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Deirdre Hughes^a

^a Warwick Institute for Employment Research, Coventry, UK
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The changing UK careers landscape: tidal waves, turbulence and transformation

Deirdre Hughes*

Warwick Institute for Employment Research, Coventry, UK

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This article explores how the UK careers landscape in each of the four home nations is changing in response to neo-liberal policies. In this context, careers services are increasingly under pressure to demonstrate their added value, impact and returns on investment. As fiscal arrangements tighten and governments state their preferences and priorities for national careers services, differing strategic responses are beginning to emerge. A quasi-market, experimental approach is now the dominant discourse in England, in contrast to differing and complementary arrangements in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The article suggests that insofar as these developments are transforming national careers services, they are also creating significant challenges which require new forms of policy imagery and imagination for high-impact, all-age careers services.

Keywords: policy imagery; quasi-market; careers landscape; UK arrangements; transformation

Introduction

With a population approaching 62.3 million (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2011), the UK is one of the larger countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and its GDP per capita slipped from 18th in 2009 to the 23rd highest in the world in 2011, at US\$38,818 (The World Bank, 2012). Of the total population, around 84% live in England, 8% in Scotland, 5% in Wales and 3% in Northern Ireland; children aged under 16 represent around one in five (20%) of the total population, compared with those of retirement age and over, who make up one in six (17%) (ONS, 2011). The unemployment rate is 2.53 million in mid-2012 (7.8%); this is higher than the same period in 2008 when it was 5.5% (*ibid.*) but lower than the 8.4% peak in 2011. Since the late 1990s an increasingly important factor has been net migration from abroad, including, more recently, migration from new EU member states. There was a net flow of 163,000 migrants to the UK in the year ending June 2012, which is significantly lower than the net flow of 247,000 in the year ending June 2011 (ONS, 2013).

There are a number of differences, as well as similarities, in the arrangements for providing careers services across the four home nations. This partly reflects the geography, culture and relative population sizes of the regions, as well as the differences in the constitutional responsibilities adopted by the devolved administrations. Williams and Mooney (2008, p. 493) argue that devolution potentially

*Email: deirdre.hughes3@btinternet.com

amounts to a paradigmatic turn that brings with it ‘new vantage points’ and ‘new perspectives’. As Adams and Robinson (2002, p. 198) and Greer (2003, p. 52) have also affirmed, there is a move towards England being just one of four nations, no longer the standard ‘norm’ against which others are measured. For those in the careers sector faced with the possibilities and tensions that devolution portends, there is an urgent imperative to move beyond the inherent dangers of technocratic pragmatism in neo-liberal policies, such as increased curriculum vitae and skills health check production lines, towards a renewed focus on new forms of ‘policy imagery’ that provide greater long-term stability in education and careers systems design (Harbourne, 2013) alongside a back and forth flow of ideas and creativity to adapt services that can grow and develop. This policy imagery approach permits ‘policy borrowing’ (Sultana, 2009, p. 3) that includes processes such as ‘assimilation’, ‘transfer’ and ‘importation’ from other nations as a basis for critique and reflection by policy-makers, academics, managers and practitioners. Philips and Ochs (2004, p. 773) highlight the fallacious assumptions behind the notion that policies can easily be transplanted from one nation context to another. However, Raffe and Byrne (2005, p. 1) argue that ‘[p]olicy learning is much more than mere policy borrowing or the identification of what policy works’. They highlight the potential for home international comparisons to support a broader understanding and awareness of the conceptual and practical issues in policy development and implementation, through detailed comparisons of policies in context.

New and complementary structural frameworks are emerging in each of the four home nations (and further afield) and these provide a rich basis for relevant policies and evidence-based practice to be considered and customised, where appropriate, to policy contexts and settings. At present, tidal waves of change around specific constellations of policy influences are creating divergence and convergence at the UK level. Lessons learned from these and other countries shed light on possible ways forward in making and strengthening the case for future investment in national all-age careers services.

