No. 22 WINTER 2009

Career Research & Development

the NICEC journal: making practice thoughtful and theory practical

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NICEC
National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling

Career Research & Development

the journal of the national institute for careers education and counselling

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Career Research and Development: the NICEC Journal is published three times a year in Spring, Summer and Autumn and the subscription price is £34 within the UK or £55 if overseas (including p&p). The single issue price is £12. Members of CRAC and NICEC receive the Journal together with a range of other benefits including free attendance at NICEC events.

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Career Research and Development: the NICEC Journal is published by CRAC: The Career Development Organisation.

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Career Research and Development: the NICEC Journal is published for:

- Career practitioners working in schools, colleges, Connexions/IAG services, higher education careers services, adult guidance agencies, companies, community organisations, etc.
- Trainers, lecturers, advisers and consultants working with career practitioners.
- Individuals working towards qualifications in career education, career guidance and career management.
- Government departments and business and community organisations with an interest in the work of career practitioners.

It sets out to:

- Promote evidence-based practice by making theory, policy and the results of research and development more accessible to career practitioners in their day-to-day work.
- Encourage discussion and debate of current issues in career research and development.
- Disseminate good practice.
- Support continuing professional development for career practitioners.
- Help practitioners to develop and manage career education and guidance provision in the organisations in which they work.

Editorial – The best way to reach adults

Ruth Hawthorn and Judy Alloway

What is the best way to reach adults with different kinds of disadvantage to offer them advice about learning and work? Voluntary and statutory bodies have been helping out-of-work and under-employed adults for decades - while not perhaps separating such advice out from the other ways in which they support their different client groups. Not many such bodies have been linked to more mainstream providers of careers advice, and there have been many discontinuities resulting from short-term funding, but there is considerable experience over what does, and what does not, help.

Experience has also accumulated through work by agencies more specifically focused on employment or educational advice. Disability Employment Advisers have worked in Jobcentre Plus and its DWP predecessors for many years as part of a range of programmes to reach disadvantaged service users (Ford and Watts, 2007). Since the 1980s educational guidance services for adults have explored ways to take their advice to hard-to-help adults through outreach activities (UDACE, 1986), with advisers setting up stalls in community centres or working through community groups already in touch with people who may not know of what they offer or may be too shy to seek it, or may assume that it's not for people like them.

How can this knowledge be captured to inform the wide range of bodies helping these groups today? In particular, what can be learnt from it to inform the current development of the adult advancement and careers service, due to open its doors in August 2010?

In 2008 the City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development and the CfBT Education Trust commissioned a research team to explore current good practice in this area of guidance work. The team consisted largely of NICEC Fellows and Associates with expertise in relation to a range of disadvantaged groups (Lesley Haughton, Heather Jackson, Jackie Sadler and Tricia Sharpe). They were supported by an independent research consultant, Andrew Morris, experienced in the commissioning of policy-related research as well as disseminating its findings effectively. The research built on an extensive literature review conducted by Paul Gutherson (2008) and a policy background paper by Tony Watts (2008).

The result was data collected from twelve agencies whose work focuses on, or includes, advice about learning and work for a wide range of disadvantages. Service users, staff and managers in each service shared their expectations and challenges as well as their strategies and solutions. The services offered by the Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus, though a key part of provision, is not represented here because their participation in the study was not possible, but some of their activities are described in other articles.

As well as the difficulty of identifying good practice and capturing it, there are considerable challenges in analysing the findings in such a project. There are many different ways in which people may be disadvantaged with respect to the labour market and it is not easy to see how to amalgamate what has been learnt. While the resulting project report, *Smoothing the Path* was written by Ruth Hawthorn and Judy Alloway (2009), the process in which the key elements of good practice were drawn from the data involved the full research team.

This issue of *Career Research and Development* includes papers from Tony Watts, on why this work is so important now, and from Andrew Morris on how research of this kind can contribute to improving public and voluntary services and how best to approach it. In addition we asked some of the managers of the services that helped with the study to write their own account of their services, not just outlining what they offer clients (this is fully explored in the detailed case studies from the project, available online at http://www.skillsdevelopment.org/default.aspx?page=866) but bringing us up to date. Since the fieldwork was carried out, the economy has been overtaken by a severe downturn that has hit publicly-funded services and charitable bodies alike. Given that discontinuity is one of the greatest problems afflicting these services in the best of times, how do they survive a recession? What happens to the expertise? What happens to the clients?

Most importantly, as this issue of *Career Research and Development* goes to press, is the extent to which the findings from this study can be useful in shaping the adult advancement and careers service expected to start in August 2010. As Tony Watts points out, it is not expected that the core statutory services can operate on the same personal, comprehensive basis seen in the work of the agencies described here. But the core statutory services can work better *with* these agencies, involving them in their networks and supporting them with resources where possible and in ways that do not undermine their missions; and as we explain in our own article, they can use the critical success factors and key messages as a starting point from which to evaluate and enhance their own practice.

Ruth Hawthorn
Judy Alloway
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Advice on learning and work: what is a disadvantage, and how do you overcome it?

Ruth Hawthorn and Judy AllowayA.G. Watts

The government's plans for a universal careers advice service for adults address the needs of people across more than one spectrum. They aim to help the highly qualified and educated as well as those with minimal or perhaps no qualifications – and all between. They aim to help young and old adults and all between, and achieve continuity with careers advice services for young people. They aim to help those active and only slightly underachieving in the labour market as well as those who start far from it, perhaps having spent a long period out of work or never having worked – and all between. They aim to offer the same service to people with physical, psychological or socio-economic difficulties as to those without them.

There are challenges in designing such an all-reaching service. If it suits people at one end of any of those spectrums, will it be useful or attractive to those at the other? If it aims for the middle, it could end up not appealing to either end or indeed even to people in the middle. A study for the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP, 2008) suggests we know more about guidance work at each end of the qualification spectrum than we do about how to reach (let alone meet the needs of) people in between. It is possible there is a similar pattern for the other kinds of advantage/disadvantage spectrums, but the picture is confused by so much overlap in the variables (people disadvantaged in one way are sometimes but not always disadvantaged in others).

A real danger faced by the new service is that because of the pressing needs for more disadvantaged people to enter the labour market, for their own sake as well as any urgency for the government to reduce the benefits bill, it will concentrate on the needs of that group and lose its balance. Some point to the way the targeted Connexions service undermined the universal offer for young people (for example Watts, 2008). Public sector careers advice for adults has traditionally focused on that end of the spectrum (*nextstep* services and their predecessors through the 1990s have been targeted at people with few qualifications, as explained in Hamilton, 2009). At present the picture is obscured by the current recession, where *nextstep* and Jobcentre Plus are responding to a new challenge in large numbers of newly-unemployed, better qualified people. It is not easy to see how long this situation will last, though Hamilton (2009) suggests they find work more quickly than the more traditional, more disadvantaged users. They continue to have real needs, and a universal service must continue to meet those, and meet them better, as well as spread its support more evenly.

At the time of writing the intended model for the new adult careers service is for a core specialist group of advice agencies (successors to the current *nextstep* services and the telephone-and-web-based Careers Advice Service, which has not been restricted to people with low qualifications, and Jobcentre plus) that will work closely with 'advancement networks', to be built locally to respond to needs and strengths in specific areas (DIUS, 2008). Possible arrangements for these networks are currently being piloted through ten 'advancement prototypes'.

The concept of the 'guidance network' has developed in two directions in recent decades: the term can refer to groups of agencies that deliver a similar range of services, who have much in common and much to gain from sharing professional practice (we could call them 'same function networks'); or to groups of agencies whose work differs from other network members, each focusing on specific needs or target groups and complementing that of other network members (perhaps 'complementing networks'). In practice, this distinction can be blurred by the difficulty of categorising the many different ways in which agencies grow up to help different people; but it is a helpful one to hold in mind. The range of models in the prototype pilots includes networks of both types, and combinations of the two. What do we need to understand, to enable either kind of network to help people at the disadvantaged end of the different spectrums without compromising their offer as a universal service?

The research project commissioned by the City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development and the CfBT Education Trust (Hawthorn and Alloway, 2009) explored good practice in reaching disadvantaged adults among agencies that will be key players in both these kinds of advancement network: agencies that have developed specialist ways of working with certain groups of adults, and will take and receive referrals from others in the networks, i.e. members of the 'complementing' networks; and also three of the core career guidance agencies that in theory at least address the needs of all adults *including* those with disadvantages. The benefits of a detailed study of their methods goes beyond simply understanding them as current or future network members: they have developed an approach to their own specific target client groups that could have wider application, not only for other disadvantaged adults but also for use with those at the other, 'advantaged', end of those different spectrums. The study faced a host of methodological and analytical problems. What counts as disadvantage? On whatever definition, and given that it would be impossible to look at all kinds of disadvantage, how could one construct a sample that could represent the wider group? Then, having collected qualitative data from users, practitioners and managers, how could one analyse and present the findings to be useful beyond the very specialised groups of agencies similar to each case study?

The sponsors of the work approached these problems in a measured way, explained in detail in Morris (2009) commissioning first a literature review (Gutherson, 2007) and then a study of the policy considerations to which the project could contribute (Watts, 2009 summarises the earlier unpublished working paper). The research methodology rested on a conceptual framework drawn up before questionnaire design and sampling began, which explored the factors known to challenge careers advice work with adults who had difficulties in relation to the labour market. This made use of the formal published literature and also on the ongoing concerns of the professional associations working with these groups (including the National Association for Educational Guidance for Adults and the Institute of Career Guidance). This gave the project team a number of issues to which the fieldwork researchers could be alert through the semi-structured interviews, while remaining open to unforeseen concerns that the respondents would themselves bring forward.

Given the problem of achieving any true kind of representation in our sample (see Watts, 2009 for a fuller account of the possible forms of disadvantage), we started from the categories used in an earlier review of work with disadvantaged adults (Hawthorn *et al.*, 2002) and for each contacted a range of researchers and specialist national bodies seeking their opinion on where best practice could be found. Narrowing down to a shortlist was not easy, but our final selection of twelve included:

- a range of kinds of disadvantage such as physical or mental conditions (visual impairment, learning difficulties); social (homelessness, refugees, offenders); economic (low earners); health (people recovering from mental illness); and life stage (older adults)
- ways of working with adults with a disadvantage (including community projects reaching people with single or multiple problems such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness, mental health problems, ex-offenders, and people on incapacity benefit); the use of telephone and internet (the Careers Advice Service); and two *nextstep* services, one of which was using innovative ways of reaching people in rural areas, and the other innovative use of inter-agency collaboration
- a geographical spread across England.

The draft report was sent to a wider group of policy makers and researchers who along with managers of the twelve case studies were invited to an 'interpretation' workshop to explore their reactions to the project findings and recommendations. This was an immensely useful process, outside our usual experience, allowing us as far as our data would permit to draw out issues that were of especial interest or concern and which we had not emphasised. It was pointed out that by focusing on *kinds* of people, and *ways* of working, we might have missed the significance of *over-riding* disadvantages that cut across all or any of these categories, especially lack of functional literacy and the confident use of English.

The case studies stand as useful material on their own. But we were also able to identify more general lessons that could be useful more broadly. As information begins to come through from the advancement network prototypes, in which some partners are unfamiliar with the main body of experience in reaching and working with disadvantaged groups, the eleven 'critical success factors' identified in our study could be helpful. These covered general lessons from all case studies about ways of:

- understanding, assessing and meeting client need
- reaching the target groups
- encouraging progression
- recruiting, training and deploying staff
- using volunteering for clients and in service delivery
- working with employers
- working with other agencies
- managing effectively
- assuring quality
- addressing funding issues
- using appropriate measures and evidence of impact.

Full details of these can be found in the project report. Finally, at a project team meeting towards the end of our fieldwork the research team, all themselves specialists in work with the groups they had studied, shared their views on the seven more un-quantifiable 'key messages' that stand out in services that really help their users:

- Help starts from what is immediately needed by the client (not driven by pre-ordained categories or entitlements)
- Careers advice is couched within a much broader programme of support
- Help is closely linked to the client's readiness and need for help

- Progress is achieved through small steps
- Effective help involves persistence
- Staff really care, and celebrate success
- The advice empowers the client to help themselves in future.

