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EDITORIAL

Jenny Bimrose ^a , Laurie Cohen ^b , John Arnold ^c & Sally-Anne Barnes ^d

^a University of Warwick

^b University of Nottingham

^c University of Sheffield

^d University of Warwick

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EDITORIAL

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Reframing careers

Careers guidance has been practised in the UK, in one form or another, for about a century, with publicly funded services refocused on different priorities as social and economic policy imperatives have shifted and changed over time. The policy profile it is currently experiencing has rarely been greater, with a high level of demand for careers support services (for example, see McKinsey & Company, 2012, p. 60), resulting from the confluence of a number of factors. These include: the growth in unemployment, together with increasing tensions exerted on individuals by both underemployment and overemployment (that is, where there is a difference between an employee’s preferred and actual working hours; Bell, 2011; Tam, 2010); the perplexing maze of educational and training pathway choices (HM Inspectorate of Education [HMIE], 2008; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2012); legislative changes to the pensionable age that delay exits from the labour market (see Age UK, 2011); and the raising of the age that young people in England must continue in education or training, with consequent delayed entry into the labour market (Department for Education, 2012). Unsurprisingly, a strong case is being made for careers guidance to play a central role in various social and economic policy arenas, by a variety of stakeholders. It has been highlighted, for example, as necessary for helping people into sustainable employment by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2011). Its importance is also acknowledged for the social equity and mobility agenda (for example, The Cabinet Office, 2009), with the value of employment support for young people generally emphasised for promoting social harmony (Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2012). In England, the National Careers Service has recently been mandated to aid economic recovery (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills [BIS], 2012a, 2012b). This increased profile for career guidance is not restricted to the UK, but is reflected in Europe, particularly its potential for vulnerable groups, for example, both in supporting the lifelong learning of older workers (CEDEFOP, 2011) and in combatting the social scourge of youth unemployment (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network, 2012).

However, the raised policy profile for careers guidance and increased demand for services have collided with cutbacks to careers services, implemented as part of

austerity measures to constrain public spending. Herein lies a paradox – at the very moment when career guidance is most needed, the least publicly funded provision is available. The responses of the four UK nations have varied considerably in their general philosophies, both towards the provision of career guidance services and in their responses to austerity measures, but it can nevertheless be argued that career guidance in the UK has, once again, found itself at something of a crossroads.

It was against this backdrop that a funding application was submitted to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to support a seminar series on careers. The title – ‘Re-framing service delivery, professional practices and professional identities in the UK’ – reflected the profound structural and policy challenges being faced by careers guidance. These challenges demanded a radical rethink both of approaches to service delivery and the structures for delivery. So it was timely to seek inclusive opportunities to support members of the broad community of careers guidance practice, across all UK nations, to get together for review and reflection. The broad aims of the seminar series focused on the need to explore the professional identities of UK careers guidance and careers practitioners; to foster dialogue amongst key stakeholders; and to contribute to policy discussions about the future shape of services and workforce capacity building. Discussions facilitated by the seminars were tailored around different themes, including: careers practitioners’ perceptions of their actual and ideal professional roles; policies and practices in different settings, including employer perspectives; particular aspects of diversity and disadvantage; existing, emerging and potential uses of digital technologies in careers; and the integration of emerging career theory in developing practice. Six seminars were hosted by universities across the UK (East London, Glamorgan, West of Scotland, Ulster and Nottingham Trent) and in the Republic of Ireland (University of Limerick), over a two-year period (2010–2012). A seventh seminar was held at the Education and Employers Task Force in London. International perspectives from academics based at universities in Australia (The University of Queensland), Finland (University of Jyväskylä) and South Africa (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University) were built in to learn from other countries’ experiences. The eight articles presented in this symposium edition relate to selected presentations from these seminars.

The topics covered are diverse. The relationship between the policy and practice of career guidance is dealt with differently in two articles. One, adopting a macro-perspective, contrasts the policy landscapes across the four nations of the UK, comparing these with European models and practices (Hughes). The other, taking more of a micro-perspective, focuses solely on English policy, presenting a historic analysis, offering challenging conclusions (Roberts). The core purpose of career guidance is thrown into sharp focus by the third article, because its potential for contributing to the well-being and health of individuals suffering from mental illness is argued, through the use of empirical evidence, thus providing a radical departure from the traditional assumption that careers guidance is about ‘getting a job’ (Robertson). The slippery concept of professionalism in careers guidance is explored in a fourth article, which emphasises the importance of continuing professional development as a mechanism for achieving both its formation and maintenance (Mulvey). Introducing a new, culturally sensitive approach to career counselling, the fifth article highlights the value of placing the client’s life experience at the very heart of guidance practice (McMahon & Watson). Facing the challenge of financial cuts and increasing demand for services, the changing practice of career guidance is