Constellations of policy influence

The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN, 2012a, p. 19) indicates that over the decade 2010–2020, the challenge is to show that Europe is able to create ‘smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, in the framework of the European 2020 strategy’. In the UK, the urgent need for economic recovery, similar to that experienced in other EU member states (and further afield), is bearing down heavily on governments. For example, ‘even once the UK has regained its peak level of output, the economy will still have considerable spare capacity, meaning that many individuals will still be unable to find appropriate employment’ (Kirby, 2012). At present, many of those in work are under-employed – doing part-time instead of full-time jobs, best described as ‘precarious work’ – or accepting employment below the level for which they are qualified (Purcell et al., 2012, p. 174). Not having a job at all is, of course, the ultimate form of ‘work precarity’, as it has become known (Eurobarometer, 2002, p. 62). Youth unemployment is a growing problem with significant long-term consequences for individuals, employers and local communities (Hughes & Borbély-Pecze, 2012; UK Commission for Employment and Skills [UKCES], 2012a). This matters, because if youth unemployment continues at current rates, by 2022 costs to the exchequer and lost output to the economy in England

alone are estimated at £28 billion, on top of the human and social costs (Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations [ACEVO], 2012, p. 6). Also, findings from the OECD's (2009) 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA) statistics for English, maths and science demonstrate that the UK has not been progressing relative to its global economic competitors. In 2010, the Welsh Education Minister made it clear that schools in Wales are simply not delivering well enough for students at all levels of ability. The Secretary of State for Education in England noted: 'In the last ten years we have plummeted in the rankings: from 4th to 16th for science, 7th to 25th for literacy and 8th to 28th for maths'.¹ This assertion is challenged by Jerrim (2011), who argues that the current coalition government should not base educational policies on the assumption that the performance of England's secondary school pupils has declined (relative to that of its international competitors) over the past decade, the main reason being problems with missing data, survey procedures and the target population, which limit the inferences one can draw (*ibid.*, p. 21). Similar ministerial concerns exist in Scotland and Northern Ireland, creating waves of change in curriculum redesign and qualification policy reforms.

At the other end of the spectrum, changing expectations of how long people will work, and an ageing workforce, means there are challenges in supporting the continuing development of mid-career workers. It is clear that many individuals will need to adapt and be resilient in managing work transitions for much longer than was customary in the past (Bimrose & Brown, 2010). For example, learning through more challenging tasks following a job change has been found to be a popular way for low skilled workers to upgrade their skills (Brown et al., 2010). Also, the use of technologies (UKCES, 2012b), combined with other factors such as changes in consumer behaviours and the availability of more 'open source' data, has resulted in profound shifts in how individuals utilise services in a rapidly changing world. Government-funded websites and telephone helplines, such as the National Health Service Direct (NHS Direct) have created a new economic imperative from central government(s) to find up to £20 billion of savings by 2014 (Department of Health, 2010), resulting in moves to switch to lower cost arrangements and hire cheaper staff. Lower cost arrangements are increasingly becoming the 'norm' and if this were to happen further within all-age online careers services, it could pose a real threat to the UK careers profession in its drive towards increasing the number of highly qualified and competent careers professionals. Current centralised versus localised policy debates also raise new questions concerning the adaptation of public policies, as well as the adaptation of citizens, particularly amongst the most vulnerable groups.

Against this complex array of policy challenges, different ministries acting as guarantors of national careers services are faced with making policy and funding decisions; these often reflect their own ministers' interests and priorities. This may militate against 'all-age' careers services since few, if any, ministers have a horizontal portfolio that spans the 'all-age' spectrum to include schools, further and higher education, vocational education and training (VET), adult education, social inclusion and public employment services (except perhaps in Northern Ireland where the Minister for Employment and Learning has policy responsibility for further and higher education, training and employment, including the delivery of all-age careers guidance services, and has joint responsibility with the Minister of Education for 14 to 19 policy and careers provision in schools).

Growing concerns about the supply and demand side are increasingly linked not only to mismatch or shortfall in skills, but also to poor careers advice and inadequate signposting of individuals to labour market demands (Mann, 2012). This emerges as a consistent theme through numerous UK government inquiries, official reports and policy frameworks (see Gracey & Kelly, 2010; Heseltine Review, 2012, p. 166; Pring et al., 2009; UKCES, 2012a). Keep (2012, p. 22) argues that '[o]ne of the most oft-repeated, but also most frequently ignored recommendations in the field of UK vocational education and training (VET) over the last 30 years has been the need for more and better careers information, advice and guidance'.