While these headings may seem simplistic, the detailed understanding that lies behind them is available from the report and the case studies. Agencies already working with disadvantaged adults will recognise the challenges and be interested in how others have overcome them, and hopefully will have other suggestions of even better approaches. All these topics are relevant too to agencies working with adults who are not faced with disadvantages and who are looking to progress their career whatever the context. But it is also possible that from this group of headings an agenda could be drawn up for the nascent advancement networks: to what extent, within our network, are we achieving the best possible service for all our clients along the eleven dimensions? Are the agencies in the core service able to say they hold the needs of the client, as encapsulated in the key messages, as their main priority? This approach offers a framework against which the needs of all services users, across all the spectrums that the new adult advancement and careers service hopes to help, could be considered and more effectively met.

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Career IAG with disadvantaged adults: the policy context

A.G. Watts

The Smoothing the Path report (Hawthorn & Alloway, 2009) is very timely in relation to the current work on developing a new adult advancement and careers service. This article outlines the origins and key design features of the new service, with particular attention to the tensions between its universal and targeted aspects. It then examines the rationale for the involvement of the voluntary and community sector in policies for career information and guidance, recent policy with regard to the involvement of this sector, and different strategies for working with the sector. Finally, it indicates some of the policy issues illuminated by the report.

The new service for adults

In England, the Government is currently restructuring career information and guidance services for adults. This followed the report of the Leitch Review of Skills (2006), which was significantly influenced by a cross-government review of information, advice and guidance services for adults (see iCeGS, 2008). The Leitch recommendations were broadly accepted by the Government (DIUS, 2007), and more details have subsequently appeared in two further White Papers (DWP/DIUS, 2007; DCSF/DIUS, 2008) and in a service prospectus (DIUS, 2008).

The information available to date indicates that a new service is to be established, which is currently referred as the 'adult advancement and careers service' (though the use of lower case indicates that this is a working title rather than the final title of the service). The service is to be run by the new Skills Funding Agency. It will be formed by bringing together two existing services:

- Careers Advice, which provides telephone and web-based services.
- *nextstep*, which provides face-to-face services.

Careers Advice is a universal service, available to all; *nextstep* is largely targeted at individuals with low skills. Careers Advice, under its previous name *learndirect,* has been has been heavily marketed and is widely known (Watts & Dent, 2002; 2008); *nextstep* is much less well-known (Harrison *et al.*, 2005).

A key issue in relation to the new service is the balance and relationship between its universal and targeted aspects. The Leitch Review of Skills (2006) argued that the service should have significant targeted features. Thus it should 'be charged with raising aspiration and awareness of the importance and benefits of learning, particularly among those that have missed out in the past'. In particular, it should 'lead a sustained national campaign to promote skills development among groups that would not normally consider learning'. This national action 'must be backed by local action in communities'. The service should accordingly 'build on the many existing partnerships with local organisations, engaging the hardest to reach' (p.110). It should be proactive: 'reaching out rather than waiting for people to come' (p.109). One of its key roles should be 'to energise individuals, building a culture of learning by raising awareness' (p. 25).

Leitch also emphasised, however, that the service should be available to all. This was underlined in its reference to 'a new universal careers service for England' (p.109) and in the notion that 'all adults should be entitled to a free "Skills Health Check"', which will 'identify an individual's skill needs and strengths' (p.110).

In designing the new service, an additional dimension has been added in the form of the concept of 'advancement agencies' proposed by John Denham, until recently Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, in a paper he presented some time ago to the Fabian Society (Denham, 2004). This concept is directed particularly at low-waged workers, and includes attention to information and advice on employment rights and access to in-work support as well as to information and advice on learning and work options. It potentially reinforces the targeted aspects of the service.

A further issue that is significant in relation to targeting is the relationship with Jobcentre Plus. This is strongly stressed in the joint White Paper issued by DWP/DIUS (2007), which focuses on the relationship between welfare and skills reform. Not surprisingly, therefore, many of the references to the new careers service are to its relationship with Jobcentre Plus in working with welfare recipients. Although decisions relating to application of benefit rules and entitlement to training will continue to be made by Jobcentre Plus personal advisers, all new claimants are to be signposted to the careers service, where they will be encouraged to attend a Skills Health Check; in some cases, attendance at the careers service will be mandatory. There is therefore a risk that the service will lose some of its client focus and become viewed as part of the apparatus for the managing of state benefits. Also, some co-location of services is envisaged: although there could be a justifiable place for this within the strategy, if Jobcentre Plus becomes the main location for face-to-face services, this could further stigmatise the service. This would arguably be to the disservice of disadvantaged groups as well as undermining the prospect of a strong universal service.

I have argued elsewhere that in the design of the new service, primacy should be given to designing the universal service, with later extensions to ensure that the distinctive needs of targeted groups are satisfactorily met (Watts, 2008). In the case of the Connexions service for young people, the sequence was the reverse: the targeted service was designed first; and efforts were then made to extrapolate some elements to all young people. Many of the problems experience by Connexions stemmed from this core design flaw (Watts, 2001).

The *Smoothing the Path* report helpfully illuminates the steps that need to be taken to ensure that the distinctive needs of different disadvantaged group are adequately addressed in the design of the new service. This has implications for a number of aspects of the service, including:

- how the service is marketed
- how it is staffed and structured so that individuals with distinctive needs can get specialist help when it is needed
- whether eligibility criteria are applied to some aspects of the service, and if so, what form they take
- the relationship which the new service establishes with organisations in the voluntary and community sector.

The rest of this article concentrates on the last of these.

Rationale

The rationale for the involvement of the voluntary and community sector in policies for career information and guidance was outlined in the OECD Career Guidance Policy Review (OECD, 2004). According to OECD, the merits of policy strategies that work through community-based organisations include their greater knowledge of, and acceptability to, particular client groups, and the contribution such organisations can make to community capacity building. Some accordingly held the view that these organisations should be used as the conduit for most public services, including those in the career information and guidance field. On the other hand, others took the view that this sector was fragmented, idiosyncratic, and sometimes anti-government and anti-bureaucratic, and that it too often consumed public funds without discernible outcomes. OECD accordingly concluded that the sector had a contribution to make to career guidance strategies for adults, but alongside – rather than as a substitute for – more formal services (p.65).

In more general terms, the contribution that the voluntary sector can make to the effective delivery of public services has been viewed by the Labour Government as being important to the achievement of its policy agenda (HM Treasury, 2002). In contrast to previous policies of managing service delivery entirely within the public sector, and to the policies introduced by the Conservative Government during the early 1990s of contracting services out to the private sector, the Labour Government has placed more emphasis on service delivery through contracting based on partnerships (Etherington, 2003a). In particular, it has viewed the voluntary and community sector as a potential partner, contractor and recipient of public funds in the delivery of its social welfare agenda (Plowden, 2001).

A number of benefits are claimed for this policy. In particular, the voluntary sector is recognised as bringing distinctive benefits to public service provision through:

- its specialist expertise
- its access to communities and individuals who are ‘hard to reach’
- its capacity to respond flexibly and innovatively to their needs (Etherington, 2003b).

The policy has offered both opportunities and threats to voluntary-sector organisations. On the one hand, it has offered them increased resources, including supports for developing their capacity. On the other hand, there are risks that the enhanced pressure for public accountability will undermine the independence and flexibility that arguably are sources of their distinctive strengths.
This can lead to ‘mission drift’, gradually drawing such organisations away from their original purposes and ethos (Etherington, 2003a).

At the same time, concerns have been raised about whether the voluntary sector can develop the capacity to deliver public services on the scale required and with adequate quality control (see NACVS, 2002). This raises issues about the extent to which contracting out services to the voluntary sector should be regarded as a replacement of public service provision, or as complementary to such provision; and if the latter, how the relationships between the two forms of provision should be defined and managed.

Recent policy

Since 1998, public policy in relation to career information, advice and guidance services has included an important role for the voluntary and community sector. The policy framework published by DfEE (1998) outlined a partnership approach, and stated that 'effective local partnerships should … include substantial participation by community and voluntary groups, which are often the most accessible agencies for local people' (para.5.2). This broad strategy was effectively reinforced by the emphasis placed within the subsequent National Policy Framework (DfES, 2003) on services for adults without a Level 2 qualification.

An evaluation of the (initially 76) partnerships by Irving & Slater (2002) indicated that in addition to 11 pre-defined priority groups (learning difficulties, disabilities, basic skills, low/outdated skills, areas of high unemployment, unemployed, English language needs, rural areas, older clients, labour market returners, offenders), other priority groups addressed included lone parents, refugees, homeless people, asylum seekers, ethnic minorities, people with mental health problems, employees with low qualifications, those facing large-scale redundancies/restructuring, and women returners. In total, 29 per cent of full members of partnerships, and 52 per cent of associate members, were from the voluntary and community sector.

In 2004, publicly-funded information, advice and guidance services for adults were rebranded as *nextstep*. Contracts were put out on tender in the 47 Learning and Skills Council (LSC) areas. Many went to careers service companies (for a brief history of these companies, see Watts & McGowan, 2007, Appendix 3). The contractors were required to sub-contract at least 60 per cent of the monies to other organisations, many of them in the voluntary and community sector. These had to be accredited in terms of the *matrix* quality standard. In some areas, the voluntary and community organisations were organised into a consortium to enable them to participate in a more effective way.

In 2008, the *nextstep* service was re-procured on a regional basis, covering each of the nine LSC regions (with two contracts in the north west region, so making ten contracts in total). The extent of subcontracting was left for the prime contractor to decide. The service specification in the tender document included:

> **'Having in place outreach arrangements for accessing and delivering services to specific customer groups and communities such as older people, low-skilled women, people from ethnic minority backgrounds and people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who are sometimes hard to reach through traditional means.'**

More recently, as part of the preparations for the new adult advancement and careers service, ten prototypes have been established to explore the best ways of establishing local networking and partnership arrangements. Some are local-authority-led; some are voluntary-sector-led. Part of their role is to explore ways of linking to the wider range of agencies and organisations which the concept of 'advancement' brings into the frame, addressing wider barriers to learning and work.

Models of delivery

A series of evaluations of community-based guidance provision in Kent (Haughton & Watts, 2000; 2001; Barker *et al*., 2005) suggested that there were three main strategies for working with voluntary and community organisations:

- encouraging *referrals* from such organisations to mainstream career information, advice and guidance (IAG) services
- using such organisations as bases for *outreach* work by mainstream career IAG services
- engaging in *capacity building* – developing the organisations' own capacity to deliver career IAG services.

The strategy for capacity building could include:

- provision of *resources*, including printed resources and software.
- *training* in career information, advice and guidance competences
- support in meeting the *matrix quality standards*.

An additional feature of the work which emerged strongly in the evaluation by Barker *et al.* (2005) was the role of community-based services in brokering learning: identifying unmet learning needs, and brokering learning provision to meet them. Brokerage is a strong element of current government policy, but in the Train to Gain programme is focused largely on brokerage between employers and learning providers. There is an important and under-developed role for attending to individual needs within the Train to Gain programme (Bysshe, 2007; Newton *et al.,* 2008). But in addition there is considerable scope for directly brokering learning on behalf of individuals (Hawthorn & Watts, 2004).

The evaluation by Barker *et al.* (2005) supported many of the claimed benefits for building the career IAG capacity of voluntary and community organisations, including the enhanced access they provide to hard-to-reach communities and individuals, and their flexibility in responding to their needs. All the indications were that such capacity building had reinforced such organisations' purposes and ethos rather than deflecting from them. On the other hand, there was no indication that the career IAG provision in the voluntary and community sector could be extended to the point where it would replace public service provision. Indeed, its development was significantly dependent on the support offered by such provision, and seemed likely to remain so. In the majority of cases, involvement had resulted in an increased awareness of the professional capabilities required to deliver career IAG and a clearer sense of the organisation's limits in this respect.

Issues

A key aspect of the new advancement and careers service for adults is how it will engage with the disadvantaged groups that are the focus of the *Smoothing the Path* report (Hawthorn & Alloway, 2009). The report strongly endorses the critical role of the voluntary and community sector in this respect. Important questions illuminated by the report include:

- how the contribution of the voluntary and community sector can be maximised
- what its relationship should be with the mainstream services provided by the new service
- what forms of support voluntary and community organisations need from the new service.
- what models of delivery are most effective with particular target-groups
- what adaptations need to be made to the mainstream services to ensure that particular target-groups can use them effectively.

