

**IMPARTIALITY IN GUIDANCE PROVISION FOR
ADULTS: A SCOTTISH STUDY**

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Introduction

This paper is the report of a project commissioned by the Centre for Educational Policy and Management in the Open University, and conducted jointly by researchers at the Faculty of Education in the University of Strathclyde and the School of Education in the Open University. The research was carried out in Scotland through discussion and interviews with guidance practitioners working in a range of settings, including further education colleges, careers service and community settings. The aims of the research are shown below.

Research Aims

- to study the concept of impartiality in its application to adult guidance practice;
 - to investigate the extent to which impartiality is perceived to be relevant and applicable by guidance practitioners;
 - to examine the ways in which impartiality is embedded in the guidance practices of further education colleges, the community education service, the careers service and relevant voluntary sector organisations.
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Our decision to examine the issue of impartiality in adult guidance was prompted by a number of considerations. Guidance professionals themselves had drawn attention to the importance of impartiality as a basic principle governing their practice. The imperative of guidance workers giving clients information and advice which is impartial and not influenced, for example, by recruitment targets for courses, is stressed in statements of good practice and practitioners' charters. The counselling approach underpinning these statements and charters tends to be strongly 'nondirective'. Guidance and learning support services have developed

considerably in the last few years and these changes have been happening against a background of increasing competition between course providers and the use of more sophisticated marketing devices in the post-school education sector. This has raised concerns about jeopardising impartiality.

The provision of guidance and advice which is impartial and not unduly influenced by the needs of any particular providers to recruit students has depended largely on the development of guidance services which have emphasised communication and cooperation between agencies and workers. Prior to 1993, this was evident in Scotland in region-wide development plans for further and community education prepared by education authorities, which set out policies and standards for adult guidance practice. Guidance networks were established in some areas to encourage sharing of information and resources and ease referral of clients to the most appropriate resource, as well as to provide joint staff development initiatives.

In April 1993 further education (FE) colleges were placed outside the control of regional education authorities and joint planning and sharing amongst neighbouring establishments and between colleges and other provision for adults tended to become agency initiated activities, although in some areas a degree of central co-ordination has been maintained. More recently, structural changes caused by the reform of local government have resulted in difficulties in maintaining lines of communication, and there are uncertainties about the funding and co-ordination of guidance networks.

At the time of the research in the summer of 1995, community education staff in Scotland were learning about their employment arrangements within the new single-tier local authorities at the change-over in April 1996. To appreciate the sensitivities involved the reader may like to consider the experience of one group of staff from neighbouring teams in a 'sub-region' of Strathclyde. The workers were engaged jointly in designing adult guidance provision in accordance with performance indicators developed by the Scottish Office and had arranged a

related staff development programme. Meanwhile the separate teams found themselves falling within the boundaries of three different single-tier authorities. In one council community education would be allocated to the education department, alongside nursery and school provision, in another the service would be part of leisure and recreation, while in the third it would become an economic development function. In each authority the culture, management structure, and funding arrangements would be different, and the community workers were uncertain about the continued viability of their plans for adult guidance, as well as possibilities for future co-operation. As well as creating uncertainties within the organisational structures of guidance, these changes seem also to be unsettling the professional ethos of guidance workers, as expressed in concerns over the loss, potential or otherwise, of impartiality.

Guidance networks exist in part to foster co-operation between agencies, yet workers in the field are also concerned that the spirit of collaboration which encouraged the practice of impartial guidance might in future be more difficult to maintain as a result of market pressures. For example, guidance staff working in further education colleges might experience conflicts between their separate advisory and recruitment functions. Munn et al. (1993) found evidence of adults being recruited to inappropriate courses in further education colleges in Scotland, apparently unduly influenced by course managers' concerns to attract funding. They also concluded that: 'The diversity of opportunities can bewilder and confuse adult students so it is important that nationally and regionally co-ordinated services offering impartial guidance are available' (p.5). In a study of adult returners in Scottish secondary schools, Blair et al. (1994) detected commercial-type impediments to such cooperation: 'Some respondents saw their own institution as being in competition with others and therefore were unwilling to make contact or encourage their own students to find out about provision elsewhere' (p.48).

The professional culture of workers in the field has also been changing significantly

recently. Staff in FE colleges have been debating how guidance responsibilities should be shared between subject teachers and specialist counsellors. Though this is not a new issue, it does appear to be having a broader and more open hearing. Careers officers, long viewed as the independent, 'honest brokers' of the educational world, have been recruited to work in colleges and assigned to Local Enterprise Company projects, where their impartiality may not be quite so clearly defined. Community education workers are no longer just organisers of courses, but have found a wider role supporting adults in their first tentative steps in education, and are called on to give detailed impartial advice about progression opportunities and potential employment options.