Careers services in the UK: tidal waves of change and turbulence

By legislation, careers service provision is free to all young people throughout the UK. More generally, it is widely accessible to young people and adults through a variety of sources including national careers services (online and offline), schools, colleges, higher education institutions, community-based organisations, VET and public employment services. Widespread variation exists regarding the degree of legal requirements in relation to career education, career guidance, career information, career management skills, practitioner competences and VET (Hughes, 2012a, 2012b). In many cases, client entitlements are not specified in such a way that entities failing to provide the service, or to provide it adequately, are susceptible to legal challenge.

At present, careers policy strategies are characterised in terms of: career decision-making in Northern Ireland (Department for Employment and Learning [DEL], 2012, p. 5); career planning in Wales (Careers Wales, 2012); careers choices in England (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills [DBIS], 2012a); and career management in Scotland (Skills Development Scotland [SDS], 2012). It is interesting to note that Wales is in the process of embedding its own adaption of a 'career management skills framework' based on the Scottish experience. Each careers service strategy is situated within a broader policy context of education, employment, skills, enterprise and economic growth. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales the publicly funded 'all-age' careers services are directly accountable to the appropriate devolved administration, whereas in England the equivalent service currently operates within a quasi-market. Here, divergence is amplified by neo-liberal policies adopted by the coalition government, whereby the market is being stimulated to provide greater choice in commodities and services to help reduce the tax burden. This process began under New Labour (Le Grand, 1997, 2009) and has continued to gather significant momentum in England. For careers services, this is characterised through increased competition, school autonomy, de-regulation and opening up the market in careers which, in turn, has reshaped the careers provider landscape with a multiplicity of providers, products and services targeting schools, colleges, VET providers, local authorities and universities (Bimrose, Hughes, & Barnes, 2011).

The careers services' role as a 'market-maker' in strengthening the supply and demand side and/or 'market provider' operating alongside other competitors remains contested territory (Watts, 2011). In each home nation, changing boundaries between different forms of private, public, familial and community-based welfare provision have resulted in 'a multiplicity that confounds any simplicity between the state and the market' (Lewis, 2000, p. 14). The critical issue, however, is the extent to which a largely unregulated market in careers services is likely to deliver in the public

interest. The Education Act (Department for Education [DfE], 2011) and *Statutory guidance for schools* (DfE, 2013) created autonomy and new freedoms for schools to secure their own impartial and independent careers guidance services. There is a strong drive by ministers to increase the availability of online ‘destination measures’, i.e. learning and career trajectory datasets and the adoption of ‘nudge principles’ (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009) to increase individuals’ usage of online services. Lightman (2012) describes all of this as ‘akin to a torrential storm’. The Secretary of State for Education, a strong proponent of reformation in the education and qualifications system, is adamant that decisions about what careers education and work-related learning to include in the curriculum should reside firmly with headteachers and governing bodies (Andrews, 2011). Purchasing decisions to secure access to independent careers professionals, with no government ring-fenced funding made explicit, present a real challenge. While the ever changing role and responsibilities of the state and markets unfold, local delivery of careers services is becoming more diffuse and confusing, especially for young people and their parents. Growing concerns and a lack of reliable data on the extent to which schools are meeting their new statutory responsibilities for impartial and independent careers guidance have resulted in a brief Parliamentary Select Committee Inquiry into careers guidance for young people (November 2012), and a thematic inspection of careers provision in schools in early 2013. While these diffuse conditions are proving extremely challenging, some possible solutions are required. Here, policy imagery can be helpful, as argued by Harbourne (2013), who points to the need for politicians and policy-makers to focus more on achieving long-term stability in education systems design, with the option of including ‘mandatory career studies’ for school students. This is the policy being effectively pursued in Ontario, Canada which has yielded some positive results. Other high-performing education and employment systems in Austria, Australia, Denmark, Germany and Finland also merit closer scrutiny.

