Workforce development and the use of ICT in Delivering Career Guidance in the UK

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National Report: Workforce development and the use of ICT in Delivering Career Guidance in the UK[1]

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the use of ICT in career guidance and on the provision of training and development in ICT skills for guidance practitioners. It will be used to inform the running of a pilot training programme in the UK and in particular the development of the e-practitioner profile, self-assessment skills tools and training materials in the ICT Skills 2 project.

This report begins by outlining the current and emerging use of ICT in career guidance. It then examines how practitioners[2] are being prepared to use ICT in their work both in their initial and in-service training and development.

1. Overview – the current context and emerging practice in the use of ICT in career guidance

The use of ICT in career guidance in lifelong learning systems in the UK varies between and within the countries that make up the UK (England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland). Furthermore, its use varies between and within the main sectors or settings for career guidance (youth, higher education, employment, adult/community). Explanations for this can be found in public policy, resourcing and professional training and practice (Offer, 2004; OECD, 2003). This report outlines key developments in each sector with illustrations drawn from different parts of the UK.

Youth settings

England

The 11-19 age group is supported, in England, by 150 local authority information, advice and guidance (IAG) services[3] The government expects every service to retain the national 'Connexions' branding that was introduced in 2001 but not all may do so. Connexions services provide help across a wide range of matters including careers, health, drugs, sex, relationships, money and housing. They are charged primarily with safeguarding young people's wellbeing and specifically helping those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) or who are at risk of becoming so. These services are free to young people at the point of delivery.

[1] This report incorporates some information from the earlier national report written by Marcus Offer for the initial ICT skills project in 2003.

[2] The full title of the ICT Skills 2 project is 'ICT Skills 2 for guidance counsellors'. In the UK, 'guidance counsellor' is not a term that is widely used. Career guidance professionals are known by a range of titles such as careers advisers (in higher education), personal advisers (in Connexions), 'Next Step' advisers (in adult guidance in England) and career coaches (in employment settings). As well as career guidance professionals, the UK also has a range of associate career guidance professionals who will be expected to use ICT in their work such as employment assistants.

[3] With effect from 1st April 2008. Previously, the country was divided into 47 Connexions Partnerships.

Up to now, the commissioners of Connexions services, the personal advisers who work for Connexions and the young people and their parents or carers, have placed a higher premium on face-to-face contact over online provision. The number of personal advisers to be deployed has been a key issue in the award of Connexions contracts and in the design of services. Similarly, professional led practice has often emphasized the limitations rather than the benefits of the use of ICT compared with face-to-face guidance. However, there has been very little research into the effectiveness of e-guidance for young people or into the effectiveness of different models of guidance which combine face to face and online support.

It is only now that commissioners and providers of services have started to consult young people about the design of services and woken up to the fact that more and more young people are competent and confident at accessing services provided 'interactively' through the imaginative and effective use of ICT. Even intermediary bodies such as schools, colleges and work-based learning providers have continued to expect personal advisers to deliver IAG services through direct, one-to-one interviews and some careers 'leads'[4] still yearn for the days of 'blanket interviewing' when every young person in the year group had a careers interview whether it represented a good use of resources or not. This reflects a lack of strategic thinking in some cases about how to achieve their aims and objectives for career guidance and how to make more effective use of resources.

When strategic considerations are taken into account, it is clear that greater use of ICT in career guidance presents opportunities as well as threats. In relation to access, penetration and reach, for example, guidance provided in high street connexions centres or schools and colleges is limited to the hours of opening of those places. The enhanced use of ICT opens up the possibility of 24/7 provision of some services or at least some extension of hours for online services. It is thought that young people and their parents and carers will welcome the opportunity to access guidance services at times that are more convenient to them but the level of demand is difficult to predict.

Commissioners of young people's IAG services may assume that greater use of ICT in guidance will help them cut costs by reducing the demand for face to face support. However, one of the risks is that activity rates will increase not decrease. More young people may take advantage of e-guidance provision for initial self-guidance but then turn to advisers for further face to face help. Personal advisers, therefore, are likely to be heavily involved in 'mediating' young people's use of ICT-based services both at a distance (e.g. through email exchanges) and face-to-face (e.g. through discussions before and after the young person's use of an ICT-based intervention).