Impartiality in guidance: the background

The practice of providing guidance to adults in connection with education, training and employment has developed considerably in the UK since its beginnings in the early 1980s, when some careers officers began to extend their work to include adults. The development of recognised standards of provision owes much to a number of major initiatives. The Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education (UDACE, 1986) described adult guidance as a process involving seven separate guidance activities (informing, advising, counselling, assessing, enabling, advocating and feeding back) and also argued that work with clients should be conducted within a framework of general principles. Guidance, UDACE said, should be client-centred, confidential, open to all adults, accessible, independent, publicised widely and able to contribute to the development of learning opportunities for the individual. Following this influential report the National Educational Guidance Initiative (NEGI) in England and Wales advised the then Department of Education and Science on the distribution of £ 1.5 million to local authorities for the development of independent guidance services based on the UDACE principles. Following the loss of government funding and the squeeze on local authority expenditure, by the mid 1990s most of these services had either closed or had been amalgamated.

In Scotland adult guidance initiatives appeared more slowly, but interest in developing the provision has been significant in the last five years. An Inspectorate report in 1992 concluded that: 'Considerable progress has been made in developing effective arrangements for student guidance' (SOED, 1992, p.36). However, the same document called for improved pre-entry guidance and better course induction, the development of policy statements on guidance, and the commitment of resources to improving facilities and staff training. Its authors advocated: '... the development of local guidance networks in which FE colleges

collaborate with careers service, schools, community education, employers and voluntary organisations to ensure that correct information and impartial advice is available at the multitude of points where clients seek assistance' (ibid., p.36). Since 1993 the Scottish Office-backed *Adult Guidance Initiative-Scotland* (AEGIS) has been responsible for raising awareness about good practice in guidance, and has produced policy documents and staff development materials on quality assurance and networking and held three national conferences. Researchers at the Scottish Council for Research in Education published four major studies in 1993-4, describing the experiences of adult returners, patterns of progression in post-school education and adult guidance practice. The introduction in 1993 of a postgraduate awards programme in adult guidance at the University of Strathclyde has also helped to stimulate the discussion and practice of adult guidance in Scotland. A research team based at Moray House Institute of Education in Edinburgh are currently studying guidance in Scottish higher education institutions and an HMI report on adult guidance is due to be published early in 1996.

Alongside the developing interest in evaluating the policies and practice of adult guidance has evolved a concern for the principles which underpin the work. For example, Edwards (1990) pointed out that different definitions of the same guidance activities imply different views of the role of the professional. Watts et al. (1988) define 'assessment' in a way which emphasises the professional skill of the adviser, while the UDACE stance appears to put learners more in charge of understanding their own skills, aptitudes and interests.

The term *impartiality* does not feature specifically in the UDACE principles, though it is clearly implied in the use of the terms *client-centred* and *independent*. The words 'impartial' and 'impartiality' - meaning 'unprejudiced' or 'fair' or 'equal treatment' feature in a number of important policy documents and research reports. For example, the Institute of Careers Guidance (ICG) and the National Association for Educational Guidance for Adults (NAEGA) have published a joint

statement known as *A Guidance Entitlement for Adults*, in which they declare that guidance should: '...be independent of the interests of any supporting agency or institution...', and, '...be delivered by trained advisers whose competence and impartiality can be proven...' (*ICG/NAEGA*, 1992). These principles have also been incorporated within the standards for practitioners developed recently by the Advice, Guidance, Counselling and Psychotherapy Lead Body. The Higher Education Quality Council has drawn attention to the complexity of relationships between impartial guidance, which they describe as 'learner-centred', and what they call 'provider-centred' admissions to higher education (HEQC, 1994).

In these documents the impression is given that impartiality in guidance is achieved where practitioners are concerned entirely with the expressed needs of the client making an enquiry or seeking help, and where the individual can expect to receive a service comparable to other clients. In this approach impartiality is viewed as being synonymous with 'client-centred' behaviour.

However, other factors may influence the advice given to adult enquirers. In a recent research report on adult guidance in Scotland, Lowden and Powney (1993) identified a policy issue arising in one of their case studies, a regional adult guidance unit, where, they observed: '...advocacy can cause tensions with education providers who may be funded on the basis of student numbers and therefore place priority on getting students into courses and sometimes overlook whether courses suit individuals' needs.' (p.49). The same study attempted to gauge clients' perceptions of providers' qualities. One of the qualities checked was the ability to provide 'unbiased' guidance, which 87% of the sample of 138 students thought applied to their guidance provider. There is an apparent contradiction in these two findings, unexplained in the report. However, companion research by Blair et al. (1993) offers one possible explanation. They comment that: 'Although 34 respondents reported that they were satisfied with the guidance they had received, many of these never received any help other than a prospectus through the mail or a chat with the switchboard. Yet for most adults,

this was enough, because they had neither expected more nor were aware that anything else might be available' (p.54). The implication of this observation is that adults could be recruited into courses without a form of pre-entry guidance which encouraged them to clarify their educational needs and then evaluate the provision.