In England, the launch of a new National Careers Service in April 2012, funded primarily, though not exclusively, by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), operates alongside, and often in competition with, the wider careers market. The careers community has expressed concerns about inherent risks in future funding for careers services to adults being eroded to supplement diminished investment in careers services for young people. Recent proposals for a new single pot of funding to support ‘local determinism’ in local communities also present both opportunities and threats to existing national careers service provision (Heseltine Review, 2012). Overall, policy-makers in the three Celtic nations (i.e. the devolved administrations) commonly refer to this quasi-market approach as the ‘English experiment’. Lessons from the Netherlands are helpful in this regard as quasi-market experiments and the availability of careers services has indeed increased but not as a consequence of marketisation and only for those who can afford it financially (Meijers, 2001). Overall, constant shifts in education and careers service policies operating alongside increased complexities in the education and employment systems now challenge the concept and reality of a lifelong ‘all-age’ careers service (House of Commons, 2013). Constant organisational and structural changes will fail to solve the careers, jobs, skills and growth policy challenge. Instead, there is a need to deliver a coherent message to communicate to a wider audience. This requires some clear thinking about what exactly they are trying to tell policy-makers, employers and the general public.

The Celtic nations

In contrast to the 'English experiment' firmly steeped in neo-liberalism, the Celtic nations have adopted a hybrid mix of 'softened' neo-liberalism and social justice policy stances. For example, the careers service in Wales is an impartial, bilingual, all-age, all-ability service which will be maintained through the effective delivery of web-based and telephony services. Recent convergence of careers services (operating under the brand name of 'Careers Wales') stem from six individual careers service companies and their joint subsidiary, the Careers Wales Association, moving into a more 'unified company structure'. In November 2012, the Welsh Assembly Government announced its intention to transfer Careers Wales into a public sector ownership model (subject to pension liability agreements). The new arrangement is likely to move closer to the position in Northern Ireland where the Careers Service is an integral part of the Department for Employment and Learning. Therefore, 2013–2014 is likely to be a year of transition, with further changes required after that, as Careers Wales owned by the Welsh Assembly Government adjusts to meet the emerging policy requirements of the Youth Engagement and Employment Division. In addition, priority groups have been identified by government officials for its Careers Wales resource allocation and delivery activity. An estimated cut of 20% in staffing is forecast in the 2013–2014 budget. There is also likely to be significant reduction in the availability of face-to-face Careers Information Advice and Guidance (CIAG) for some client groups.

The Welsh government's priority for the careers service is *young people* (in defined priority groups in schools and colleges and unemployed young people up to the age of 25 who are most in need of CIAG and support). The shift in priorities may be more due to accident than design given the recent demise of the Department for Lifelong Learning, where the careers service policies used to reside. Comparing this to England, where the bulk of careers service funding currently flows from the BIS, we find greater emphasis on *adults* in England than young people. Youth unemployment in Wales is also higher than that of the remainder of the UK (19.1% versus 18.4%), so policy-makers can easily justify this policy stance. Careers service support for employer engagement with education, coupled with capacity-building support to schools to help institutions develop the 'Careers and the World of Work' framework (including the Careers Wales Quality Mark) remain a priority. Bimrose and Hughes (2012) highlighted to the Welsh Assembly the need for careful consideration in terms of rebalancing current levels of face-to-face, web-based and telephony services into a more integrated and cost-efficient model.

Careers services need to be as seamless as possible as individuals move between sectors (e.g. school, vocational education, higher education, employment) and life stages. There remains merit for future policy development, in Wales and further afield, to factor in the cost-benefit advantages to be accrued by offering mid-career workers career guidance that could potentially extend the length of their careers. This should not be at the exclusion of working with the unemployed; instead an inclusive approach is required linked to a long-term vision that moves beyond the immediate challenges of unemployment. Interestingly, the Skills Minister in England has endorsed and funded a new 'Mid-life Career Review Initiative' undertaken by the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). Finally, it is anticipated that the Deputy First Minister will shortly chair a new Wales Careers Strategic Forum to foster cross-sector collaboration and co-ordination in respect of

both policy and service delivery, as set out in 'Future Ambitions: Developing Careers Services in Wales' (Edwards, Sanders, & Hughes, 2010, p. 68). Lessons can be learned from recent emergent practice in Northern Ireland, as discussed below (and other EU member states [Hughes, 2012a]). A fundamental issue will be the need to continue, and increase, investment in the development of the website and telephony services to provide appropriate information and effectively deliver its services. This will mean a significant step change in the investment required as the website and telephony service will be the primary method of ensuring that an all-age service is maintained.