A second consideration relates to accommodation and equipment issues. A number of connexions services have been looking to reduce premises costs so that freed-up resources can be used to make other improvements in the service. The use of ICT offers the prospect of establishing virtual Connexions centres located throughout cyberspace! Paradoxically, some services are looking to increase the number of access points for young people by co-locating with other public services such as schools, colleges, youth clubs, libraries and community centres; but they will only be able to succeed at this if they make better use of ICT (e.g. it may not be possible to maintain a physical library and vacancy information service at each access point, but these services can be provided electronically through a computer and internet connection). Some of the 150 connexions services in England are also handicapped by the ICT infrastructure with which they have to work and lack the budget to

[4] The term careers 'lead' is used here to describe the main careers education and guidance specialist in the school or college. The person in this role could be a teacher, a non-teacher or a personal adviser employed by the school or college for that purpose.

introduce the kinds of innovations they would otherwise like to make, e.g. the bandwidth to their offices may not be big enough to support video-conferencing between personal advisers and young people and the cost of increasing it may be prohibitive at the moment.

Workforce deployment and development is another major consideration. Some connexions services are introducing hot-desking in their centres as a solution to the changes in the accommodation at their disposal and they are looking more favourably at home-working as a way of retaining skilled and experienced staff. ICT solutions are clearly required if these changes to workforce conditions can be made to work. Already, many personal advisers are confident in the use of laptop computers not only because of the training they have received at work but because of their own greater fluency using ICT in their personal lives. Some of the current use of computers by personal advisers is linked to 'back office' administration such as record-keeping and the typing of discussion notes and action plans; but alongside this, the use of computer software and websites such as occupational databases, prospectuses and interest guides is already well-developed. The current focus on workforce development, however, opens up the possibility of extending IAG training to include ICT-based interventions.

Local connexions services in England are going through a structural transition which in 2008-2009 may both stimulate innovation in the way guidance services are delivered but also temporarily deflect attention away from it. Budget constraints make e-guidance solutions look more attractive but those same conditions make it more difficult for local services to invest in upgrading their computer infrastructure.

Another barrier to the use of ICT in guidance for young people in England is the way targets are set for connexions services. Connexions services, for example, are discouraged from developing email services because this type of intervention is treated as a way of 'making contact' for statistical and funding purposes rather than as a 'guidance intervention' in it is own right.

Government policies towards the use of ICT in guidance for young people has been generally supportive. Since their inception in 2001, for example, connexions services have been required to target the welfare and well-being needs of socially excluded young people. They have struggled to balance the competing claim that they should provide a 'universal' as well as a 'targeted' service. Some voices in government have given the impression that the universal element of the service could be provided by young people's self-managed use of new and improved websites. The guidance field in schools and colleges has also benefited indirectly from national strategies to develop the use of ICT in education. Nevertheless, e-guidance practice is less well-developed in the youth sector than it is in the higher education and adult fields.

The most significant initiative in the use of ICT in guidance for young people in England is Connexions Direct (CXD) which offers confidential advice, support and information to 13–19 year olds seven days a week from 8am – 2am. Information, advice and support on issues as diverse as work, careers, learning, health, housing and relationships can be accessed via telephone (or mini-com), live Webchat, email and SMS Text. A team of mystery shoppers judged that the service was achieving a good performance but there were areas of weakness (DfES, 2005). The CXD call centre is in Newcastle where a team of advisers answer enquiries from young people on a range of personal matters including careers and learning (as well as drug use, health, housing, sexual problems, etc.). Most local Connexions services use CXD for their online service and provide offline services at their centres, but some have their own local online service too such as an email enquiry facility.

An evaluation of the CXD website from the perspective of current users and those who are under-represented such as teenage boys, young people with disabilities and Muslim young people has also recently been carried out by VT Research for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, 2007). Most users expressed very positive views of the website. They also provided a wealth of ideas about how the website could be improved further.

Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

The careers services in Scotland (http://www.careers-scotland.org.uk/), Wales (http://www.careerswales.com/) and Northern Ireland (http://www.careersserviceni.com/) are all-age guidance services. They have websites which offer information and interactive services to young people and adults as well as directing users into local off-line resources at careers or Connexions centres. In Wales, for example, young people and adults can contact a careers adviser through a school, college, local careers centre/shop or by a freephone helpline. In those centres, computers will normally be available for personal use by guidance seekers, including adults as well as young people, and access to the Internet may also be provided. One of the pioneering initiatives of Careers Wales has been the development of an e-Progress File[5] modelled on the paper-based Progress File achievement planner which was itself a replacement for an earlier National Record of Achievement. Alongside the e-Progress File, young people and adults have access to a range of guidance tools and resources including a facility to 'get in touch with a careers adviser' by post, phone, fax or email.