In a sense, one can see the dynamics of the new service as being based significantly on resolving tensions along two continua: that between the universal and targeted service; and at the targeted end, that between the culture of the voluntary and community sector and that of Jobcentre Plus. Much depends on where the key design features of the service arrangements are located on these two continua.

In relation to the second, the nature of the service relationship offered by voluntary and community agencies differs markedly from that offered by Jobcentre Plus. The latter is an official agency with powers to determine access to benefits: it accordingly establishes formal time-bound relationships with its clients, with careful steps being taken to assure the safety of its staff. In the case of voluntary agencies, on the other hand, clients are received in a very different way, symbolised in the welcoming cup of tea (ibid, p.27), and the relationship with them is much more informal, client-centred and open-ended. It accordingly tends to be more holistic in nature, and may involve an advocacy role with employers and other opportunity providers.

The benefits of incorporating a strong role for such agencies within the new service are evident from the report. They are likely to be much more attractive to many disadvantaged adults, and to give them the support they need to achieve effective outcomes.

If they are to play this role, the contracting arrangements need to attend to and respect their distinctive nature, and the dynamics which are critical to their success. The report emphasises in particular the need for longer-term funding, and for targets which are realistic and include measures of soft outcomes.

There are inevitably tensions between the ethos of the voluntary and community sector and a public service subject to cost constraints and public accountability. The notion of an open-ended commitment to individuals who walk in through the door can be very resource-intensive. There are balances to be struck between the time given to such clients and to seeking out other potential clients who may be in equal or greater need. Open-ended commitments may encourage dependence. They may also encourage workers to give extra support beyond what they are being paid for. In recognising that 'this is regrettably a widespread necessity, but cannot be part of a sustained solution (ibid, p.41), the report acknowledges that in the end some boundaries have to be drawn.

But the culture of voluntary agencies is to push these boundaries as far as they can be stretched. In portraying their work with such clarity and sensitivity, the report merits the closest attention from those responsible for the design of the new service.

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Designing research for improvement

Andrew Morris

The guidance needs of disadvantaged groups are many and various, so ways of responding to them are unsurprisingly varied too. The diversity of clients and the organisations that work with them is reflected in the pages of this journal, as are the differing perspectives of the providers, the clients and the practitioners. The editors have provided the unusual opportunity to set out the wider context of a research project designed explicitly to influence the practical and political world. The nature of this design process is the subject of this article.

The fundamental proposition is that for research-based evidence to contribute effectively to the improvement of public services, the core research activity needs to be seen as part of a more embracing overall project. This wider project involves both the build-up to the research and the impact activity that surrounds it. For better or worse, these elements of a project are as likely to affect its influence in the world as the quality of the research at its core.

Recently the question of how people actually respond to evidence has itself become a topic of research (Nutley *et al.*, 2007: 319; Morris *et al.*, 2007). The evidence suggests that knowledge tends to move across communities in actively driven ways, rather than passive ones. By engaging with people in the communities for which the knowledge is intended it is more likely that useable knowledge will be created; from the social process of interacting with them it is more likely that the findings will be taken up. Mere publication and presentation have limited effect. In practical terms, projects need to be designed around the entire process in which a research investigation is embedded, including the way in which resources are mobilised and communities engaged before an investigation begins and the way in which communities are engaged with the outcomes afterwards.

So how did this project about careers guidance for disadvantaged groups set about acting on these principles? How did this particular project work as a case study in project design and implementation?

The planning phase[1]

Identifying issues and funders

The first and most fundamental step is to engage organisations with funds and resources to support a project. Identifying and defining interests in this is crucial. In this case, two organisations were found to have complementary interests and were brought together through a broker familiar with both. The Centre for Skills Development at City and Guilds (CSD) had identified careers guidance as a recurring issue in much of its work – it saw effective careers guidance as being a major issue for effective vocational education and training. CfBT Education Trust was involved in both careers guidance services and in work with disadvantaged groups and was researching aspects of both. It was significant that both organisations had *a priori* reasons to believe that the issues were important and that the knowledge base needed strengthening. Agreement was reached to work together and to focus on their common interest in careers guidance for groups at a disadvantage in the labour market.

The next issue is to work out and agree upon on a method of collaboration. The advantages of collaboration are that the total resources available are multiplied and that complementary capabilities can be brought to bear. However, in practice, collaborative action can be time-consuming and conflictive. The importance of brokerage (between both organisations and individuals) in facilitating this has been highlighted in recent conferences and studies, notably through the OECD (2007). In this project, explicit project management methods were agreed upon and used, including the creation of a joint board, a unique project manager and various protocols for management and communication.

In order to define carefully the questions and objectives that would shape the project an initial scoping study was commissioned to survey the state of existing knowledge. In the words of the author this was intended to ‘inform decisions on which topics to focus on, which organisations to consult and which organisations to keep informed’ (Gutherson, 2008). It enabled the project to build on previous work and to identify the range of disadvantages to be considered. Obvious though the need for this step is, it is all too frequently ignored.

[1] The structure for the following sections is based on Morris (2002): 8.

Key points about this stage of the process were:

- the interests of funders were clearly and precisely defined and respected
- previous knowledge was sought out and built upon in the project specification
- potential stakeholder groups were identified
- intermediaries were found and used to help with brokerage and communication between the main players.

Specifying the research

Clear, detailed and comprehensive specification is a hallmark of effective projects. A good starting point is to work out the kinds of outcomes the funders are interested in (in distinction to the actual outcomes, yet to be discovered). In this case the board discussed and agreed upon several. They wanted to:

- illuminate an area that is inherently complex – there are many types of disadvantage and many approaches to careers guidance
- help policymakers at a time of change by focusing on issues where knowledge and understanding were acknowledged as weak
- help organisations delivering guidance services by establishing some kind of conceptual framework and recommendations based on empirical evidence.

To satisfy all three interests the board decided on a case study approach, seeking out examples where practice was likely to be interesting and effective. The clear aim here was to provide policy developers and practice leaders with information they could make use of directly for improvement rather than, for example, survey-based information reporting on the state of the service, or an evaluative study in relation to a particular intervention. From these preliminary agreements on outcome and method a clear specification of objectives, scope, scale and resource requirements was made possible.

Key points about the specification stage were:

- subsequent confusion was minimised by discussing and agreeing the ultimate purposes of the project before tackling detailed processes and resource allocation
- the project's niche in the policy and practice contexts was specified as well as its locus in the academic literature
- methods were designed to suit explicitly stated outcomes and purposes - in this case, portraits and recommendations for practice and policy.

Designing for influence

To be influential the outcomes of a project need to be both sound and useful. So, expert attention needs to be given to both the scientific issues of method and to the communication and engagement issues of an impact strategy. To this end, complementary roles were defined for writers, web designers, event organisers and marketing people as well as for researchers, team leaders and a project manager. Clear distinctions were drawn between the roles of these various experts and collegial relations encouraged between them. Such relations can be hard to develop in practice however, and the sheer pace and spread of this project was a constraint in this case. An explicit strategy was drawn up for securing impact by engaging with a wide range of stakeholders. Experts in research and policy were brought in to advise on method, focus and personnel. Government officials were consulted on the kind of outcomes that would be helpful and ways of fitting them into the schedule of policy development. Researchers and consultants with practice backgrounds were engaged in establishing the sample, creating the research instruments and preparing the fieldwork. The involvement of many parties, with diverse kinds of expertise was vital in arriving at a sample that had the right mix of disadvantaged groups, regional variation and service delivery type, within the budget and timescale the funders could afford.

Key messages about designing for influence are:

- use teams rather than sets of individuals to get plurality of expertise
- use face-to-face workshops to encourage cross fertilisation
- develop the method, sample and instruments collaboratively to combine the perspectives of the researchers, funders, stakeholders and management team
- build impact strategies into the project specification
- engage stakeholders from an early stage to create a sense of commitment for later, when the outcomes become available.

The investigative phase

The investigation at the heart of this project - interviews with practitioners, managers and service users - is described in the other pages of this journal. Several aspects of the way the fieldwork was organised were important in achieving coherence and impact. Above all the use of a team approach, in which the various research consultants collaborated with one another and with the project managers, was vital to securing agreements on method, sampling and instrument design. Regular communications meant that differing perspectives and interests were reconciled and differences in experience and knowledge were capitalised upon. This meant that the disputes and misunderstandings that frequently dog collaborative projects were headed off. It also enabled a creative approach to develop in responding to emerging issues. As a project progresses, new situations are inevitably encountered, opportunities arise and hindrances appear. These can be perceived, all too easily, as threats to the original agreed plan and result in undue adherence to procedure even when circumstances have changed. Better to take up the opportunity to learn as the project proceeds and to modify plans accordingly. In this project, for example, the balance in the sample between regional spread and richness of practice was adjusted in the light of experience, and changes to the schedule were agreed to accommodate, for example, the re-contracting of *nextstep* providers within the lifetime of the project.

A further feature of an impact-driven project is sensitivity to the giving of time and thought by the organisations providing the data. Sometimes perceived as merely the subjects of research, these organisations are of course also key to the interpretation of findings for practitioners and to the implementation of changes implied by the findings. So empathy in relation to the site visits, interviews and recording and interpretation of information is important.

Equally important is a forward-looking sense of the roles to be played in future stages of the project. In this case responsibilities for data collection, recording, analysis, authorship and publication of reports was discussed and agreed well in advance between the researchers, writers, project managers and funders' board so that potential conflicts and delays were averted. Particularly important is early planning of the intended publication structure, because decisions about ultimate communications will affect the way data are to be collected and analysed. In this case, for example, it was decided that detailed case study reports would be needed for specific types of audience as well as a general overview report for others. Organisations involved with a specific community – such as unemployed or homeless people – would want to know in some depth about guidance issues for their client group, whereas a body concerned with guidance policy in general would be more interested in common features arising from analysis across multiple client groups. The decision to publish cases studies called for website development and the need for an overview report with recommendations implied a substantial hardcopy publication aimed at decision-makers. Early communication decisions ensured that in-depth data were collected and that analysis took place at both case study and overview levels.

The key factors in the investigative phase that contribute to ultimate impact include:

- respect amongst all parties for the multiplicity of roles that need to be played over the entire process
- recognition of the importance of intermediary roles, connecting up the work of the separate actors
- regular internal communications, both virtual and face-to-face
- discussion prior to data collection about outputs and their formats
- an expectation that procedures may need to be modified as the project proceeds, in the light of experience and emerging findings.

The influencing phase

As the foregoing analysis has suggested, to be effective in influencing policy and practice, 'impact features' need to be designed into a project at all stages from the very beginning. The right people need to be engaged, the right issues addressed, the right methods used and so on. It is not sufficient to consider 'influencing' as simply a late stage in a linear process, following the research (Nutley *et al.*, 2007: 176-179). The metaphor of 'dissemination' - the spreading of the seeds - is quite inappropriate. It gives a misleading sense of what applicable knowledge is, what it can do and how it can do it. Influence comes about through the active efforts to combine different forms of knowledge and expertise in a variety of actual contexts. Some elements of this process are discussed below in relation to this project.

Interpreting

The first consideration is the recognition of interpretation as a stage in the process of using evidence, distinct from the analysis of data. Analysis is truly the researcher's province, but the process of identifying important patterns, features or commonalties may well need to involve a wider range of perspectives. The interpretation needs to be not only scientifically sound but also potentially useful for practice and policy. In this project, the interpretation process began with sharing of analyses amongst the various researchers and led on to sharing with the project managers and funders. To bring in the views of policymakers, practitioners and service leaders a whole day workshop was organised, structured to enable the various parties to consider their own perspective and to interact it with that of others. To enable this interpretive activity to influence the final outcomes of the project, a clear distinction had to be drawn between the report produced by the research team and the final publication destined for public use. The researchers' report was given to the workshop participants in advance and formed the basis for interpretive discussion. The final publication was carefully modified by the authors to take account of material emerging from these discussions, without compromising the authenticity of the data analysis based on the case study visits. In practice, of course, several iterations of draft documents were needed involving many parties and this required time and sensitivity to differing points of view.

Beyond interpretation lies a further distinct stage, in which the implications of the findings for policy and practice are drawn out. Where these are for the benefit of particular communities it is vital that their detailed knowledge of the practical context influences the implication statements. It is all too common for research to be ignored because the implications have been drawn up by researchers alone and show too little understanding of the context of management, budget-setting, decision-making or change processes into which the implication statements will play. The time and resources spent in bringing together diverse groups of stakeholders in workshops for this purpose helps to enhance the ultimate influence. Rushing impatiently to publication or the next research project is the enemy of impact!