highly topical, with the integration of information and communications technology (ICT) into practice probably *the* key contemporary challenge. So the three remaining articles provide perspectives on this very issue, with all based on research evidence. One explores the potential impact of the use of career websites on young people's careers decision-making (Howieson & Semple); another examines the perceptions of careers practitioners as an important mediator in the integration of ICT into their practice (Kettunen, Vuorinen, & Sampson); and the third presents some stimulating blue-skies thinking around how the future might look for career support services, with the creative application of technology (Lally & Sclater). Short summaries of each of these eight articles follow.

Hughes, in her article 'The UK Careers Landscape', provides an authoritative analysis of the similarities and differences evident in policy and practice amongst the careers services in the four UK nations. The impact of different policies on practice is examined, with the experimental quasi-market approach adopted in England contrasted with approaches in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Hughes draws on broader European policy perspectives, urging that lessons be learned from both the successes and failures of other countries, since they can only serve to enrich and inform UK policy. Policy imagery and imagination are advocated as techniques to support thinking and political influence that can take us beyond the boundaries of familiar approaches that have been tried and found wanting. A key influencer on the reshaping of practice is governments' insistence on evidence, to justify the investment of public resources. It is argued that this fundamental challenge, assumed to be possible (though doubted by many), has to be confronted and somehow accommodated for career guidance to survive and thrive.

The pan-European perspective adopted by Hughes contrasts with the single focus on England adopted by Roberts in his article, 'Career Guidance in England Today: Reform, Accidental Injury or Attempted Murder?' The title resonates with the recent, ferocious and unprecedented policy attack on career guidance services in England, which, it is argued, can be explained using a historic analysis of the responses to economic change over the decades, by careers guidance professionals. The journey on which the author takes the reader is fascinating, compelling and controversial. Two critical break points are identified: the separation of services for young people with those for adults; and the espousal of occupational psychology as the basis for the claim to professionalism. The prognosis for the future of careers in England is both optimistic – there is still the need, and a demand, for services – and pessimistic – the severity of the damage inflicted to the service infrastructure and the morale of the profession will be difficult to fix.

The call for a defence of the profession is taken up by Robertson in his article entitled 'The Well-being Outcomes of Career Guidance'. Based on empirical research, he argues the case for career guidance in promoting well-being in clients, particularly those suffering from mental illness, defined by both positive engagement and pleasure. His argument is founded on the premise that career guidance interventions through a number of plausible causal mechanisms have a direct and positive impact on clients' well-being by encouraging engagement with learning and work. The discussion draws on parallels with the benefits of therapeutic counselling, such as providing practical support in a safe environment and managing emotions as part of the helping process. It closes by calling for the profession to discuss the well-being effects of its services and the extent to which the profession should be involved in the promotion of health and well-being.

Mulvey focuses on the need for career guidance professionals to prioritise their own ongoing education and training needs in her article, 'How to be a Good Professional: Existentialist Continuing Professional Development (CPD)'. At the same time as arguing for CPD as an individual responsibility, she is careful to assert that benefits accrue equally to employers of professionals and the professional associations to which they belong. Further, inherent tensions around the disparate goals of this triad need to be reconciled. The article uses England as a case study to chart the metamorphosis of the professional association landscape for careers, as it rationalised from a number of disparate associations to a single entity. It also draws on European research to highlight the importance of integrating 'professionalism' in training, as a fundamental competence. This, together with other strategies, is needed to strengthen the professional identity of career practitioners, which is integral to the quest for improvements to client services.

Continuing with the theme of career service improvements for clients, McMahon and Watson provide an international perspective in their article, 'Story Telling: Crafting Identities'. They explicate the 'story telling' approach to career practice, which falls within the broader tradition of narrative career counselling, and argue for its applicability across a range of clients with diverse needs. A brief historical overview of the development of career theory helps to position the innovative nature of this particular approach to practice. Connectedness, meaning making and agency, together with other core concepts, are explained for this new and challenging approach to practice. A practical case study application of the story telling approach in a South African context illustrates its value for working across a range of cultural contexts in helping to develop a future career story and future identity.