Higher education settings

Students in higher education establishments throughout the UK are served by their own institutional careers service, the majority of which are member of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS). Students in further education are also increasingly served by their own college-based guidance service, but if they happen to be studying university-level courses there, may also have access to AGCAS. In January 2008, an ICT advisory group was set up to advise AGCAS on how it can best help members use ICT to deliver careers education, information, advice and guidance[6].

Higher education (HE) careers advisory services in the UK obtain services from Graduate Prospects, an organisation which trains careers advisers and develops resources for HE institutions. Graduate Prospects has been a pioneer in the development of interactive services for students[7]. They provide a national website for undergraduate and graduate students including online information (e.g. FAQs, sources of further help), careers chat, virtual careers fairs, careers assessment and profiling, email query system and online vacancy information. iProspects, the software business development unit within Graduate Prospects, specialises in selling its software solutions to commercial recruiters and HR services, education providers and professional and guidance associations. iProspects also runs non-accredited, e-guidance skills training workshops for guidance staff on how to provide effective interventions to clients at a distance.

[5] A number of organisations in England have also developed e-portfolios for supported and self-guidance use by 14-19 year olds, higher education students, employees and adults.
[6] The group is chaired by Chris Jackson (chris.jackson@agcas.org.uk).
[7] Most of the influential reports on the use of ICT in guidance in the UK have been written for the higher education sector by Marcus Offer, independently and in collaboration with colleagues (see bibliography).

One of the innovative services offered by AGCAS Scotland is SORTED (Scottish On-line Route To Employability and Career Development). SORTED is a series of interactive career development seminars accessed through the internet at a time convenient to students covering topics such as 'assess your personal skills and experiences', 'learn how to build a CV', 'prepare for interview' and 'look for graduate jobs in Scotland'.

All higher education careers services have their own websites, which vary widely in how much guidance they provide on-line but most target at least current students of the university, graduates, employers, and many also include academic staff and prospective students among their specified audiences. Some of these websites also include individual pages for groups with special needs – students with disabilities, mature students, students from ethnic minorities, international students, and so on.

There are also regional web sites for graduates in most regions of the UK, and most of these have been set up recently, usually arising from collaboration between local HE careers services. These tend to focus more on job search, vacancies and placement issues than on career planning in general but they do generally provide a link to local sources of careers advice. They aim in particular to encourage graduate recruitment by small to medium sized and regional employers.

Employment settings

In industry, careers guidance is more often referred to as career development or career coaching, and larger companies and organisations will be better provided for in this respect. Larger human resource departments, for example, may have a career development specialist. Companies may make use of online psychometric tests for recruitment and career progression purposes. Some may also use interactive tools for performance management and professional development planning. Executives may seek guidance from private careers guidance companies or coaches. Recently the creation of union learning representatives by the trades unions has seen a big leap forward in the provision of advice and guidance for (particularly) low-skilled and less well-qualified workers.

Adult/community settings

IAG provision for adults in the UK is complex and changing. *Learndirect* offers a free telephone service and an online advice service accessed through their website in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. (*Learndirect Scotland* has a helpline). The service has an annual budget of £14 million which enabled it to help one million people in 2006. Around six million searches were made on their website. The service is confidential, impartial and delivered by qualified advisers. English and Welsh-speaking advisers are on hand from 8.00am-10.00pm every day. Other advisers provide information and advice in Farsi, French, Gujurati, Polish, Punjabi, Somali, Sylheti and Urdu on weekdays. An evaluation of the UfI/learn direct telephone guidance service by Page *et al.* (2007) for the DfES showed that there is a demand for telephone guidance, that telephone guidance is feasible on a large scale, that it can be provided cost-effectively, and that service users are satisfied and experience a range of positive outcomes.

At the local level, 47 contractors work as *nextstep* providers delivering a wide range of services and using a wide range of methods, including outreach work, to meet the needs primarily of adults who do not possess a level 2 qualification[8]. Some *nextstep* providers have developed websites and offer telephone advice services.

[8] A level 2 qualification corresponds to what 16 year olds of average and above average ability are expected to achieve.

In addition, Jobcentre Plus offers guidance services to some of its clients. Jobcentre Plus is part of the Department for Work and Pensions. It has a range of duties which include helping people into paid work. Most of its services are provided face-to-face; but the service has a comprehensive website and adults can contact Jobcentre Plus by telephone or textphone.