An important source of guidance for adults contemplating a return to formal education, or during their course, is the help they receive from friends and relatives. Blair et al. (1993) found this was the only source of guidance for over half the respondents in their study, and offer a number of reasons for this, including the fact that adults need to feel they can trust their adviser. The researchers point out that trusted friends or family can offer guidance knowing a great deal about the prospective student. Few friends or relatives will have wide knowledge of the educational opportunities available, however, which hints at another potentially important aspect of impartiality - the extent to which the guidance offered by professional guidance workers is complete and wide-ranging.

These two features of impartiality, client-centredness and completeness of information may be to some extent in conflict. This is best illustrated by the distinction between the humanistic model of guidance which emphasises the worker's role in helping the client to understand his or her needs and an information-processing model which views guidance as the provision of information from which rational choices are made. In the latter approach the focus may be more on the information and the increasingly sophisticated technology used to access it, and less on the client, or on the interaction between client and guidance worker. This may well also reflect the differences in the perceptions of what is required from guidance among clients and professional workers - the former with a more pragmatic expectation than the latter.

The research quoted here is broadly supportive of the suggestion that impartiality is a principle which guidance providers aspire to, but which may be compromised

by the political, economic and institutional culture within which services operate, as well as by poorly developed networks and inadequately trained staff. All these reports are cautious in their comments about impartiality, however, since this was not the central focus of their researches. The present authors felt there was clearly a need to explore the concept in considerably greater depth, to report on how it is understood by practitioners, and more particularly to understand what factors influence the extent to which it is possible, and maybe even desirable, for guidance practitioners to provide an impartial service to clients.

Method

At the core of this research is the concern to understand more fully the perceptions of practitioners concerning the concept of impartiality and its practice within (principally) the adult guidance context. Our own experience and work in a range of settings with guidance practitioners led us to the belief that we could not assume a common understanding of the notion of impartiality. In addition, we suspected that practitioners, from a range of organisational settings and reflecting differing agency philosophies and professional training, would have varying perspectives of impartiality, and that these differences would, in turn, influence guidance practice.

Accordingly we wanted to get at the meanings which practitioners place upon their day to day experiences with adults in guidance contexts, and to understand the constraints and opportunities upon impartial behaviour within different agencies and those which derive from personal-professional belief systems and exposure to professional training. Essentially we needed to know how guidance practitioners conceive of and define impartiality. Since we could not assume a single shared definition of impartiality we chose methods which would allow us to uncover the range of meanings which influence practice. Ethnographic approaches are extremely valuable in providing rich data in relation to the meanings respondents ascribe to their everyday beliefs and organisational behaviour, though of course there are dangers in generalising the research outcomes (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983).

Using the conceptual analysis methods popularised by Wilson (1963) the researchers conducted an initial brainstorm around the notion of impartiality and related concepts. We shared views about instances of guidance which would seem to qualify as impartial and those which would not. So, for example, using the client-centred definition of impartiality, a college-based guidance worker who

advised an enquirer that the course he was interested in could also be studied in neighbouring schools, a competitor college and by distance learning with the Open College, would be offering impartial guidance. Encouraging a 35 year old woman to consider courses in caring entirely on the basis of her experience in raising her own children, would be to deny her individuality and broader interests. Our discussions helped us to identify tentative 'impartiality variables', factors which could determine the extent to which adult guidance might be perceived to be impartial. These are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: A tentative model of impartiality variables

Variables	Illustrative Example
Social/political	Extent of competition between providers
Organisational	Whether or not an agency is in a 'guidance network'
Worker-related	Influence of training and professional ideology
Client-related	The extent of the client's assertiveness
Implementation-related	Moving from recognising impartiality as a worthy principle to active practice by, say, referring to other agencies

We used the Focus Group method (Morgan, 1990) in order to conduct an initial survey of the ideas of practitioners relating to impartiality and contextual factors which limit or facilitate impartial behaviour. Guidance practitioners from a broad range of guidance settings were invited to join the researchers for a morning of discussion on the topic of 'Impartiality in Adult Guidance'. These were: two further education lecturers with extensive guidance responsibilities; two former careers officers now working in further education colleges; two community education workers; a careers officer; a guidance worker employed by a private company; and two workers from different guidance networks. Our collaborators were known to us either through Scottish guidance networks or because they were registered students on the University of Strathclyde's postgraduate awards programme in adult guidance. No attempt was made to achieve 'representation' in this sample (all were within easy travelling distance of the researchers' location in the west end of Glasgow), but we were careful to ensure typicality through the choice of work settings from which collaborators were drawn.

