the New Deal. Some envisaged specific joint initiatives in this area:

‘Perhaps a shop-front all-age (including graduates) Guidance Centre in X: there’s a reasonable argument for it!’

In terms of models for the future, some were based on communication, co-operation and collaboration within more clearly demarcated boundaries:

‘A clear division of responsibility.’

Some services, however, argued for greater cross-fertilisation across professional boundaries:

‘If lifelong learning is to be meaningful, then there must be good lifelong careers guidance and information which is totally seamless.’

A few seemed to envisage moving towards full integration:

‘If the trend towards “home town” university attendance grows, both careers companies and ourselves will be providing local services to local people. From the client’s point of view, multiple agencies will cease to make any real sense.’

‘[The present provision] reflects institutions’ self interest and preservation of familiar structures … Merging existing careers services is essential … The Employment Service should stop messing around with benefits. They
should transfer them to DSS and merge the rump of the Employment Service with local careers services and higher education careers services.’

Some thought that integration might be possible in specific areas of activity:

‘It is possible that they could merge to provide a one-stop adult guidance service.’

‘They could provide joint graduate services.’

Other, however, were strongly against integration:

‘HEI careers services are effectively part of a national (even international) careers service network but with the huge advantage of working within institutions ... I can see some pooling of information and agreements on joint projects but it would be very much to the detriment of HE students to have any general pooling of resources with “localised” providers.’

It was also noted that any moves to integrate the services would be hampered by differences in salary structures and in terms and conditions of employment. Most comments seemed to favour a process of gradual development in particular areas of activity, with sensitivity to local differences:

‘The best way of encouraging co-operation is through locally funded initiatives to provide improved service for graduates and a more co-ordinated approach to local industry.’

**Conclusions**

Our survey has revealed a great diversity both of attitudes and of practice in the relationships between CSOs and HECASs. In some areas, there are very close working relationships, based upon trust and personal contacts built up over a long period of time. In others, there is lack of contact, or—more negatively—some mistrust and suspicion. Between these two extremes are areas where contacts tend to be limited to specific activities.

Our review has identified many examples of collaborative practice. These cover a wide variety of activities related to a range of client-groups. If all services felt willing to address the full range of possibilities indicated by the practices we have reported, the scope for expanding such collaboration would be considerable. This does however depend a great deal on developing a climate of trust. This has to be built up gradually, and can easily be undermined by misunderstandings, by behaviours perceived as threatening, or by policies perceived as encouraging competition rather than collaboration.

Where negative attitudes exist, they have in many cases been closely linked to the impact of the contracting-out of CSOs. This has meant that the organisational climate in CSOs is now perceived by some to be very different from that in HECASs. It has also meant that, with some CSOs having a profit-making structure, and others adopting an entrepreneurial approach within a non-profit structure, there has been considerable suspicion of their expansionist ambitions. Such suspicions
have not always been groundless: some CSOs have publicly indicated an interest in taking over higher education services. But the suspicions have significantly hampered possibilities for collaboration even sometimes in areas where the CSO has harboured no such ambitions.

The range of variation within CSOs and within HECASs means that generalisations which each group makes in relation to the other cannot always be substantiated. Thus some HECASs view CSOs as being driven by business motives linked to fee-charging and income-generation; but some HECASs have also been under pressure to engage in such activities, and most CSOs are non-profit organisations. In a sense, both groups of services have a core contract or remit—CSO from government, HECASs from their institution—to provide a free service to a core group of clients, and have to confront issues related to fee-charging and income-generation if they want to move much outside that. Some staff on both sides feel uncomfortable about these issues (though by now more CSO than HECAS staff may be reconciled to them): we suspect (though we are moving beyond the boundaries of our data here) that some of the tensions between the two groups of services may have been based on projection of this discomfort.

In practice, the proportions of CSO and HECAS budgets which comprise contributions from core contracts and from other sources of income seem to vary considerably within each sector. Collecting comparable data on this is not easy, because—particularly in the case of HECASs—some costs are hidden or merged under different budget heads. We hypothesise, however, that the range of the proportions covered by the core contract are broadly similar (perhaps 60–95%) across the two groups.

The policy context is now changing. Whereas the clear policy of the previous Conservative Government was to encourage competition between guidance agencies (Watts, 1998), the new Labour Government is more predisposed to collaboration. The annual report of the statutory Careers Service notes that ‘careers services are … starting to collaborate with other services rather than working in competition with them’ and that ‘partnership has become pre-eminent as a key working principle during the year’ (DfEE, 1998b, p.38). Moreover, the Government’s policy statement on adult guidance states explicitly that ‘we wish to avoid competition between different local agencies, where that detracts from the quality of service available to local people’ (DfEE, 1998c, p.7).

Other aspects of the new Government’s policies are likely to influence the future relationships between CSOs and HECASs. One is its concern to ‘refocus’ the role of CSOs to give more attention to disaffected young people (see DfEE, 1999; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). This could have the effect of reducing the attention which CSOs give to higher-education-related work within their core contract. On the other hand, the fact that CSOs are one of the four key partners in the new local Lifelong Learning Partnerships (DfEE, 1999), alongside their likely significant role in local partnerships for offering information, advice and guidance to adults (DfEE, 1998c), could mean greater attention to some of the fields of work discussed in this report.

It is clear that the long-term future of the relationship between CSOs and HECASs rests to a significant extent on whether there is to be a coherent national
strategy for lifelong access to guidance, incorporating guidance for adults as well as for young people. The DfEE consultation document on adult guidance (DfEE, 1998c), linked to parallel initiatives in Scotland and Wales (see ETAGW, 1999), offers the prospect of significant moves towards a national framework based on co-ordinated local diversity in delivery; these initiatives are closely linked to the formation of Local Learning Partnerships and the development of the University for Industry. CSOs and HECASs both have potentially major contributions to make to local delivery. The roles of both sets of services, and the relationships between them, need to be given careful attention in developing the national framework. We hope that the results of our survey will helpfully inform these discussions.

References


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