Key factors in the interpretative stages are:

- engaging with representatives of those to whom the project findings speak
- using face-to-face methods to bring differing perspectives to bear
- maintaining a provisional stance about publication decisions so that interpretations can influence the final product
- drawing out implications only when sufficient knowledge of the context is available to blend with the findings of the study.

Communicating

It barely needs saying that excellent communications are of the utmost importance in today's world! The issue for a research for policy and practice is to accept that a communications strategy is needed from the outset and that time and resources need to be allocated to it on a scale comparable to the investigation itself. This strategy needs planning and the engagement of all parties, much as the investigation itself does. As with any communication task, potential audiences and readerships need to be identified and approached. Appropriate channels need to be found and the controllers of these engaged through a communication plan. In general, a variety of channels and formats are needed to enable knowledge to be shared with a reasonable range of interested parties. The interests of channel controllers and network managers need to be understood so that areas of mutual interest may be found and exploited.

In the case of this project it was recognised at an early stage that interest might be anticipated from the organisations concerned with particular client groups, for which guidance was but one aspect of their work, and also from others concerned primarily with guidance, for which the specific client group was less important. It was also to be expected from policymakers in national government, local and regional authorities, specialist agencies and representative organisations, and from other countries within the UK and abroad. It was the heterogeneity of these audiences that led to a multi-stranded publication strategy. An easy-to-read overall report was produced with a concise writing style, bullet points, pull quotes and exemplar boxes that busy practitioners and policymakers might be expected to dip into, if not to read thoroughly. At the same time the rich detail of the case studies was preserved and made available as web downloads, with the specific client group audiences in mind. Hard copy was developed particularly for people rushing around on trains or skim-reading for five minutes and electronic versions made for wide circulation through electronic networks.

A strategy for contacting opinion formers, champions, network managers and change agents [22] For practices that support effective impact see (Nutley *et al.*, 2002: 41) is under continuous development and is likely to continue well after the immediate products of the study have been published. The success of this strategy will depend upon its capacity to identify the interest of different communities in making use of the evidence and in finding ways to establish interactions with them.

Key issues in effective communications include:

- initiating and developing a communication strategy that identifies key contacts and establishes approaches that serve the interests of each
- seeking two-way exchanges with potential users of the evidence that enable them to challenge it, play with it, feed back on it
- providing products and services that potential users can integrate into their normal ways of working.

Following through

All too often research finishes with a final report. Researchers and funders may be eager to move onto the next exciting project and people's patience may be exhausted in simply meeting the challenges of publication.

In this project the communication plan is being implemented at the time of writing. As it begins to bite it is hoped that organisations that find the reports useful will wish to engage further in exploring their implications. Workshops might be set up to discuss implications for local delivery or national policy. These may reflect the interests of client-specific organisations or of guidance professionals in general in improving professional practice. Either way, the challenge is to find the resources and the will to follow through with actions after the original research has finished. One way to do this is for people reading the report themselves to engage in some form of follow-through 'action research' – to test out some of the recommendations in their particular context and to monitor what happens. Another way is for organisations to involve the original researchers and authors in workshops to tease out what might be done differently in the light of the evidence. A further way is for other organisations, not directly involved in the original study, to engage in spreading the word and to consider extending the scope of the original study to include new and different client groups. The instruments designed for this study could, in principle, be used again and again with new client groups.

And finally of course, the discussion of new ideas and knowledge inevitably throws up further questions. This cyclical nature of the discovery process enables understanding to grow over time. So the very questions thrown up by debating the current report could form the basis for further study. Records of discussions flowing from this project need to be kept and communicated to the original sponsors so that ideas for the next stage in understanding guidance for disadvantaged groups can be held and passed on to whomsoever takes up the baton!

Key points in following through include:

- considering different kinds of forward path:
  - deepening engagement with communities already contacted
  - finding new communities to broaden the spread and scope of the study
  - identifying where new knowledge leads us - new questions and new insights needed
- considering whether other funders might be interested in collaborating to exploit the messages to improve practice or develop understanding
- engaging with organisations, individual, funders and agencies that might build on the research work to sustain the accumulation of knowledge.

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Action Stations

Paul Hannan

An estimated two million people in the UK have a significant visual impairment. In England around 153,000 people are registered blind, with a further 153,600 registered partially sighted.1

Action for Blind People South West is one of several specialist Action Teams based throughout England. The Team's mission is to deliver practical support to blind and partially-sighted people in their home, rather than them having to attend an office, which for many individuals would present a major barrier to engagement. In this respect all the team's work is outreach.

The team is made up of 'co-ordinators' each of whom specialise in a specific area, for example benefit claims, housing assistance, assistive technology (computers and gadgets), social interaction, self-employment, employment (including job retention) and training and education.

In each of these specialist areas the Exeter-based team, which covers Devon and Cornwall, has built on its success year on year. Success breeds demand and the team has grown over the last seven years to its current complement of twelve, supporting 800 service users in 2008.

Whilst each co-ordinator brings his or her own specialist knowledge to the task, the real strength of the team is its holistic approach to meeting the service user's needs. In a first meeting, typically lasting 1.5 hours, the co-ordinator, chosen in response to the nature of the first enquiry, assesses the service user using a standard questionnaire. This is not simply a paper exercise. Sensitivity and keen observation of the service user's environment is essential to establishing need, and to making appropriate referral to the team's other specialist co-ordinators and other agencies. Co-ordinators share case work on an on-going basis and this shared knowledge and constant communication between the team members is the glue that welds the service together, provides solutions and delivers success.

This approach is underpinned by Action for Blind People's determination to properly consider and incorporate the views of service users in its strategic planning. This thinking is firmly embedded throughout the organisation and is seen as a crucial element in providing a 'service user-led' service. This is achieved through Action's user-participation programme, in which every service user is invited to participate. Service user's views are canvassed via questionnaires and regular user-participation meetings are held to discuss issues and collect views, which in turn inform Action's local and national service delivery.

This thinking is extended in the team's active engagement with other agencies, for example, with Jobcentre Plus Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs) and Devon Social Services Sensory Team Rehabilitation Officers for Visually Impaired People (ROVIs), and underpins its co-operative efforts in delivering creative solutions such as that found for Jim.

Fixing it for Jim

24-year-old Jim was referred to the South West Action Team for employment advice by the local sensory team ROVI. With severe hearing and sight impairment and a fragmented educational background, Jim was low in confidence and a long way off being ready to look for work.

Following an initial interview, the Action Team's employment co-ordinator referred Jim to other team members: an assistive technology co-ordinator to establish his needs and pursue equipment grants, and a benefits co-ordinator to check and improve his DLA benefit claim. Meanwhile the employment co-ordinator introduced him to local community education courses in literacy and numeracy.

However, things don't always go to plan. Jim didn't take to the community education courses and rebuffed other solutions including a residential work preparation course at Royal National College for the Blind in Hereford. However, working together with the ROVI, Jim was persuaded to visit Hereford 'just to see what it's like'. The ROVI accompanied Jim on the visit and both came back enthused and ready to get things moving. The Action Team employment co-ordinator liaised with the Jobcentre DEA to organise funding and make arrangements and Jim is now getting ready to start at Hereford this autumn.

Jim of course still has a long way to go and no-one is expecting a perfect solution, but on his return Jim will be better prepared for work and continue to be supported by the Action Team co-ordinators and local partner agencies.

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[1] Source NHS Information Centre 2008 http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/blindpartiallysighted08

This is just one example of partnership working in action, an example, we like to think, of 'best practice' in which specialists within and outside of the Action Team combine their expertise to create a solution. This co-operative approach is crucial to meeting service users needs and extends throughout all the Action Team's specialist areas. However this is not a top-down design. It is very much rooted in local initiative and the individual efforts of co-ordinators, given their head by an enlightened local management, to network and develop strong relationships with local partners.

Locally designed initiatives, and the active pursuit of work with partner agencies, extends Action's outreach activities in the community. For example, in the field of training and education this year the team has successfully contributed to a transition project (college leavers into work) with the West of England School and College for Young People with Little or No Sight (WESC), and with Devon Adult & Community Learning (DACL), to establish sorely-needed computer and literacy courses for blind and partially-sighted adults. These have subsequently led to integrated study on mainstream courses.

Initiatives such as these have an entrepreneurial element. An individual co-ordinator identifies a need, designs a solution (often in consultation with other members of the team), presents it to the local management for approval, and all things being equal is given the go-ahead supported by the whole team. Several of these initiatives will run alongside each other and every advantage pursued where they converge. This approach, based on a willingness to share expertise, creates its own dynamic and engages the expertise and contribution of the whole team.

The results speak for themselves. In 2008 the team's benefit co-ordinators claimed around £500,000 of previously unclaimed benefits, Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Attendance Allowance (AA) on behalf of individuals in Devon alone. More than 80 housing solutions were found, 113 assistive technology outcomes were recorded, with over £20,000 of equipment grants obtained, as well as several new social groups founded. In addition, five businesses were established and more than 40 people supported into employment, with 25 people retained in their current employment following sight loss.

Challenges ahead

The current stringent economic climate brings into focus the ongoing challenges that lie ahead for both individuals and organisations: how to maintain momentum, guarantee resources and continue to support and improve the lives of service-users.

As a charitable organisation, Action for Blind People is funded by public donations and in common with other voluntary sector outfits, increasingly by contractual income. Contracts provide a sustaining flow of funds for services that might otherwise be pinched or not provided at all, but sometimes they require methodologies inconvenient for the service user group.

Signatures, for example, can prove to be a significant challenge for blind and partially- sighted individuals who are invariably required to commit, by signature, to contract terms that they are unable to read. Service users rely on co-ordinators' descriptions, often an uncomfortable responsibility for the co-ordinator, especially when an individual is required to sign several documents at the same time which have the potential to affect their income and future prospects.

An example of this issue arose in a project in North Devon aimed at tackling rural isolation. A Devon County Council initiative, 'Women on the Up' paid transport costs to bring together a group of women at monthly meetings. When initial funds were exhausted a *nextstep* programme 'Skills for Jobs' was felt to be a close fit and imported to continue support to the group. Its terms required engagement in job search and training, but the sheer weight of signatures required at various stages confused and frustrated some members of the group, who, despite patient explanation, saw this as a gross imposition.

Subsequent discussions with *nextstep* representatives resolved this issue, once Action had explained the challenges that signatures present to our service-user group. This experience demonstrates how crucial it is for agencies to work together to develop flexible solutions that recognise the particular needs of the individual.

2009 has proved an eventful year for Action for Blind People. In April this year Action became an associate charity of The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB). This allows the two organisations to share resources, skills and expertise, and to engage and reach more blind and partially-sighted people with even better services.

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More information

For more information on Action for Blind People, phone us on our National Freephone Helpline 0800 915 4666 or visit our fully accessible website www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk.

Helping disadvantaged young adults prepare for employment

Clare Norton

The 800 homeless young people that live with Centrepoint each day are amongst the most socially excluded and disadvantaged in the UK. Many of the young people Centrepoint supports have left home early as a result of abuse, neglect, family breakdown, drugs or depression. Many have been in care or prison and have not had the benefit of family support and encouragement. At school most were regular truants who did not achieve well, left school early or were excluded and generally had bad experiences within formal education. Around one in ten has a known mental health need and an increasing number are refugees with language, cultural and isolation obstacles to overcome, and qualifications that are not recognised in the UK.

These often chaotic and unstable backgrounds can leave young people with low confidence and motivation and poor self-esteem. Often they feel intimidated by the thought of going back into formal education without qualifications, especially if they have not been in a learning environment for a long period of time. They do not know what to do or where to start, to put their lives back on track educationally and need a stepping stone to help them back into learning.

Each young person who comes to Centrepoint has a unique personal history, with their own personal challenges and each in turn presents challenges to Centrepoint to provide the best all round care possible. Centrepoint makes every effort to tailor its support to the needs of each individual, working closely with young people who have been away from education for a long time and lacking the motivation to return, instilling confidence to sustain learning and achieve success. Our aim is to enable them to explore their own interests and abilities, starting them on a path of life-long learning. We aim to increase the skills that young people will need to be able to live independently, maintain their own accommodation and to access information and advice from a variety of sources and media. This involves reviewing the way support is delivered to them (taking into consideration that they are still going through the process of adolescence) and by providing the space and time for them to develop in a safe environment, in the hope they become able to proactively demand change in others areas of their lives.