The wide-ranging discussion produced a number of identifiable themes, and these are summarised in the box below.

Themes Identified

- the conflict in FE colleges between written commitments to client - centredness and pressures to satisfy admissions targets or to hold on to good students and recruit them for higher level courses;
 - the overlap between guidance and marketing roles;
 - the blurred distinction between guidance and selection;
 - equality of treatment;
 - the variable extent to which providers get involved in guidance networks and other forms of co-operation;
 - the widely different perceptions of guidance held by managers;
 - differential access to databases and other detailed information sources;
 - the different experiences of practitioners working in different contexts (for example, in community education courses normally arise in response to local demands, and therefore there is not normally a pressure to get 'bums on seats').
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As a result of the discussion group, we wanted to follow up these issues in more detail, as well as explore the different perceptions of impartiality held by practitioners. We decided to do this by conducting a number of lengthy individual interviews. We identified a pool of potential interviewees, selected because of their substantial knowledge of the adult guidance context - some of whom had participated in the focus group seminar - and finally conducted interviews with twelve practitioners. Three of the interviewees worked in separate further education colleges (two guidance managers and one departmental guidance adviser), four were staff from community education settings, and two were careers officers with adult guidance responsibilities. We also interviewed an organiser with a voluntary sector adult education project, a Citizen's Advice Bureau manager and

a guidance worker from a Local Enterprise Company. We did not include amongst our interviewees anyone from a secondary school with adult students or from a higher education establishment, simply because our aim was less to ensure representation of all agencies involved in guidance provision, than to reach a broad group of adult guidance practitioners. Our respondents came from different parts of Scotland, again not to ensure complete geographical representation, but to avoid being unduly influenced by the local characteristics of one area.

Interviews typically lasted for 45-60 minutes and were tape-recorded to avoid the distractions associated with note-taking. Respondents were promised that neither they nor their agencies would be identified in subsequent reports of the findings. We devised a standard format (Appendix 1) and used semi-structured interviews for ease of comparison of results between the three interviewers. The focus group took place in the summer term of 1995, while the fieldwork interviews were conducted during the summer and early autumn of 1995.

The themes which emerged for us as we considered the various discussions with practitioners are outlined in the next section.

Emerging Issues

The focus group seminar, interviews and a range of more informal discussions with practitioners attending courses and conferences have helped us to identify a number of separate issues, or observations, which seem to offer important clues in understanding the tensions arising for practitioners as a result of the interplay of professional values, institutional imperatives and practical realities. These nine issues, listed in full in the box below, are then discussed more fully in the following section.

1. Impartiality has different meaning for different guidance workers and those operating in different contexts.
2. The definition of impartiality depends, to some extent, on a perception of other providers being partial.
3. Guidance workers may feel torn between their personal beliefs about what constitutes impartial guidance and the expectations of the organisation which employs them. Also, within institutions more junior guidance staff - and guidance specialists in general - may not feel in a strong position to argue in favour of the importance of impartial behaviour, particularly if this includes providing information about competitor institutions, or advising students to consider other options before making decisions about courses.
4. Guidance agencies may fall short of their obligations to behave impartially towards clients for a variety of reasons, including deliberate action (protectionism), practical constraints (e.g. inadequate time and resources), and lack of awareness or limited knowledge (e.g. failure to refer).
5. Agencies which do not also offer education or training opportunities seem to perceive fewer conflicts in relation to giving impartial guidance.
6. Guidance which is clinically impartial, objective and free from opinion may not always be perceived by clients to be in their best interests, and, indeed, adults may expect a more directive approach from professional advisers.

7. Clients for pre-entry guidance often arrive having previously gained highly subjective, partial information from personal contacts.
8. Unequal power relationships between guidance worker and client may militate against impartial behaviour.
9. The idea of impartiality as fairness introduces the concern for equality, or treating all clients the same, or at least providing the same opportunities to every adult seeking guidance.

Issue 1: Impartiality has different meaning for different guidance workers and those operating in different contexts.

When asked about their understanding of the concept of impartiality, most of our interviewees referred to ideals commonly listed in guidance charters and mission statements. Examples of these are: helping people to reach informed decisions about their future, based on gathering together information about a range of options; giving unbiased information which is not linked to the needs of one provider or the worker's own livelihood; behaving in a client-centred manner so that the adult's best interests are considered. One of our careers officer respondents described her work as 'trying to guide a client through all the aspects and avenues'. In her guidance work with clients she aimed: '... to try and raise the questions for them in the sense of helping themselves look at issues, all brought together by helping that person make their own decision without ourselves colouring it.'