In 2007, the government announced that in England it planned to establish a new adult careers or advancement service[9]. (Scotland and Wales already have an all-age career guidance service.) The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) plan to merge the information and advice services of *learndirect* and *nextstep* providers into a new universal adult careers service in England, working in partnership with Jobcentre Plus. Adults will be able to access the service face to face, by telephone or online.

2 e-practitioner profile and training

The main routes to professional qualification as a career guidance practitioner in the UK all provide some opportunity for candidates to demonstrate learning outcomes based on their use of ICT. Examples include:

- The Qualification in Career Guidance (QCG)
  The QCG, awarded by the Institute of Career Guidance, is available at 15 universities across the UK. The QCG is available as a one-year full time or two year part time course and combines academic study with work based learning. Learning outcome 16 (Gather, organise and use careers related information) requires trainees to be able to 'Research, access and obtain information using the various operating / delivery systems including ICT'.

- S/NVQ level 4 in Advice and Guidance
  The Scottish/National Vocational Qualification level 4 in Advice and Guidance is offered by five awarding bodies. The range statements for many of the units in the level 4 Advice and Guidance framework make it clear that evidence showing the use of ICT could be used for assessment purposes; but there is currently no explicit unit which addresses the use of ICT in guidance for practitioners working in lifelong learning systems which is the focus of the ICT Skills 2 project.

- MA / MEd / MSc Level Qualifications
  Fourteen universities in the UK offer Masters level qualifications in career guidance. Some of the modules and particularly the dissertation element of most Masters courses would enable an interested candidate to investigate the use of ICT in guidance.

In-service training in the use of ICT in guidance often takes the form of short courses (e.g. one-day) to equip practitioners to use specific programs or software.

Professional formation and development frameworks in the UK need to take account of a number of key trends in the use of ICT as a medium, tool and resource for guidance. These include:

Increased importance of the internet

[9] The potential for a national adult careers service to deliver guidance through web-based services is discussed in a forthcoming paper for the *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* by Tony Watts and Gareth Dent entitled 'The Evolution of a National Distance Guidance Service: Trends and Challenges'.

There has been a widespread increase in the accessibility of the internet and world-wide web to the UK population in the education system, community provision (e.g. public libraries) and in people's homes. This has encouraged commercial developers of paid access career guidance software (e.g. matching programs) to move to online formats.

The proliferation of guidance sites also poses another problem for users and practitioners alike – finding the most appropriate resources is confusing and difficult. This is why many learning and guidance providers are also making increased use of intranets and virtual learning environments (VLEs) to provide platforms for structuring users' access to guidance resources on the internet.

Web 2 tools that encourage social networking and user-generated content are beginning to transform the way the internet could be used for guidance. Blogs and wikis can be used for peer guidance and e-mentoring[10] activities.

Shift from 'clients' to 'partners'

Increasingly, young people and adults who access guidance through ICT perform some of the activities for themselves that previously a guidance worker might do for them such as exploring and researching careers information, taking self-assessment tests and drawing up individual learning and career plans. So by the time they meet face to face to continue the guidance process, the young person or adult may have already achieved quite a lot for themselves. It is likely that this trend will continue with the development of more self-help programs, e.g. questionnaires with pre-formatted responses built into them. Forums have the potential to enable young people and adults to provide peer support in the guidance process.

Developing ways of using social software

It is becoming more important that guidance practitioners provide support by harnessing the informal ways that young people and adults increasingly use to communicate with each other. Mobile learning, podcasting, e-zines, blogging, social networking (e.g. university alumni sites) and dedicated websites are just some of the possibilities for transforming guidance practice; but there have been no large scale application of these technologies yet.

Developing blended solutions

The use of ICT in career guidance is not necessarily an 'either/or' choice. In many instances, a blended solution will be more effective, e.g. where online provision is supplemented by offline services.

3. Certification procedures

Professional certification in the career guidance field in the UK is provided by professional bodies such as the Institute for Career Guidance (ICG), exam bodies such as OCR and universities. Application to accredit a qualification in the use of ICT skills in guidance could be made to any of these bodies and an award could be rated under the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

4. Obstacles and proposals for the training pilots

[10] An example of this is www.horsesmouth.co.uk.

The potential for the application of ICT processes in career guidance in England is considerable; but practice is patchy at present. The use of ICT as a resource to improve both the accessibility and range of information has made great strides but shortcomings still remain, some of which can be addressed by improving the professional formation of guidance practitioners.