Careers advice is couched within a much broader programme of support, focusing on the all-round needs of the individual. Young people are encouraged to use Foundations for Life Centres at Centrepoint Foyers. These centres are equipped with computers and staff to enable young people to access online learning resources to bring them out of isolation, help them rebuild social skills and develop a sense of community.

Foundations for Life centres provide a mobile resource offering advice and information about suitable courses, enabling young people to read through college prospectuses and helping them to complete course application forms and improve their interview techniques. The key to the success of the centres is their accessibility, enabling young people, as and when they feel ready, to begin making steps towards getting back into education or taking on employment. Staff will continue to be on hand to support young people once they are in education, to help them manage their workload and deal with any potential problems.

We forge links with colleges and universities to increase their understanding about homeless young people's specific needs when it comes to studying, and we identify tutors and colleges which are sympathetic to this hard-to-reach group. Needs might include addressing basic literacy and numeracy skills, co-ordinating taster courses and providing more intensive one-to-one support.

Since formal structures and an academic route back into education are not suitable or appealing to many of the young people in Centrepoint's care, we also offer additional learning opportunities. For example, our horticulture programme enables young people to gain City and Guild's Horticultural Skills Vocational 1 (No.9352), helping them gain useful vocational job skills, develop transferable teamwork skills and offering the chance to explore further employment ideas.

Centrepoint's Lifewise programme is a series of accredited life skills workshops which equip young people with the wide range of skills required for independent living and to move towards mainstream education, training and employment.

The key to this programme is its responsiveness to young people's needs. Working in a group allows them to see that learning can be relevant, useful and fun; however workshops can also be delivered on a one-to-one basis if needed. Young people's comments feed back into existing workshops and are used to inspire new ones. The workshops are delivered by support and development workers as well as members of the learning and health teams. Workshop schedules vary between services according to the needs of young people, but a range of workshops is available on a regular basis.

The Awards and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) have accredited all the Lifewise workshops as part of their Unit Award Scheme. The AQA scheme provides flexibility, enabling Centrepoint staff to either make use of existing units or write new units that respond to young people's needs. On completing a unit, young people receive a certificate recognising their achievement, bolstering their CVs as well as their confidence.

Accreditation can help young people take the first steps towards further education, training and employment, or help them secure a place in a shared flat once they move on from Centrepoint. Since Lifewise began in 2007, over 900 young people have received 2800 AQA unit certificates.

The first workshop young people attend is 'The Deal'. The Deal clearly sets out how Centrepoint will work with those living with us; what they can expect from Centrepoint and what is expected of them in return. Following this, young people working with their support & development, and with their learning workers identify the key skills they will need for a successful transition to independent living.

Moneywise is a programme to improve the financial capability of homeless young people. We researched the extent of financial exclusion experienced by Centrepoint residents and developed a holistic programme to educate young people about personal financial management. The programme is part of the Lifewise AQA accredited workshops. It also involves capacity building through staff training and signposting to specific financial capability agencies. As a result our residents have access to high quality advice and leave Centrepoint services fully informed of the importance of financial capability.

Since Moneywise training was implemented over 200 young people have received training in money matters, while a further 105 support workers have undertaken the first stage of the staff training programme. Further to this, 20 Moneywise Champions have been identified who ensure that the scheme is at the forefront of support staff minds when they are working with young people.

Feedback from young people shows an increase in their confidence levels and ability to become independent, improving their chances to become more self sufficient once they have left our services. They are also better equipped to identify personal areas of weakness and ask for support.

The core offering of Lifewise units is in managing a home, cooking and managing health, but we have been able to respond to wider issues such as anger management and coping with change, as well as improving employability. Specific units have been developed around Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), for example CV writing and interview skills as well as units on such things as IT, digital media and music. The Workwise unit offers the chance to enter into practical employment, either paid or voluntary, as well as apprenticeships, traineeships or work placements. Specialised roles in the learning team have been developed to deliver all these elements.

To ensure our support is making a positive contribution to the young people's lives we gauge the distance travelled. Learning assessments are carried out and reviewed regularly. These documents reflect where the young person started from and what their goals and achievements are upon entering our services. These together with the short achievable goals that are set during their stay, are all recorded and can be reflected on.

At Centrepoint the link between health problems and homelessness is also well understood. More than one in ten of the young people Centrepoint supports has a known mental health need. Mental health problems are eight times higher for people living in bed and breakfast accommodation, and eleven times higher for those who sleep rough, compared to the general population

To help those with mental health difficulties, Centrepoint has a dedicated multidisciplinary team of accredited psychotherapists and trainers, including a drug counsellor and a healthy living adviser. The team undertakes a range of specialist assessments and develops individual packages of psychological support. These can involve one-to-one sessions, group therapy, psycho-educational and healthy living groups, referring where appropriate to external specialists while continuing to work with them jointly.

The Health team works directly with over 800 young people a year, ensuring that all who are perceived to have, or be at risk of having, a health problem are assessed within a short time of entering Centrepoint services. Most referrals are young people with a history of homelessness due to abuse during childhood, as well as a number of refugees with a history of trauma, loneliness and isolation.

Our overall service is focussed on individual needs, tailoring support to each young person and their readiness to move forward. At every opportunity, we endeavour to learn from the young people that we support. Centrepoint's Youth Educator Programme is a prime example of our aim to learn and discover new ideas to take on the challenges of working with this client group. Our Youth Educators are drawn from among our service users: they impart their knowledge and experiences of homelessness to other young people, helping to prevent young people becoming homeless. They also share their knowledge with Centrepoint staff, training them to deal better with the issues that homeless young people face and to improve Centrepoint service provision. The Youth Educators also receive formal, accredited qualifications to ensure their achievements are clearly recognised.

The success of Centrepoint's work is the focus on each individual. Looking at individual needs and making small steps to achieve progress is fundamental to ensure a disadvantaged young person is ready to move forwards. In learning from our young people and being responsive to their needs, our support is persistent and individual care is provided by a few key staff who celebrate each person's success. Our aim is that such advice and guidance should ultimately empower the young person to help him or herself.

Clare Norton
Regional Director of Operations at Centrepoint

References

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Working with offenders: The Foundation Training Company Ltd

Andy Hope

'The student is always at the centre of FTC's thinking. The visit to Highpoint demonstrated the commitment and quality of the team. It demonstrated continual efforts to improve delivery and support for the students. Subsequently the students show a high regard for the team and the programmes which they demonstrate in their feed-back, body language and achievements' (OCN Moderators' Report).

Staff and former learners enjoy a break at a recent conference.

John

John was first referred to FTC whilst serving a sentence in HMP Edmunds Hill. During his time with us he took all elements of the course but it was the first time he had used computers and he loved the challenge.

John had problems around drug addiction and this had impacted on his offending. On release he was referred to our community training and resource centre in Hackney. He arrived highly motivated to change and eager to start. Because of his addictions John was referred to Riverside House, a second-stage rehabilitation centre. He did their training, which was about drug rehabilitation, and we continued to work with him to help achieve his goal of going to college.

Shortly afterwards John was interviewed by a local college and they were impressed with his motivation. He had to undertake a Level II English test which he passed and is going on to take a level II IT course. He hopes this will lead to future courses around IT networking.

Whilst John is in college, FTC continues to work with him to secure voluntary work placements in order to increase his confidence and experience.

The work of the Foundation Training Company

The pressures of resettlement that face offenders are huge. The individual has to consider a range of serious issues, for example finding suitable housing and work, the impact of their offending behaviour on their lives thus far and rebuilding relationships with family and friends. These pressures may begin to explain the fact that a very large majority people on completion of a custodial or community sentence will re-offend.

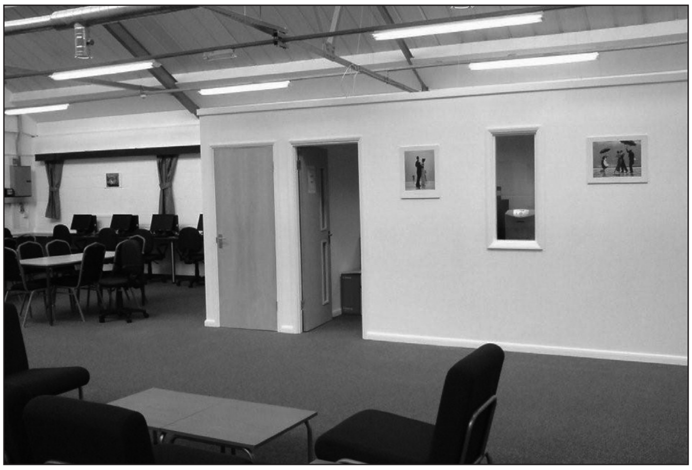
The Foundation Training Company is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. It was formed for the purpose of developing and running resettlement courses for serving prisoners. The company evolved from a community training project in London which had been in existence since February 1993. FTC currently delivers resettlement training in eleven prisons on behalf of Her Majesty's Prison Service as well as operating two Training and Resource Centres in London and an Alternative to Custody Programme in Essex.

As FTC has matured the original purpose has changed and our aims now reflect the fact that a high proportion of our work is done in the community. Therefore a programme that was set up for serving prisoners now reflects the need to support offenders, ex-offenders and those at risk of offending; this in itself can bring challenges. In a custodial setting FTC has been used to dealing with a 'captive' audience and prisoners have very little choice in where they can go to get resettlement advice and support. Although voluntary, the resettlement course is not a soft option. Once on the course the learners have to face up to many realities and make difficult decisions about their future. Those that complete the five weeks feel more prepared and able to make a change to their lives.

'It's honest and realistic what they tell you. You know that you cannot hide the fact that you've been to prison but they go through disclosure with you to help you cope with the stigma. I now feel confident that I can look an employer in the eye and disclose it to him without the stress I would have had.'
Ex-learner

In the community FTC receives a steady stream of referrals onto the programme, but there are many distractions for the learner prior to their arrival at a centre. Of the 1408 appointments made at one centre in London, just 858 (61

[1] Ministry of Justice, 2004, Reducing Re-offending: National Action Plan. http://noms.justice.gov.uk/news-publications-events/publications/strategy/reducing-reoffending-action-plan?view=Binary. The pathways are: Accommodation; Education, training and employment; Mental and physical health; Drugs and alcohol; Finance, benefit and debt; Children and families of offenders; Attitudes, thinking and behaviour.



The FTC learning centre in HMC Wayland (left) and its community-based centre in Lambeth (right), showing the similarity in standard and style.

per cent) were attended. Although this conversion rate is good by conventional standards, it means that many who could benefit from our help and support do not take advantage of what is on offer. A small group of peer mentors are being trained and supported to make contact with those who have been referred to us and encourage them to keep the appointment. We would regard a 70 per cent attendance rate as about the optimum possible in this respect, and it is our objective to achieve this figure by the end of the Centre's second year.

Irrespective of whether a learner joins us in custody or the community, time has taught us that their induction is vital to settle them into the programme quickly. From the very start FTC has put great effort into the learning environment. On setting up the first pre-release course in Feltham, FTC staff were met with disbelief from prison officers when they asked for the delivery area to be painted and carpeted, lighting improved and tea/coffee provided for the learners. However, attitudes soon changed, and a Chief Inspector of Prisons Report stated 'FTC provided an outstandingly motivating atmosphere in their workshops and group rooms.'

The induction process also gives both FTC and the learner time to get to know each other. Many learners, even though they volunteered for the programme, will initially be reluctant to engage fully. There is a feeling, especially amongst repeat offenders, that they will once again be judged and that their support will disappear once they go through the gate. FTC staff work hard to dispel this notion as quickly as possible, through being honest and realistic with the learners and ensuring that their own expectations of what can be achieved in the first few months after release are realistic. As one learner put it 'everyone is wanting to remind you of the reason you are here, [but] the course is about, well you've done all that – so let's talk about what happens when you get out.'