In Northern Ireland, the joint careers policy strategy and implementation plan (DE/DEL, 2009) between the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Education (DE) provides a framework for action. A high-level Strategic Steering Group has been set up to oversee and guide the implementation of the key areas of the strategy of the 'Preparing for Success Implementation Plan (Department of Education & Department for Employment & Learning, 2011)'. In doing so, it will take account of the provisions in the programme for government, in particular the economic agenda and the objectives of the 'Revised Curriculum and Entitlement Framework' (DE, 2010) and 'Success through Skills: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland' (DEL, 2011). The Strategic Steering Group will also take account of the objectives of a number of cross-departmental strategies including, the Anti-Poverty Strategy, Children and Young People's Strategy, Innovation and Creativity Strategy, Partners for Change, and the Welfare Reform Agenda with a priority focus on the needs of *young people and adults* vulnerable to social exclusion. Linked to this is ministerial interest in improving the usage and quality of labour market intelligence and information (LMI). In recent years, there has been a high degree of careers service policy stability; however, proposals for major departmental structural changes, driven by the Northern Ireland Assembly, could impact upon the future strategic positioning of the national all-age careers service. Consultations have taken place to help determine whether a move into 'education' or 'enterprise' by 2015 would work best. Early signs suggest the latter is favoured. Lessons learned from Careers Scotland's earlier experience of being embedded within an enterprise culture (2002–2008) could be helpful in this regard. Careers work in schools is also in the political spotlight, as evidenced by an ongoing Assembly Select Committee Inquiry.² Northern Ireland's youth unemployment has risen significantly in the last six years. In 2006 this figure was 9.7% and had jumped to 19.5% by 2011. This equates to a change from 12,900 to 23,300 unemployed young people. Simultaneously, long-term unemployment for adults is on the increase. The development of effective referral processes between the Employment Service and the Careers Service has led to a significant increase in adult clients availing of careers guidance services (15,692 adults received an individual careers guidance interview in 2011/2012, an increase of 81% from 2010/2011). In addition, the Careers Service is testing extended opening hours on Saturday mornings and Thursday evenings to improve access for adults currently in work.

In Scotland, the 'Curriculum for excellence teaching and learning framework (Scottish Government, 2008) is the main driving force underpinning new pedagogical approaches in primary and secondary education. Within this, a dominant theme for *learners of all ages* is to build 'core competencies' and 'career management skills'. A Scottish Blueprint framework, based on the Canadian and Australian 'Blueprint for Life Design', has been developed which offers a good example of 'policy borrowing'

(SDS, 2012), with the transference of learning for individuals taking place through the curriculum, web- and telephony-based careers service, entitled 'My World of Work'. A pioneering approach in the integration of theoretical and practice-based models of 'career guidance and coaching' is now well underway. Some practitioners are employed as 'careers and work coaches' delivering a facilitative and empowerment approach linked to the achievement of career management competencies. While this exists in career guidance, it manifests itself more overtly in the language of career coaching and counselling. Similar to other home nations, youth unemployment is of major concern: this currently stands at 21.4% which is slightly higher than the UK as a whole (21.3%) and it rose by 1.8% in 2011, showing an upward trend.³ A dedicated Youth Employment Minister is now leading a new strategy specifically to address this issue. A Youth Employment Challenge initiative (UKCES, 2012a), similar to that in England, was launched in July 2012,⁴ followed by moves to introduce 'speakers for schools' to inspire young people. This is an example of policy borrowing and imagery at its best.

The rich diversity in national careers services' policies offers common themes and challenges in practice, such as investment in web-based and telephony services, staff competence and experience of using LMI effectively, curriculum leadership and influence and social and economic returns on investment (SEROI) to governments and individuals.