The main conundrum is how to time the introduction of new ICT-based methods so that they coincide with the readiness of young people and adults to receive information, advice and guidance in these new ways. What is clear is that the momentum for change is unstoppable – the public are becoming ever more sophisticated in the way they use ICT in their everyday and working lives; and that career guidance needs a strategy to catch up. The timing of the ICT Skills 2 project, therefore, could not be more appropriate. The training and professional development of guidance practitioners in ICT through a cross-sectoral national pilot is a good place to start.

The ICT Skills 2 project is also timely in relation to other contemporaneous European and international initiatives for the training and accreditation of career guidance practitioners. A challenge for the ICT Skills 2 project partners is to make links to and complement related projects. The three most relevant projects are:

- **International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG)** (www.iaevg.org)

  In 2003, IAEVG published the results of a four year study to identify the competencies required in order for educational and vocational guidance practitioners to deliver quality services to clients. The framework identifies 11 core competencies and 80 specialised competencies organised under ten headings. Three of the specialised competencies make explicit reference to ICT:
  3.8 Knowledge of career planning materials and computer-based career information systems, the Internet and other online resources (Careers Development)
  5.4 use information technologies to provide educational and occupational information (databases, computer-based educational and career guidance programs and the Internet) (Information management)
  10.2 use on the Internet in the job search process (placement).

  Career guidance trainers and assessors can identify many other competencies in the IAEVG framework where the use of ICT could be signposted in a range statement and which need to be taken into account as innovation takes place in both ICT and guidance. Since the publication of this framework, for example, possibilities for enhancing the use of ICT in guidance have continued, particularly in the wake of Web 2.0[11] advances.

  The ICT skills 2 project is able to build on its associated project which developed an ICT skills framework in which the ICT skills have been mapped against the IAEVG framework. The process of updating the map is taking place in the first quarter of 2008.

- **EAS (European Accreditation Scheme for career guidance practitioners)** (http://www.corep.it/eas/). For the pilot phase, the partners have identified five main tasks that career guidance practitioners need to accomplish that can be broken down into elements of competence for assessment purposes. The tasks are:

[11] Web 2.0 refers to the current interactive phase of internet development defined by blogging, social networking and 'wiki' sites built with user-generated content.

1. Establish communication with the client and support him/her to make use of the service as a separate activity
2. Deliver information related to career guidance as a separate activity
3. Perform career guidance interviews
4. Carry out career education activities with small groups focused on job search
5. Carry out career education activities with small groups focused on training paths.

In addition, the EAS scheme has identified five elements of competence common to all main tasks that should be assessed. These elements are:
B.1. comply with ethical guidelines
B.2. be engaged for the continuous improvement of own knowledge and skills and of the service
B.3. establish appropriate working relationships with all the persons involved in the guidance process, internal and external of the organisation
B.4. use ICT for career guidance purposes
B.5. know and know where to find information related to career guidance

The map produced by the ICT Skills 2 project could be used by local assessment and accreditation bodies to refine their competence requirements.

- **CEDEFOP Study of the qualification routes and competences needed by career guidance counsellors**

  The National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC) is conducting a study for CEDEFOP in partnership with EAS and IAEVG on qualification routes and competences needed by career guidance counsellors. It is due to be completed by late 2008.

Conclusions

The scope and potential of the ICT Skills 2 project to expand training and development in the use of ICT in delivering career guidance in the UK is considerable.

The timing of this project is good in the sense that policy-makers, professional bodies, training providers and career guidance organisations in the UK are generally receptive to the idea of updating training and development activities to meet newly-identified needs. The DCSF, for example, currently has a programme for developing the IAG workforce (www.iagworkforce.co.uk) and is planning a review of the training framework for personal advisers. It is also standard practice in the universities that teach career guidance courses to revalidate their qualifications every three years.

The main obstacles hindering the pilots are a lack of ambition to use ICT for anything more than establishing and maintaining communication and interaction with clients and for enhancing careers information and carrying out careers assessments. Research projects are urgently required to develop and test methodologies to measure and assess the impact of ICT in guidance[12]. Such methodologies should help to identify the real added value of using ICT in guidance in terms of guidance models, developmental issues and systemic and organisational issues.

[12] A few studies in the UK have begun to explore the issues in relation to the design of interactive guidance services such as Watts and Offer (undated), Watts (2002) and Watts & Jackson (2000) (see bibliography)

develop and test models of interactive or e-guidance for use in different situations and this is something to which the pilot phase of the ICT Skills 2 project can contribute.

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