The remaining three articles in the symposium relate to the integration of ICT into the practice of career guidance. This integration on a UK-wide basis is proving to be unstoppable. The careers profession, however, has been cautious in embracing innovation and change, so that the full potential of ICT to deliver 'more for less' has not yet been realised. A key contemporary challenge is to identify and support the type of action that will be required to stimulate technological transformation across the whole careers sector (Bimrose, Hughes, & Barnes, 2011). The remaining three articles in the symposium address different challenges for this particular change agenda. Howieson and Semple, in 'The Impact of Career Websites – What's the Evidence?' presents a discussion of results from an empirical study into the use of various websites by young people and, more particularly, their impact on the career decision-making of these young people. Government policies have tended to view multiple career websites as the primary solution for addressing young people's career decision-making, despite a lack of rigorous evidence to validate this direction of travel. The research undertaken by Howieson and Semple provides some intriguing challenges to a number of the assumptions underlying current policy, such as that relating to the unequivocal eagerness of all young people to engage with technology. Their study identifies two groups of pupils who were less than likely to use careers websites: those at risk of not achieving positive post-school destinations and minority ethnic pupils. This finding, and others from the study, emphasise the urgent need for further research to inform policy in this area.

The article by Kettunen, Vuorin and Sampson, entitled 'Career Practitioners' Conceptions of Social Media in Career Services', reports a qualitative study of 15 careers guidance workers in Finland and their attitudes to using social media in their work. Five different orientations are identified. These can be considered as

being on a continuum ranging from highly negative to highly positive about social media in this context. However, the reasons advanced by the careers guidance workers who take each stance are qualitatively different, and also probably reflect their own level of comfort (or not) with this technology. At the most positive end, they perceive a need to be where young people are, to respond quickly, engage in dialogue and encourage clients to reflect. In the middle of the continuum are perceptions that social media might help to reach clients who otherwise stay out of range and also prevent or counter misinformation. At the negative end are concerns about the workers' expertise being overridden, the expectation of 24-hour availability and a sense that young people do not want 'oldies' intruding in their social space. The authors conclude that if social media are to play an increasing role in careers work, it is necessary to consider careers practitioners' conceptions of their role and purpose as well as their technological skills.

The final article in the symposium, by Lally and Sclater, entitled 'The Inter-Life Project: Researching the Potential of Art, Design and Virtual Worlds as a Vehicle for Assisting Young People with Key Life Changes and Transitions', presents thought-provoking results of a study using the three-dimensional and immersive virtual world of Second Life[®] to support young people (aged 15–17 years) in their school to work and university transitions. The study demonstrates how virtual work can stimulate both emotional and cognitive engagement in a wide range of activities, such as supervision, group discussions and film-making. It also demonstrates how young people, by claiming this virtual space and engaging with creative activities, acquire new skills that map on to the real world of work. While recognising that more research is required, the authors present a clear case for the careers sector to embrace and engage with the potential of this technology to enhance careers services in the current challenging environment.

This symposium comes at a crucial time for careers guidance, with the articles dealing with critical issues for this phase of its ongoing development. As publicly funded services across the UK, careers guidance has always been something of a hostage to fortune, with politicians continually reordering priorities and raising the bar for performance, then using perceived weaknesses in delivery as a reason for reducing funding. All of the symposium articles highlight contemporary issues. A more stable policy framework within which services are delivered is pivotal, with some accommodation needed (and long overdue) between what is necessary and what is practically possible within resource constraints. Related to this point, performance measures for careers guidance have, for too long, been defined narrowly around placement into education, training or employment. Broader outputs and outcomes need to be recognised as legitimate, such as well-being and health. Constant policy shifts over the past few decades, precipitated by government change and policy redirection, have exerted increasing pressures to deliver more and more, with shrinking budgets and new market players entering the careers arena. This has, inevitably, taken its toll on the professionalism and standards of services delivered. Budget cuts have resulted in a downward pressure on the careers workforce, with ever reducing levels of qualification required for entry and opportunities for CPD severely compromised. Professionalism is a status to which the community of careers practice should be aspiring. Continuing professional development is an urgent issue for the newly formed UK-wide Careers Development Institute (CDI), to ensure that the demands and expectations for services are met. Part of the up-skilling and re-skilling agenda for the careers workforce is effective engagement with governments and new

approaches to practice. Traditional theories underpinning practice have provided robust and useful frameworks in the past, but the volatility and dynamism of the global labour market demand contemporary theories that provide different frameworks for practice. This will inevitably involve the use of ICT, with high-quality labour market information and greater connectivity to employers at the centre of effective approaches to practice.

Never has the challenge to, or the opportunities for, careers guidance been so great. The authors of this editorial, who also organised the delivery of the ESRC seminar series on which this symposium is based, wish to thank all contributors and hope that readers will feel challenged and stimulated – perhaps most importantly inspired – by the articles presented.

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Jenny Bimrose
University of Warwick
Laurie Cohen
University of Nottingham
John Arnold
University of Sheffield
Sally-Anne Barnes
University of Warwick