Social and economic returns on investment

Governments strongly indicate that investments in careers services must demonstrate more clearly their added-value benefits. Plant and Thomsen (2011) highlight that a political climate exists where careers guidance is elevated to being the answer to all kinds of educational and labour market predicaments (drop-out, retention rates, integration of migrant workers, preventive workplace guidance, etc.). At the same time, it is also accused by sceptics of failing to make an impact. In these circumstances, it is no wonder national careers services are being held to account for their actions. Moving beyond this, imagination in the form of 'unsettling thoughts' or 'unfinished business' is required (Clarke, 2004) for future 'scenario building' on the 'division' and possible 'diversion' of scarce public sector resources. For example, what would citizens (and the careers profession) stand to lose if there was no national careers service? How can the 'knowledge triangle' between education, business and national careers services be strengthened as a condition for jobs, skills and growth? More fundamentally, what balance is required in the design and delivery of careers services for young people and adults? What is the role of the Welfare State and how do careers professionals add value compared to other professionals? Changes in its funding, its organisation, its management and its subjection to new political-cultural projects are reshaping the conditions and possibilities for future careers services. Progressive struggles are never just about thinking better thoughts (Clarke, 2004, p. 151); instead they require imagination in the form of new strategies for addressing corrosive cynicism that may exist in some political and/or public circles. Most EU countries have focused mainly on the quality of service provision and improvements, with practitioner competence positioned centrally within this discourse. With the exception of some public employment services, few careers services, if any, have used data and statistical modelling to help analyse the immediate, medium- and longer-term calculated savings to the public

purpose in the form of economic and/or social returns on investment. While this alone will not solve the corrosive cynicism and justification challenge, an evidence-based inter-disciplinary approach at a senior policy influence level is necessary to make sense of relevant datasets to help marshal strong policy investment arguments. For example, a recent evaluation of the outcomes associated with the Next Step service (DBIS, 2012b) aimed to explore the potential for exploiting new customer data in order to carry out an analysis of employment and learning outcomes. This includes a combined approach of econometrics and a propensity score matching model using datasets consisting of: (i) Next Step customer data for the first 12 months of service delivery; (ii) Individualised Learner Records (ILR) containing the incidence and nature of education and training; (iii) the Department for Work & Pensions National Benefits Database (NBD) containing information on benefit dependency; and (iv) the HM Revenue and Customs employment and earnings datasets. The findings suggest a positive impact for those receiving careers advice: the employment rate increased by 9% and the proportion in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) reduced substantially during the six months after intervention. However, the report emphasises that more work is needed to fully explore how far the impacts can be attributed to the careers advice and to identify possible additional benefits of the service. In the absence of more work being undertaken on the social and economic returns on investment, careers services will remain vulnerable and will become significantly weakened. Policy imagery and imagination that produces solution-focused approaches to careers service design and delivery is the new imperative, however complex and contentious, to help move beyond simply mirroring back the fault-lines in government policies.

Transformation

Devolved administrations are each focused on carving out their own individual approach and key strategic priorities to careers service policies. The future direction and impact of careers services is likely to continue to be challenged within wider policy debates, particularly on curriculum design, business and education links and welfare reform. The strategic positioning of national careers services in these policy debates is crucial. As further austerity measures bite hard on public sector services, and with greater competition between and across agencies, possible models of national *and* local design and implementation are required. Differing forms of convergence are emerging in an attempt to make sense of the turbulent and transforming UK public policy landscape. New structural formations of 'strategic policy influence' within the UK are on the ascendency. By briefly outlining these, it does not negate in any way the invaluable collective efforts of various careers community lobby groups that, rightly, hold government(s) to account for their policy actions. Also, this does not attempt to occupy some high moral ground position, but instead puts the spotlight on new formations that, for the time being, reach directly into UK governments at a senior level.