An 'Action and Learning Plan' is produced in conjunction with the learner. The Action Plan element is formed around the seven Resettlement Pathways found in the National Reducing Re-offending Strategy[1] Ministry of Justice, 2004, Reducing Re-offending: National Action Plan. The pathways are: Accommodation; Education, training and employment; Mental and physical health; Drugs and alcohol; Finance, benefit and debt; Children and families of offenders; Attitudes, thinking and behaviour. The simple premise is to ask the individual 'where they have come from, where are they now and where do they want to get to' in their life. Using this information, goals are set for each individual and a learning plan is set up to underpin these goals whilst on the course. Whilst the learner works towards these goals by following their learning plan in the classroom, a support worker will be doing much of the follow-up work on the action plan by contacting employers, training and accommodation providers and other agencies on release from custody. In the community the learner is encouraged to do much of the contacting of agencies themselves. FTC sees this as a vital strand in confidence-building for the individuals by allowing them to build their own communication and social skills for the future. In custody this is not always possible due to the security restraints placed on the use of telephones and the internet. However, regardless of the learner finding themselves in the community or in custody, daily contact is maintained with the support worker and their Action Plan is constantly reviewed. This Action Plan is a living document for the life of the intervention: it has to be, because as the learner's confidence grows so do their aspirations. Quite early in the programme many learners start to re-appraise their goals and look beyond the first few months in the community to a more sustainable settlement. It is because of this that FTC took the decision to move 'through the gate' with the learners and provide further support in the community.

London was chosen because of the large percentage of prisoners that return there on release from the prisons in East Anglia. Based on the successful model delivered by FTC in custody, the Training and Resource centres allow FTC to deliver resettlement support in a more flexible and individual manner. With regard to security concerns, all referrals are risk-assessed and treated accordingly.

Learners are encouraged to do more for themselves. Every learner is given a hotmail account and encouraged to fill in applications for jobs, training and accommodation, where appropriate online. For those less able, or who do not yet feel confident enough, support is given. But the main objective for everyone in the community is to do as much for themselves as they can. The community programmes have also allowed FTC to employ ex-offenders as managers, tutors and support workers, something that is extremely difficult to do in a custodial setting.

Notwithstanding the difference in locations and staff, commonality is immediately apparent to anyone that visits an FTC programme, either in the community or custody. This also applies to the learning elements. These cover the Skills for Life areas of literacy, numeracy and ICT, with the wider Skills for Life elements of personal development, working with others and improving own learning and performance. All of these are embedded into the programme and learners produce a portfolio of evidence to show how they have covered the curriculum. Portfolios are internally and externally verified, and learners who are successful will receive nationally recognised units of accreditation. In 2008-09, FTC carried out over 11,000 resettlement interventions and to date more than 11,000 people completed courses. 95 per cent of these have achieved at least one nationally recognised award from OCR or OCN. This has resulted in the award of around 12,100 accredited certificates and an immeasurable level of improved self-esteem and confidence. In some cases this will be the first time a learner has received any certificate for learning.

As most of the learning is embedded the learners do not see themselves in a learning or educational environment: they are more likely to think of the new skills they are learning as obvious tools to help them achieve their resettlement goals. Therefore, the larger the portfolio of evidence the greater the indication that the individual is making progress towards those goals and towards their personal development. 'The FTC five-week programme is a tremendous programme that gives prisoners the confidence, knowledge and expertise to prepare for that successful release' (Prison Governor).

The team that delivers this programme varies in size depending on the size of the programme and the location, either in custody or the community, but it always includes a manager, a delivery element (i.e. tutors) a resettlement element (i.e. key support or resettlement tutors) and volunteers. These teams are backed up by central management providing supervisory and development support, quality assurance, administration and financial control. Within the team the manager is pivotal, providing communication with local community groups and resource agencies, and in custody liaising with prison and offender managers. Tutors and resettlement staff have a symbiotic relationship: although the latter have the nominal lead in helping an individual implement their action plan, it is often the tutors who will notice a learner's growing confidence and encourage them to become more ambitious in their plans. To ensure resettlement staff are made aware of these changes, good communication between staff is essential.

In the more structured custodial environment, teams are encouraged to sit together at the end of a morning and afternoon session and discuss what went on over a cup of tea. This allows the resettlement worker to catch up on the learners' aspirations and so become more aware of their needs. In the community, where the learning is more individual, learners' aspirations will be discussed in more detail during the (recorded) weekly team meetings. In all of this the manager is again pivotal, ensuring that communication between the learners and staff is regular and timely. Many staff started as tutors and even volunteers, with approximately 74 per cent starting out at a lower position than they are now. At interview FTC always looks for an 'FTC type of person', someone that shows a real desire to work with this client group and who wants themselves to develop. The majority of staff become qualified to the standards required after they have joined.

Much of the success of FTC relies upon our ability to refer learners to other agencies to deal with their wider needs. The vast majority of learners see their ultimate goal as employment. During induction and initial interview their wider needs will soon become apparent, many of which will have to be dealt with prior to their engaging with prospective employers. These needs could be around dealing with addictions, family re-integration, debt and even health. To meet them we have built up a network of trusted agencies that we can refer to for further support: in return we accept referrals from them to support their clients using our expertise. For example it might become quickly apparent to us that a learner still has an addiction problem; with their consent we will contact an agency that specialises in addictions and ask them to receive our client as a referral. Once the learner is in control of his/her addiction we would expect them to be referred back to us for support in gaining employment. In this way the learner understands that we are not breaking ties with them but they are in fact getting a better service for their immediate need from an expert. In the same way, we will accept referrals from the addiction agency for their clients. 'I can tell a guy who's been with FTC the minute he walks through the door of the hostel. He's different, more focused, ready to commit' (St Edmunds Society, Norwich).

The change in temperament, behaviour and attitude in our learners is reflected in their self-esteem and higher levels of confidence, creating a clear hope for the future: it is on these changes that FTC will continue to build. All agree that a positive attitude towards further education, training and a lawful future is the way forward. As a Prison Governor succinctly put it, 'It may not always count on the scorecard but what they do for individuals represents real opportunity, and the way their staff provide this is excellent.'

Andy Hope
Chief Executive, The Foundation Training Company Ltd

Stay Well – Stay Working: Richmond Fellowship Employment Service working to support adults with mental illness into work and learning

Ross Hall and Vicky Edmunds

With the current changes in the economic climate there has been a marked increase in the numbers of people unemployed. For those in work there are increased pressures to perform with a wide concern about job loss. As the recession bites and unemployment mounts and these trends have an increasingly detrimental effect, NHS services around the country are reporting a rise in mental health problems.

What are the facts?

- 1 in 6 people (amounting to 7 million adults), in England suffer from a common mental health problem. The cost to employers is estimated at £26 billion (Sainsbury Centre, 2007)
- The onset of mental health problems is associated with double the risk of leaving employment compared to other health conditions or impairments (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004)
- Nearly 3 in 10 employees will have mental health problems in any one year, the majority of which will be anxiety and depression (Mental Health Foundation, 2003)
- After 12 months absence from work there is only a 25 per cent chance of returning to work (Sainsbury Centre, 2007)

What is the Richmond Fellowship?

The Richmond Fellowship is one of a number of voluntary sector organisations who work with adults with mental health problems to offer support with work and learning. This year the organisation is celebrating 50 years of working within the mental health sector, during which time they have offered a wide range of services including supported housing, registered care, community links and support for employment, education and training. More recently job retention services have been included.

We have been providing vocational services since 1985, and for the past 24 years the Richmond Fellowship and its staff have worked to develop a high quality employment service for people disadvantaged or disabled by severe and enduring mental health problems.

The employment advice services draw on a range of models to inform their work. They provide specialist assessment, guidance and support to assist clients into work and/or education, with ongoing support to both clients and their employers. They are also now at the forefront of providing early intervention support for employed people experiencing difficulties associated to their poor mental health.

During the last year (April 2008 to March 2009) the Richmond Fellowship worked with:

- 3,197 primary clients (clients accessing our core service), an average of 1,417 at any one time
- 767 secondary clients (clients receiving a 'light touch' service) , an average of 356 at any one time.

During that same period 61 per cent of our primary clients and 68 per cent of our secondary clients gained a positive outcome.

What type of support do people with mental health problems need in connection with employment, education and training?

The first principle of the service is recovery. The idea of 'recovery' derives from a set of values about a person's right to build a meaningful life for themselves with or without continuing mental health symptoms. It is based on a principle of self-determination and self-management. The emphasis is on instilling hope and the belief that there is something for the individual to strive for. This can help to sustain motivation and support the individual's expectations of a full life. It does not mean 'cure'. It is more about learning the life skills to self-manage and deal with the challenges and changes in both personal health and life in general.

The Richmond Fellowship also works closely to the Individual Placement & Support (IPS) model. This takes the idea that clients with severe mental illness can achieve competitive employment, and encourages them to access it in integrated/mainstream settings, working in regular places of business with non-disabled employees rather than in specialist vocational settings. The main principle is that all are capable of employment, and it places an emphasis on early job search that is driven by the client's choice and preferences. This is assisted by the provision of accurate information about career choices, labour market, legislation, benefits and financial implications to enable a truly informed choice. We also view moves into education and work-based training as of equal value to the individual.

We aim to offer our clients a professional relationship based on equality, offering support whilst always respecting their capacity to direct their own growth and development. We offer impartial, non-directive advice.

Advisers working with the Richmond Fellowship come from a wide range of backgrounds. Many will have experience in the mental health sector, and in advice, guidance, counselling and/or education. Others will have developed knowledge and experience in the private or public sectors, and a few will have developed an interest in working in this field after recovering from mental illness themselves. The advisers use a wide range of guidance, counselling and other support models to inform their practice. They are expected to hold an NVQ level 4 in guidance or a similar qualification. This integrated method allows us to offer a client-centred approach to our clients.

Clients will come from a range of backgrounds and stages in their recovery. Most Richmond Fellowship employment services are commissioned to work closely with NHS mental health teams and other health professionals. Clients have the opportunity to access the service independently, or will do so following discussion with the health professional responsible for their care. Health professionals themselves will also introduce people to our service. Clients will vary in their proximity to the labour market. Some we work with have never been employed, or have been unemployed for long periods of time, and may also have low skills and/or very little current work experience. Others can be highly qualified professionals who have either just lost their job, or are at risk because of a mental illness. Our service recognises that everyone is an individual and the impact of mental ill health will affect people and their lives in different and unique ways. Therefore advisers need to use a holistic and flexible approach to their working with clients.

What does this type of service offer that makes it different from any other IAG service?

> **'Richmond Fellowship has helped me to gain confidence and the skills to pursue a career. I now have a permanent position, thanks to help from the RFES service.' Dan**

Firstly, it is important to have the time and resources to adhere closely to normal guidance practice. The ability to offer a good advice and guidance service coupled with the time to follow up clients goes a long way to support individuals with mental health problems.
Richmond Fellowship's experience is that:

- clients need time to build trust and to be offered a supportive and understanding environment where they can be open and honest about their concerns
- it is important that all clients have their hopes and aspirations acknowledged
- clients require time to move at their own pace – they are their own best expert
- targets and goals are more achievable when broken down into manageable steps
- there needs to be opportunities to review and to understand personal progress and life changes
- we have to be flexible enough to deal with the inevitable relapses that occur when dealing with a fluctuating health condition
- doors need to be kept open for clients to return when they are feeling well, or ready for the next step
- it is vital that clients are totally involved in the process as a whole and take responsibility for the choices they make.

Advisers need to have not only a good knowledge of their skills and understand clear boundaries, but also be aware of where their role ends and where support and advice is best given by others. For example, because the role requires a lot of listening, it can be easy to slip into counselling mode. Advisers have to be aware of when there is a need to refer a client to appropriate professionals if psychological intervention is required.

In addition we have found:

- advisers must recognise the importance of facilitating self-direction for the client and foster a solution-based approach
- there is a need to work within the individual client's own networks
- promoting self-efficacy by working alongside the client is essential
- advisers need to develop their own support networks, identifying the resources and skills which will help them to support themselves in the future. They need to know where they can get help and resolve issues for themselves and their clients without having to refer back to the service.
- the facilitation of peer group support has proved extremely effective, reducing isolation and encouraging personal reflection and self- determination. Individuals are able to share experience and realise they are not alone – it is not just them experiencing problems.

- clients may require access to other types of activities. These can include job- seeking skills, assertiveness training, access to basic skills, work placements, access to careers software etc.
- it is importanct for advisers to build a relationship with the client so that they can understand their motivation and readiness to move forward, to know when and how to challenge and motivate a particular individual and when to back off.