Probing the concept further with our subjects revealed differences in the perceived meaning of impartiality, which are associated with the different contexts in which guidance is offered. The careers officers, for example, tended to hold a position in which impartiality is believed to follow from three characteristics inherent in their service: firstly, they are not direct providers of courses or jobs and therefore have no recruitment targets to meet; secondly, they have access to very comprehensive resource bases of information about occupations and educational opportunities; and, thirdly, they have typically experienced training which emphasises the non-directive or person-centred approach in working with clients. In practice there are complicating factors which spoil this rather neat view of impartial guidance. Despite having access to extensive information, inevitably careers officers know more about some opportunities than others, or have formed favourable views from their relationships with one provider compared to another, and these 'hidden persuaders' are likely to influence - however unwittingly - the guidance they give.

Community education workers and those working in voluntary adult education and guidance projects have a lot in common. In the main, guidance is given in the context of helping adult returners to develop personal confidence and basic skills, and then to move on, either to other community-based programmes, or to university or college courses. These workers tended to speak about impartiality in terms of 'empowering' adults to evaluate information from a range of different sources. Often this is a gradual process, developing out of an educational experience itself. 'You are working with them so that they are enabled to make the choices or come to the decisions that will suit them for their future direction.' Community education workers typically describe the satisfaction which comes from ideas about progression or the suitability of particular courses of action arising naturally as a result of participation - guidance embedded within a programme, rather than a 'bolt-on' extra. They also confess to their fears about not being able to provide adequate information, and being extremely limited in the amount of time they can give to individual participants to help them make sense of their current studies or consider further educational and vocational options.

Guidance staff in further education colleges were most likely to talk to us about factors which limit their ability to give completely impartial advice. All our FE interviewees were aware of pressure to fill courses: 'We are selling our courses, that's the dilemma', as one put it. The distinction between *internal* and *external* impartiality arose in these discussions. College staff striving for good practice in guidance could guarantee to give factual information about competing courses *within* their college, and to treat all students with the same degree of respect, but loyalty to the employing institution makes it difficult, or unreasonable, to expect staff to recommend competitors' courses, or to encourage potential students to consider other options - at least at the pre-entry stage. Our respondents were not aware of direct injunctions from college senior managers to avoid mentioning courses available elsewhere. It is simply that an assumption is made when an enquirer asks about a particular course, or for details of entry requirements for a profession or line of work, that there is a predetermined interest in following an appropriate

course in that college. The support materials will tend to be the prospectus and course information; for the guidance worker's own college.

We identified two situations when it appears to be easier for college staff to be more impartial in the sense of giving information about opportunities available elsewhere. Firstly, if it emerges that an enquirer is seeking a course not available in the guidance worker's own college, then other options could be legitimately raised. Secondly, at the pre-exit stage a range of progression opportunities could be discussed. However, the increasing tendency to provide higher level courses in the further education sector means colleges understandably wish to develop an internal market and encourage students to remain and progress within their current institution.

Issue 2: The definition of impartiality depends, to some extent, on a perception of other providers being partial.

The issue emerging here is closely related to the professional identities of workers coming from different work settings and training backgrounds. Careers officers we spoke to tended to take a pride in their service as representing the 'honest brokers' the people with 'no axe to grind', who could more easily 'put the client first.' The same was true, to a lesser extent, of community education staff who are proud of their important role in general confidence-building and awareness-raising with adults returning to education for the first time. In the eyes of these respondents, the easily identified villains of the piece were further education college staff, who were perceived as being interested only, or mainly, in 'bums on seats', and who were therefore particularly likely to want to steer enquirers in the direction of their own courses, even if a more suitable alternative was available elsewhere.

Both FE and non-FE respondents spoke to us about the effects of deliberate marketing by colleges, for example, the use of radio advertising aimed at recruiting students for particular courses; these approaches may be more influential to prospective students than the careful ministrations of trained guidance workers,

because the information they give is accessible and immediate. Respondents who were aware of recent changes in FE funding policies which reward student retention, were still able to produce folk tales of adult clients being talked into courses whose suitability for them was in doubt. That this was not entirely myth was borne out by some of the further education respondents who reported incidents where FE staff who were not guidance specialists (e.g. heads of subject departments) were vigorously recruiting students into their own departments. And FE guidance staff themselves could relate experiences of their own attempts to offer an impartial service being frustrated by colleagues' overriding concern with recruitment. This rather contradicts our earlier observation that staff were not aware of direct instructions from senior managers to operate partially. Nevertheless, this contradiction appears to exist in reality within the FE sector, indicative of the development of an implicit culture of partial behaviour in the absence of explicit managerial dictat.