Firstly, the UK Commission for Employment & Skills (UKCES), a non-departmental public body, is providing strategic leadership on skills and employment issues in the four nations of the UK. Priority areas of its work include 'more employers investing in the skills of their people' and 'more career opportunities for young people'. Joint work with the OECD is currently underway to explore options for 'policy borrowing' and 'influence' in relation to post-secondary vocational

education and training in England. Secondly, a UK-wide 'Policy-makers Forum', led by the government administrations, meets quarterly to share good and interesting careers service policies. Thirdly, in England a National Careers Council (2012) established by government in May 2012 will advise ministers on a future vision for the National Careers Service and the wider careers support market. It will report its findings to government in mid-2013. Membership comprises senior leaders from education, careers and employment sectors who adopt an independent and impartial cross-departmental facilitative role to 'join the dots' in careers work across education, vocational education and training, social inclusion and welfare to work policies. This direct line to government is a significant step forward for the careers sector in advancing 'policy influence' at a senior ministerial level. Lessons learned from France and Denmark (Hughes, 2012b), who each have a direct line into their respective Prime Minister's office to advise on national careers policies, are helpful examples of 'policy borrowing' in this regard. However, the fragility of such structures is also noted in the earlier experience of the Netherlands in which its National Council was abolished due to cutbacks and changes in fiscal policies.

Fourthly, in Northern Ireland, a Strategic Steering Group, as discussed earlier, led by senior civil servants working with business and education leaders, operates at a cross-departmental level with the Careers Service policy lead driving forward this work. In the near future, Wales may possibly follow a similar arrangement.

Fifthly, a new UK Career Development Institute (CDI) established in 2013 brings together four professional associations into a new entity from 2013 onwards offers fertile ground for cross-agency dialogue, including closer working links with professionals delivering in the Welfare to Reform agenda, private and voluntary/community sectors. And finally, the three Celtic nations have recently committed to a new 'Concordat' between their national careers services and Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER), to support the sharing and development of LMI for careers practitioners. This is viewed as a means of improving the quantity, quality and impact of LMI for the benefit of individuals, the economy and as a means of driving down costs. England has yet to fully commit to signing up to this.

Conclusion

So what happens next in the UK careers landscape? This is the big question which urgently requires policy imagery *and* imagination. Some immediate reflections include, for example: if the 'English experiment' is to make a positive impact on the lives of young people *and* adults, particularly those most vulnerable in society, what quality elements, criteria, indicators and examples of data can be put in place at a strategic level to monitor progress in the experiment? Policy lessons can be learned and borrowed across the four home nations (and further afield). The ELGPN *Lifelong Guidance Policy Development: A European Resource Kit* (ELGPN, 2012b) may prove helpful in this regard but this requires senior-level leadership concentrating on policy focus, imagery *and* imagination. Various international 'tried and tested' models briefly illustrated earlier highlight strong parallels in high-performing curriculum, labour markets and careers service developments in North America, Australasia and across Europe. This evidence base is openly available but how well are policy-makers and practitioners utilising this in their everyday practice? Also, as common themes emerge in the four home nations, such as the usage of, and

investment required for, web-based and telephony services (and staff training), what scope is there for joint working and new ventures on the user outcomes of such interventions? Why duplicate in a time of constrained resource? Clearly, the new formations responsible for 'strategic policy influence' must be encouraged to engage in solution-focused scenario building, alongside those within and across the careers community. All of these questions are independent of any *a priori* assumption that some form of public sector national all-age careers service is fundamentally a good thing.

Notes

1. Speech by Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, 20 January 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/speeches/a0073212/michael-gove-to-twyford-church-of-england-high-school>
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Notes on contributor

Dr Deirdre Hughes, OBE holds two ministerial appointments as Commissioner at the UK Commission for Employment & Skills (UKCES) and Chair of the National Careers Council in England. She was awarded an OBE in the 2012 New Year Honours List for services to career guidance. She is an Associate Fellow at the Institute for Employment Research (IER), Warwick University, Past President and Fellow of the Institute of Career Guidance (ICG) and an Associate at the Centre for Educational Sociology, Edinburgh University. She is Founding Director of the International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS), University of Derby (1998–2008). She specialises in the evidence base and impact of careers work, including research on national, EU and international career development policies, youth employment and skills, the marketisation of careers work, use of information communication technologies and labour market intelligence and information applied in careers practice.

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