Key elements of our model include:

- the involvement of clients at every stage to ensure agreed actions, with regular reviews
- the use of a holistic, flexible and non-judgmental approach
- the need to identify support networks
- the understanding of motivation and readiness
- the need to keep our door open for re-entry
- the keeping of clear boundaries
- the keeping open of clear channels of communication
- the need to support the client to develop their own self-advocacy skills, but to advocate when necessary.

'Richmond Fellowship helped me move from a stage in my life, where I felt of no use to anyone, to a time where I now have hope and look forward to a normal life.' Paul

Early intervention – Why offer a service for employed people?

Evidence from our employment advice services suggested that many of our clients who were seeking work had previously held employment. Most had lost their jobs following the onset of mental health difficulties which then exacerbated stress and problems in the work place. Support for individuals struggling to hold down jobs while trying to cope with the debilitating effects of mental health difficulties has historically not been catered for, especially if people are not able to access secondary care through NHS provision.

'The longer a person is off sick, the more difficult it becomes for them to return to work and the less likely it is that they will return to work at all' Unum Limited IfES, 2001

Richmond Fellowship Retain – an additional service provision

RETAIN, Richmond Fellowship's national Job Retention Service for people with mental health problems, was launched in 2006. Its long-term aim is to improve the working environment for all people experiencing mental health difficulties and maximise the availability of early intervention support services.

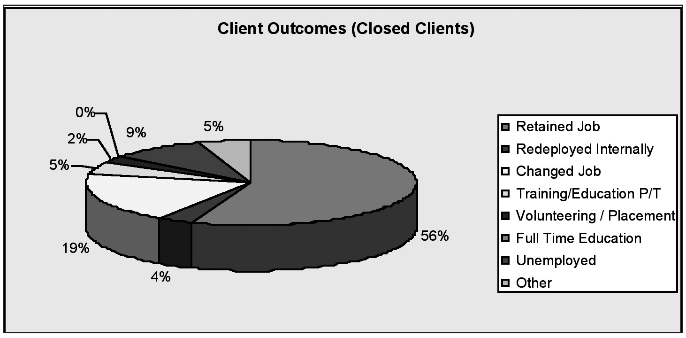
Retain supports people experiencing mental health problems including stress, depression or anxiety at work. These clients are unlikely to be receiving any care service through the NHS. The service aims to maximise a client's chance of maintaining their employment when problems arise, by working with them on a one-to-one basis and also directly with their employer.

Using the same principles, Retain facilitates employed clients who are experiencing difficulties in the workplace to find solutions to their problems, improve their mental health at work, or return to work after a period of absence. Employees report that the service supported them to review their current situation and opened up different ways of looking at things, offering new options and less negative possibilities in what could be described as 'reframing' or 'reappraising'.

'…during the meeting with [the adviser] I realised I really do want to come back, yes I actually really do have skills that I can use and that… If they [employers] are a bit more flexible, and they take into account that I have this severe long term problem, that it's not my fault, it's just how it is, that they can accommodate me.' Alice

If required Retain can give support and information to employers and offer mediation in order to bring about a successful outcome. Retain also recognises the lack of specialist support for employers and maintains a neutral stance.

'The thing that's most difficult to manage as an employer when people have mental health problems is getting them to talk about it with us. Having RETAIN to help make those conversations possible has been really constructive. The great thing about RETAIN is also that you're not on anyone's side. You're helping us as well as the employee through your knowledge of employment issues as well as mental health.' Sonya Taylor, Coaching and Advice Officer, HR department, Brighton & Hove Council.



Retain clients, July06- Aug.09 internal RF monthly report

Since its formal launch in 2006, RETAIN has worked with over 800 people, of which 79 per cent have had a positive outcome – they have retained their job, been redeployed or changed job.

Recent research on Richmond Fellowship's Retain model (Cameron and Walker, unpublished) concluded that this service provided:

- positive work outcomes
- help to preserve and develop work related identities and aspirations
- increased confidence, communication skills and an approach to problem solving
- increased sense of hope, increased confidence to approach employers
- reduced self-blame and isolation.

The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health has recently completed research to understand the impact of Employment Advisers in Primary Care. This is based on a study of both our Cambridge and our Huntingdon and Fens Retain services (Sainsbury Centre, forthcoming). The Cambridge Retain service was successful at helping over 80 per cent of people to retain their job, and its positive impact is demonstrated by a continued funding grant from Cambridgeshire Primary Care Trust as part of the NHS's Improved Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme. Research by Cameron and Walker on the Brighton Retain service (unpublished) also highlights good practice and the positive outcomes achieved by our clients.

The future

Richmond Fellowship is continuing to develop its services in response to the needs of both clients and funders. Recently it has been working in partnership with local Primary Care Trusts to use IAPT funding to place specialist employment advisers within health teams to offer timely support when ill health might be affecting a persons ability to sustain work, or when a lack of employment might be contributing to mental illness. This approach fits well with the concept of the 'Fit For Work' model outlined in the Black report (Black, 2008), that promotes taking a more holistic view of people in the early stages of sickness and offering support on a wide range of areas including an emphasis on work.

An ongoing concern for our services is that funding in this area is often short term and driven by changes in local and national policy. However, Richmond Fellowship continues to strive to inform good practice in the sector and to support the development of services. We are committed to working with external research bodies, policy makers and other partnership organisations, hopefully to sustain a continuity of provision for this type of valued support.

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Responding to the economic downturn: how advice practitioners are helping to meet the needs of unemployed adults

Martin Peel and Ruth Hawthorn

Developing a well qualified and better skilled workforce, capable of making and implementing realistic and achievable plans for progression and development, is dependant on individuals being able to draw upon the help and support of relevant services at the time that is right for them.

The *nextstep* service, as delivered in Suffolk under the auspices of Suffolk County Council (SCC) as contract-holder, was the subject of one of the case studies described in Hawthorn and Alloway's *Smoothing the Path* (2009), and the full case study ('Careers guidance for disadvantaged adults case study: Suffolk County Council, Community Learning and Skills Development IAG service') is available with the others online at http://www.skillsdevelopment.org/pdf/Suffolk%20County%20Council%20Community%20and%20Learning%20and%20Skills%20Development.pdf.

At the time of the fieldwork, the 2008 two-year contract for *nextstep* provision had only just started. SCC had been given the overall contract for not just its own county but the other five eastern counties (Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire and Norfolk) as well. The case study looks in particular at the Suffolk arrangements for partnership working and outreach, especially co-location with other services and efforts to reach service users in rural areas, all practice which could be of interest to other providers whether or not they are funded through *nextstep*. It will be relevant to those that are, suggesting possible areas into which to develop, but also to those that are not, as under arrangements for the new adult advancement and careers service the successor to the current *nextstep* service will certainly be at the heart of any guidance network arrangements.

From the delivery of a public service, and the way it is experienced by its users, it is not always obvious what efforts have to be made behind the scenes and at management level to achieve that provision. Some of these, especially relating to network building and managing short-term funding (often from a variety of sources) are described in *Smoothing the Path*. What factors were influencing *nextstep* provision at the time of that fieldwork (early autumn, 2008), what has been happening since, and what are the prospects for the next stage after August 2010 when the new service will be in place?

The *nextstep* service

The *nextstep* service in England is funded through the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and managed on a regional basis by lead (prime) contractors. It offers free, impartial 'face-to-face' career information and advice to adults aged 20 plus, including help and support in identifying skills development *needs* as well as training, learning and work *options*. The 'new' contract was introduced in the summer of 2008 and then amended at the end of 2008 to further help 'customers' accessing the service during the economic downturn. The service is now available to adults aged 18 and 19 who have been referred by Jobcentre Plus.

At the same time as those changes, the *nextstep* service in some areas also joined in pilots of a new DWP/LSC initiative to offer a more comprehensive service to its customers under the Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) service. A selection of trials were introduced nationally in response to the Leitch Review of 2007, which called for a fully integrated employment and skills service by 2010/11 to enable individuals more easily to increase their skills and progress into, and within, work. There are IES trials in three of the eastern region counties, so useful information is emerging from the region on how the new adult advancement and careers service (aacs) and Jobcentre Plus may work together in future.

The *nextstep* role in the IES trials involves a *nextstep* adviser providing a Skills Health Check service for Jobcentre Plus (JCP) customers. JCP advisers are trained (with help from *nextstep*) to judge which customers would benefit from the Skills Health Check, a diagnostic process that includes face-to-face careers information and advice services as *per* the *nextstep* offer. Some customers are supported in addition to use an on-line, more in-depth, skills diagnostic tool. The trialling of this tool is part of work to design the components of the aacs to start in August 2010. The tool is currently still evolving but is proving helpful to the full range of *nextstep* users including those who already have a high qualification level. If available through open access from 2010 it will be an important element of the universal service.

The changing context

The Suffolk service described in the *Smoothing the Path* case study was emerging against a background of intense activity. The contracting body had to subcontract urgently across six counties with a wide range of delivery bodies. To meet the aims of the service it was seeking a spread between larger agencies whose staff was primarily concerned with advice about learning and employment, and a longer list of smaller agencies, drawn from the private, voluntary and community sectors, which might only have one or two staff members employed in such work. All this had to be set up quickly, but also comply with formal procurement procedures. Providers were familiar with one-to-one interventions, but the challenge was to provide the new offer of group work for some users on the very limited budget available. The solution was to work through organisations that already saw potential *nextstep* clients in groups, and where more in-depth coverage of vocational issues by *nextstep* staff would be welcome. This way accommodation and other costs were covered by other funds.

This use of groups had advantages of building on familiarity and trust, permitting those who wanted, and were eligible, to follow the group session with a one-to –one session under *nextstep* funding. At first the disadvantage was that group sessions were not so good at reaching their intended target group, for example those not eligible for *nextstep* one-to-ones because they were already well qualified. However, over the course of the year the economic climate changed, and group work is now reaching that target through, for example, pre-redundancy group activity offered in conjunction with employers. In addition, changes in the IES offer in response to the economic down-turn have altered the picture: people with higher qualifications can now seek individual sessions, JCP itself is now offering group work to which *nextstep* staff are contributing and in areas that are not part of the IES trials, JCP customers unemployed for six months are now being signposted to *nextstep* and a Skills Health Check.

This flexible response to the recession on the part of the IES programme has brought problems as well. Co-location of *nextstep* and JCP was one of the highlights of the case study in the *Smoothing the Path* project. Now, as JCP increases its own staff numbers to deal with extra work, there is less room for *nextstep* staff, and no *nextstep* budget to seek accommodation nearby. In some cases the previously co-located *nextstep* staff are being re-housed in local further education colleges, but this means having to send service users off to a different venue, and one that some may find off-putting.

Change is stressful for those trying to reduce its impact on service users. Scarcely a month has gone by since the start of this current *nextstep* contract without the sub-contractors being told they have to do something differently. This is particularly problematic for the smaller, third sector providers. In spite of this, across the whole *nextstep* East of England region some remarkable partnerships have emerged, including the innovative decision by housing associations to take on their own employment advisers under the *nextstep* banner. But change is ongoing. Already a year into, and a year in advance of the end of this contract, the selection process for the new service has begun, at first establishing which prime (regional) contractors will be asked to lead. Changes to lead agencies and to size of area are possible. And subcontractors have all the uncertainties described in *Smoothing the Path* that result from short-term funding arrangements. The new advancement service must seek ways to establish provision on a firmer footing.

What do customers and advisers think of nextstep?

An evaluation based on data collected between April and August 2009 across the East of England from *nextstep* customers and advisers found users very positive about their advisers. Scores were high for how friendly, helpful, professional and knowledgeable they were, and overall 95 per cent of customers described the service they had received as either 'very good' or 'good'.

> **'Adviser put me at ease very quickly and was able to tell me almost all the information I asked for. Anything she didn't know she found out, and got straight back to me.'**
>
> **'Allows people to better themselves and gain confidence in achieving more.'**
> **SBA, forthcoming**

As the majority of the sample was unemployed, unsurprisingly the help most appreciated was in respect to job search. Many indicated Jobcentre Plus had referred them so that they could develop a CV and a number indicated how valuable they found this was. However, crucially, this was particularly the case where skilled advisers were using the opportunity to complete a CV to undertake a much more in-depth review of career goals, skills and interests, which customers found empowering. There was a strong consensus that, as one individual put it: 'this is a good service - but more advertising/publicity is needed to make people aware of it'.