Interviewed separately, almost all of our respondents could provide 'horror stories' of partial advice by others motivated by concerns other than the best interests of the client. For example, a careers officer asked to describe an instance of non-impartial guidance, readily offered the example of a student approaching a college with an interest in a course which turned out to be unavailable, and then being given information about completely different courses which were available in that college. It would therefore appear that practitioners often define their own practices in relation to the perceived partiality of guidance provided elsewhere. This provides the possibility for a certain lack of critical reflectivity in relation to their own practices and, on occasions, a certain moral grandstanding.

However, our experience of joint training in adult guidance with workers from different settings is that there comes a dawning awareness that no one group can justifiably claim the moral high ground in relation to impartiality. As one of our interviewees put it: '...you might have very laudable ethics...but it's only as impartial as the information you have, so you might just have a very incomplete picture and

be offering it impartially, but it's not the full picture.' This awareness of the guidance worker's limitations appears to be a necessary health warning: only by acknowledging such limitations can guidance workers provide a completely honest service.

Issue 3: Guidance workers may feel torn between their personal beliefs about what constitutes impartial guidance and the expectations of the organisation which employs them. Also, within institutions more junior guidance staff and guidance specialists in general - may not feel in a strong position to argue in favour of the importance of impartial behaviour, particularly if this includes providing information about competitor institutions, or advising students to consider other options before making decisions about courses.

Several writers have referred to the stresses caused by 'cognitive dissonance' (Festinger, 1957) when an individual has to reconcile two apparently contradictory sets of beliefs. There was clear evidence of these stresses in the responses of some of the interviewees, who felt a professional obligation - as a result of training - to be 'client-centred', while working within an organisation with different priorities. Nowhere was this more marked than in the comments of one member of the focus group, a qualified careers officer now employed within the information centre of a further education college. Her perception of her situation was that she felt obliged to direct enquirers to the best available educational provision, while being aware that her employers assumed that her function was to locate students into the most appropriate course *within that college*. While this did not always represent a conflict, it did so sufficiently often to cause considerable negative feelings about the college and about her situation.

Experienced careers officers who move to employment in FE colleges are likely to retain their external professional links with former colleagues and remain active in their professional associations. In one area arrangements have been made to set up an informal grouping of careers officers employed in FE colleges to help support each other. These links are likely to be particularly important in providing support where there are tensions between adult guidance staff and

departmentally-based course recruiters. Similar support comes from formal guidance networks, where they exist, and we have noticed informal cross-sectoral support developing as a by-product of attendance on the University of Strathclyde's adult guidance courses.

The experience of cognitive dissonance appears to depend to some extent on the guidance worker's position within either the formal or informal power structure of the organisation. Where guidance workers are relatively junior members of staff, or where they have few allies in more powerful positions, they seem likely to experience more difficulties in operating impartially. Conversely, the support of senior management is perceived by guidance workers as a crucial determinant of good guidance practice - in which impartiality is seen to feature.

Issue 4: Guidance agencies may fall short of their obligations to behave impartially towards clients for a variety of reasons, including deliberate action (protectionism), practical constraints (e.g. inadequate time and resources), and lack of awareness or limited knowledge (e.g. failure to refer).

There may be nothing illegitimate *per se* in college managers expecting guidance staff

to supply information only about courses in their own colleges. Also, it could be reasonably argued that to fulfil certain performance indicators community education workers or staff of training organisations may feel under pressure to meet targets or fulfil quotas by encouraging clients towards their own provision. In fact our fieldwork uncovered a definite climate of concern within FE colleges about the effect of student recruitment on staffing. Some colleges had made staff redundant, and our interviewees were acutely aware that a good guidance service can give a prospective student a favourable impression of the institution. In this respect they were effectively partners in a marketing exercise.

There is no necessary relationship between lack of resources and impartial guidance. However, a guidance worker pressed for time may find this a restriction

in providing a complete service. These demands were felt most by lecturers and community education workers for whom guidance is one aspect of a multiplicity of roles. They voiced concerns about not being impartial in the sense that they provided guidance 'on the hoof', rather than in a more considered, planned fashion.

It is clearly unrealistic to expect guidance staff employed by one education or training provider to carry equal supplies of information, or to be personally as well informed about the courses offered by competitor organisations. This is not to say that a full knowledge base is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for impartial guidance. While it helps to know something about opportunities outwith one's own organisation, that wider knowledge will not guarantee impartiality or client-centredness in the absence of an organisational agreement about the appropriateness of sharing that knowledge with the client. Networking has an important part to play, and referral is rightly signalled as a key professional competence of guidance staff. But referral is much more likely to occur in those situations where guidance workers know that their own organisation has nothing to offer the client, and hence has nothing to lose by onward referral.

A consideration here is the influence of staff training. All of our interviewees were trained to some extent in adult guidance, and most were either undertaking or had completed advanced training. We collected anecdotal evidence of poor or incomplete guidance where workers had no specialist training, yet it is much too simplistic to suggest that partial guidance is related, in whole or part, to a lack of training. Trained workers know that impartiality is a principle which guidance professionals regard as important, however that knowledge in itself cannot protect against students being recruited onto courses without being encouraged to consider alternative options. There is a persuasive argument to the effect that FE colleges will give impartial guidance where it is in their interests to do so. This could come about by the 'stick' of an external audit of guidance services by an HMI or Scottish Quality Management System (SQMS) assessor - and possession

of quality kite-marks appear to be increasingly prized by college managers - or by the 'carrot' of reducing drop-out as a result of more sophisticated recruitment procedures.

Issue 5: Agencies which do not also offer other education or training opportunities seem to perceive fewer conflicts in relation to giving impartial guidance.

There are operational differences between the different sectors within which guidance staff work, which affect the ways in which impartiality is perceived and defined. One consequence of this is that the extent to which impartiality is seen as problematic also varies between sectors. The responses we received from careers officers in particular suggested that they felt that, almost by definition, their practice was impartial, a view which we discussed earlier in *Issue 2*. This confidence could be related to their professional training and the occupational socialisation which followed, but also to more tangible factors such as the generous supply of information at their disposal and the fact that they were not usually themselves providers of education or training.

In reality, of course, careers officers quite properly 'filter' or 'select' the information they offer to clients, and this selection process is based on judgements both about the opportunities and about the clients. This in turn raises questions about the basis of this selection, and the importance of making explicit the criteria used in the selection process - questions about the assessment process which were beyond the scope of this investigation.

One respondent, working in a voluntary sector agency, described how she recommended courses in a particular college, because she had received good feedback from past clients and furthermore she had invested time in developing close professional relationships with college staff. She was very aware that this preferment ran counter to values she considered important - and indeed differed from the general advice given to prospective students to 'shop around' and

evaluate a range of possibilities - but rationalised this tension on the basis that adult learners benefited from her good relations with the college. Many such preferential arrangements exist, where it is almost understood that adult learners completing a community-based course who wish to progress will enrol on courses in the local college. Further, it is only in the larger urban areas that there is any real choice of provider for many adult returners who need to study close to their domestic commitments. It is therefore not so straightforward as might have been thought, that agencies not providing learning opportunities necessarily are more impartial in the guidance they give.

Issue 6: Guidance which is clinically impartial, objective and free from opinion may not always be perceived by clients as being in their best interests, and, indeed, adults may expect a more judgmental approach from professional advisers.

Several respondents argued that impartial guidance was not necessarily what the client either expected or wanted. If, for example, clients choose to visit a particular further education college to seek information and advice about courses of study, they are unlikely to expect to be given information about courses on offer at a different college a few miles away. One respondent used the analogy of the car showroom. You don't turn up at a Volkswagen dealer expecting guidance about buying a Ford. According to this viewpoint, supplying 'impartial' guidance has the potential for both puzzling and irritating the client enquirer.

The same point was made by the manager of a Citizens' Advice Bureau office in a small town. A fairly regular request by clients was for legal advice - specifically for the name of a 'good lawyer', to deal with, let's say, a custody dispute. If there are seven legal firms practising in this town, the CAB office cannot afford to be seen to be favouring one practice over another, and so is obliged to frustrate the client's request for information about which firm is the 'best' one to deal with custody cases.

The over-simplified equation of 'impartiality' with 'client-centredness', in other words, cannot really be sustained. Providing the most beneficial service to the client may well involve being 'partial' - such partiality being based on the guidance practitioner's experience and understanding of the relative strengths and weaknesses of different service providers. A guidance worker in an FE college described a situation involving his own son who had obtained an HND place in a college; the young person consulted a careers officer, who with breathtaking directiveness told him he should cancel the place and take time out to think more deeply about his future. The parent was grateful, knowing that his son was uncertain about his choice. The worker was certainly directive, probably partial, but arguably client-centred. In other words the neutrality implied by a non-directive approach to adult guidance is often the method of choice, but the danger is the client may be unprotected against clever marketing by course providers, and handicapped by lack of clarity about their own interests and motivations.