Several respondents would have liked more time, and a service provider nearer to them. One or two with higher-level qualifications commented on the need for more specialised information and advice relevant to their professional background. But the study provides further evidence about how much unemployed - and other - customers value the extent to which skilled careers advisers can boost their confidence and self-esteem, and enhance their ability to develop and implement plans of action. Any analysis of the effectiveness and value of careers advice needs to recognise the importance of such customer empowerment (and associated career learning) as well as the 'hard' outcomes of a job or training place.

nextstep advisers were found to be very interested in, and frequently passionate, about meeting the needs of their clients. In turn their managers frequently emphasised staffs' commitment and stressed their resilience in the face of frequent changes in policy and direction. Most advisers (62.8 per cent) felt that *nextstep* was meeting the needs of its users (though a third of these said only 'quite well').

But the evaluation also highlighted concerns, including a lack of capacity. As the service achieves better customer recognition, and the planned implementation of aacs leads to greater demand, there will be a need for more new entrants to the profession and for a further up-skilling of the existing workforce. Crucially those drawn into the work will need to be attracted by better, and sustainable, pre-, and post-entry training and career development opportunities. (It is a sad irony that one of the more challenging questions posed to an adult adviser is how to become, and make a career as, an adult adviser). This will be one measure of success of Lifelong Learning UK's current review of the careers guidance sector which comes at an opportune time. However, in order to be completely successful, any review and subsequent improvement in qualifications and training will need to be accompanied by more stability in terms of funding for services and a funding methodology that allows for adequate continuous professional development.

Also, it is simply not possible to provide the face-to-face *nextstep* service within easy reach of every customer. The evaluation report says that after an initial face-to-face meeting, advisers and customers should then be able to work together over the phone. Separately, *nextstep* East of England has found that referrals to and from the national telephone and web-based Careers Advice Service have been increasing, but this process involves picking up with a different adviser. This need to provide face-to-face and distance within the same series of interventions with a specific adviser is a different matter.

To help improve delivery capacity, the region's prime contractor for *nextstep*, SCCl has, with LSC funding, supported their sub-contractors in the up-skilling of advisers to NVQ level 4 in advice and guidance, thus enabling the advisers to take on the full range of *nextstep* work. They have also launched an innovative training scheme through which SCC has appointed 13 people from a diverse range of backgrounds as trainee advisers on fixed-term contracts. Trainees are placed with *nextstep* sub-contractors across the region and will undertake an NVQ in advice and guidance.

Although CAS and *nextstep* are both funded by the LSC the separate procurement arrangements for the face-to-face, on-line and telephone strands of the new aacs means there will be plenty more work to be done in harmonising the two services. But the growing achievement of both services, particularly during this period of speedy change in the face of severe economic challenges, is impressive. It will be essential to build on this, and learn the lesson from previous initiatives in this field where skills of management and provision from previous programmes were lost. Working partnerships and wider guidance networks are complex, and take resources and time to grow.

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The impact of the recession on the *nextstep* service

Julian Hamilton

Prior to August 2008 the great weight of the adult careers advisory service was directed towards helping those of low academic achievement. Access to the nextstep service was almost exclusively confined to those who had yet to achieve a level 2 qualification (5 GCSEs A*-C grade, or NVQ level 2).

However, the new *nextstep* contracts awarded by the Learning and Skills Council, which commenced in August 2008, took a step away from this limited eligibility by introducing the 'Universal' session. Although the main function of the Universal session was to provide signposting information rather than advice, as its name suggested, it was open and available to all, regardless of circumstances or academic achievement.

The main focus of the service though continued to be those with low academic achievement and for anyone who had yet to achieve a level 3 qualification (NVQ 3 or A levels) there was the 'Differentiated and Personalised Service (DPS)'. This was in-depth assistance that enabled an adviser to work with customers, via multiple interventions, on a 'journey' that only ended when they achieved their learning and/or work goals. With this level of support it was hoped that even hard to reach groups, such as the long term unemployed, lone parents, 50+ and those with disabilities, would find it possible to re-enter the labour market.

Unfortunately, no sooner had this new contract begun than the economy moved into recession and in the south west of England, month on month the number of redundancies and people claiming unemployment benefit rose, while the number of job vacancies fell.

Jobcentre Plus found themselves handling large numbers of fresh claimants, some of whom were experiencing redundancy and unemployment for the very first time. Because *nextstep* advisers had been tasked to help those with low qualifications levels, they had been working in the south west Jobcentres for quite some time, as low academic achievement was common amongst the long term unemployed. During this time they had been able to build good working relationships with Jobcentre advisers who had been referring claimants to them, mostly for help into employment initiatives. It was quite natural therefore that as the numbers of people signing on increased, so did the volume of referrals. Many of these had pressing financial commitments and were particularly anxious to get whatever help was available to assist them in a return to work as quickly as possible. This may well have been a contributory factor in this increase, but whatever the reason, by late 2008 there were so many referrals being made to *nextstep* South West by Jobcentre staff that some kind of working agreement needed to be implemented. The initial steps in this direction took the form of a pilot scheme that was trailed in a limited number of Jobcentres, under which all fresh claimants were referred automatically to an advice session with a *nextstep* adviser. The *nextstep* service was also to be invited in to assist at all redundancy interventions that Jobcentre Plus handled in the pilot areas.

The Learning and Skills Council also assisted in this joining up process by making it possible for *nextstep* advisers to help 18 and 19 year olds, (previously they could only see those of 20+), and by creating the new 'Universal Plus' advice session. Via the Universal Plus, anyone in receipt of benefit, who was facing redundancy or who had been made redundant, would be entitled to an in depth advice session with a *nextstep* adviser, regardless of previous academic achievement. These couple of amendments made it possible for *nextstep* advisers to assist virtually anyone that the Jobcentre cared to refer to them.

This pilot scheme ran in the selected Jobcentre offices from January to March, 2009. Feedback on the pilot from jobseekers, *nextstep* advisers and Jobcentre Plus was so unreservedly positive that its life was extended and the geographical spread expanded to cover almost all the Jobcentres across the south west region.

For those *nextstep* advisers who found themselves now working almost exclusively out of Jobcentres or in redundancy interventions, the job was a little different from what it had been just a few months back. Then they had been helping a relatively small number of customers over an extended period, via multiple interventions. They would have been helping customers with a range of additional issues that made it difficult for them to find employment and move off benefits without one to one, intensive assistance. Now they were responding to the very high level of demand for initial access to the service and seeing large numbers of people, usually for a single intervention, mostly with regard to CVs and job applications. Yet, while previously helping someone put a CV together might have been completed over a number of interventions, now customers generally required them as soon as possible, often so that they could get them out to potential employers or apply for a particular vacancy, with a closing date just a few days away. In some respects this required immediacy suited the adviser, as appointment slots in the Jobcentres and at redundancy interventions, ran at half hourly intervals. The adviser could not really afford an extended completion period as tomorrow would bring further appointments and undoubtedly more requests for the same type of assistance. To get everything that was required completed in time advisers often had to put in additional hours after the appointment day had ended, particularly if a customer was not able to type a CV up onto a computer and so needed this done for them.

Much the same need for immediacy was present in some other areas of assistance provided by advisers. In the past for example, retraining had been considered a viable and realistic option, even if it had meant spending a number of years at college before using the resultant qualifications to gain employment. Today, while many would have welcomed the opportunity to use a period of unemployment to retrain and change career direction, the thought of having to wait until the start of the academic year in September to begin a course, was generally off putting enough. The intrusive nature of many courses into the working week, making it difficult to reconcile both learning and full time employment, as well as the length of time it would take to get fully qualified, were usually enough to put many off the whole idea of retraining. A preferred option was usually to up-skill via an open learning course, many of which had flexible start dates and hours designed to suit the learner.

The difficulty was that as the number of unemployed rose, so did the numbers looking for such courses and by the early part of this year so many had signed up for what was available that the allocated funding was rapidly drying up. By May even Skills for Life numeracy and literacy qualifications, which had generally been under subscribed for as long as they had been available, had now run so far 'over profile' that there was a temporary freeze on any further inductions. For a period then *nextstep* advisers found themselves in a difficult position, as the range of possible referral and signposting options available began to wither away. Fortunately, the Learning and Skills Council was monitoring the situation and in early July was able to make more money available to help those looking to gain further qualifications. Of particular significance was the amount of money now directed at those who had been unemployed for six months or more. This was a new element in the assistance given to adult jobseekers as up until this time much of the additional help that had been available, especially when it came to paying for course fees, came as a result of either being in receipt of an income based benefit, or not yet having achieved a level 2 qualification. Unfortunately, many of the newly unemployed were well qualified and in receipt of 'Contributions Based Jobseekers Allowance'. This is not regarded as income based benefit, since entitlement relies on the number of national insurance stamps paid. In the past this group tended to fall between the stools and generally found funding for courses extremely difficult to acquire, so this shift in eligibility criteria was most welcome.

Referral to *nextstep* by the Jobcentre, of substantial numbers of well qualified, work ready and highly motivated jobseekers was yet another major change that advisers had to adapt to.

> **'Just a few months ago I was seeing predominantly long term, unemployed, BL3, (qualified below level 3), from postcode areas associated with hardship and social need. Many were aged 40 – 65, or were lone parents, having to adjust to the change in child age entitlement to Income Support. Now I am seeing people of all ages, postcodes and social groups, across the full range of academic levels. There is new category of professional person using the jobcentre service and redundancy support events, not seen before in seven years of workplace advice.' nextstep adviser in Cornwall**

This was a learning curve for both advisers and clients. For the last four years *nextstep* advisers had not seen many professional people with high qualification levels. While they were adept at helping to construct 'Skills CVs', (those emphasising a persons skills rather than the qualifications or employment history), they were perhaps somewhat less experienced when it came to advising on CVs, applications and employment opportunities for managerial positions. The same could be said with regards to advice on qualifications, where the expertise generally lay in advising on those at or below level 3, rather than at graduate or postgraduate level.

Many clients had been in a particular sector and/or with a particular company for most of their working life and now, in spite of good qualifications and employment histories, redundancy found them ill equipped to handle job search, CVs, and application forms in an online, email age where competition for jobs was fierce. While most were glad to get what help they could and were extremely pleased to hear that there was an organisation on hand that could give them free assistance with such things, there were limitations to what the service could provide and some clients found this difficult to appreciate.

> **'Those with qualifications above level 3 tend to have higher expectations of the service and often require more individual attention. They expect a professional relationship to develop where they can use the adviser as a consultant whom they can contact by phone or email on an ad hoc basis. A few clients expect a recruitment service where the adviser contacts them when a matching vacancy has been sought out. It's often difficult to explain to them that, because of funding limitations, the Universal Plus service provides for just one in-depth interview,' nextstep adviser in Cornwall**

The entrance of these well qualified, highly motivated jobseekers onto the market served to increase the competition for the jobs that were available. Even unskilled, low paid vacancies were receiving numerous applications and the employers were able to pick and choose. An applicant now needed to show that they had a relevant work history and possess all the appropriate training and certification that the particular vacancy required.

Those that could not were finding the level of competition extremely daunting. Those who had been out of work for some while, that lacked experience and had few qualifications were particularly vulnerable. These included the long term unemployed, lone parents, 50+ and those with disabilities. These are the very people that would have benefited from the intensive support provided by the 'customer journey' that was originally envisaged from the *nextstep* service, had it not been for the changes that the recession has brought about.

No one can doubt that the changes made to the *nextstep* service since the beginning of the new contract in August 2008 have been a success. In utilitarian terms they have certainly delivered the greatest good for the greatest number and the advent of the 'Flexible New Deal' programme, which has referral to a *nextstep* adviser written in, it would seem as though the close links between Jobcentre Plus and *nextstep* will continue into the foreseeable future.

It is a real credit to the *nextstep* service that it has been flexible enough to alter course and adapt so rapidly in response to the new role required of it. In doing so it has raised its profile to become far more of a universal service, helping a wider range of people than might have been envisaged some nine months ago. The real credit though must go to the individual advisers who have not only handled a steep learning curve with alacrity, but put in the extra effort and hours that have been required to bring assistance to those in need.

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Career Research and Development: the NICEC Journal **Winter 2009**

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NICEC
National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling

Career Research and Development: the NICEC Journal is published by CRAC: The Career Development Organisation.