One interviewee, a community education worker, argued she was being impartial when she was challenging clients to consider raising their aspirations and look at a wider range of opportunities. There are risks, of course, for professionals stepping outside the role of detached 'counsellors', such as making incorrect assumptions about the client's needs, or basing guidance on out of date information about particular courses, service providers or employment opportunities. However, the expectations of the client may not be in accord with views of what constitutes good practice in guidance.

Issue 7: Clients for pre-entry guidance often arrive having previously gained highly subjective, partial information from personal contacts.

One of our interviewees, a careers officer, commented: 'People may come in to speak to us and they have a tunnel vision approach to the options... based on the media experience, what other people tell them... and they are very much influenced by this. People say, someone has told me I should do this, what do you think about that? Until people know the range of options open to them then they

cannot make informed decisions - they'll make decisions based on imperfect information.'

The guidance workers we interviewed rarely meet clients who are totally devoid of any preconceptions about the opportunities open to them. The encounter with a guidance worker commonly takes place a reasonable distance along a path which may have begun with vague feelings that life had more to offer, had progressed through discussions with family and friends, and may even have involved earlier encounters with other agencies or organisations. In these circumstances, it is unlikely that guidance workers will give equal weight to all the options available. Rather they may want to encourage the client to consider alternative options to those already identified, in order to ensure that the decisions eventually taken are based on an adequate supply of information and a full understanding of pros and cons. In other words, they are partial in their guidance as a counter-balance to the partial information previously available to the client.

It would be dangerous, however, for adult guidance workers to assume that information from family, friends, the media and press are necessarily partial and possibly prejudiced, while their own approach is totally impartial. The bind is that friends and family have a better prospect of knowing the advice-seeker well. Careers officers and pre-entry guidance staff in colleges are disadvantaged by not knowing the client well and depending on information often given during a single interview. However, careers officers routinely follow up interviews with written summaries, which give the possibility of including suggestions and information based on further consideration or research. Community education workers and other on-programme guidance staff are in a position to develop relationships with students, which can be very helpful in tailoring guidance to individual needs.

Many of our respondents spoke about concerns about 'leading' or unduly influencing clients in a particular direction. Their unease seems to be consistent with a concern to operate in a client-centred way, by first building some

relationship with an individual and undertaking subsequent guidance activities within the context of better understanding of the client's needs and interests. FE lecturers advising students they also teach and community education workers were more likely to speak of the satisfaction that this deeper knowledge of the person could bring to their guidance work. Careers officers spoke about the pressure to come to some conclusions within the time constraints of one interview, particularly as they were working to targets expressed in terms of the number of clients seen within a particular time frame. Clients could be offered additional interviews without difficulty, but this is not quite the same as developing a working relationship within the context of adult learning.

Issue 8: Unequal power relationships between guidance worker and client may militate against impartial behaviour.

There are two considerations which need to be examined here. Firstly, there is the extent to which a degree of equality in the contractual relationship between lecturer/worker and adult learner is necessary to offer a good guidance service. One view of impartiality is that it involves a certain objectivity achieved by careful attention to the facts available from a client's referral documentation and by interview, and also the possible use of psychometric tests. However, this view of the worker seems to put the professional in a position of power, directing the transaction by requesting personal information, issuing forms to be completed, structuring the interview and defining the guidance process. Concerns about this kind of inequality between the worker and client were raised by interviewees from community education settings, who spoke of the importance of guidance becoming an integral part of the tutorial relationship, rather than a 'tagged-on' extra. Guidance, in this sense, is itself an educative process.

Secondly, there is the question of we might call 'expert knowledge', the combination of considerable experience in providing guidance to adults in vocational and education aspects of their lives, and with access to extensive resources and local information and contacts. Perhaps adults are not naive about

the 'knowledge is power' dimension, but expect professionals to be considerably more knowledgeable than themselves. 'If they have poor decision-making skills, then they really want you to narrow the options for them.' The issue then reduces to one of the level of confidence which a client has in knowing his or her own wishes, expressing these clearly and guarding against being 'nudged' in a particular direction due to the limited range of opportunity structures suggested to them.

Issue 9: The idea of impartiality as fairness introduces the concern for equality, or treating all clients the same, or at least providing the same opportunities to every adult seeking guidance.

Most respondents, when invited to discuss impartiality, assumed that the issue was about being impartial between *providers* - of jobs, education or training. A second relevant aspect of impartiality, however, concerns the perceived obligation to be impartial between *clients* - not to discriminate between them in the delivery of the guidance service. With hindsight, it is difficult to understand why this aspect should have received so little attention. Was it because it was somehow taken for granted that professional guidance staff don't discriminate? One interviewee began the discussion by stressing the importance of impartiality between clients. She worked for an organisation employing large numbers of volunteer advice workers, and a major element in the induction training of these volunteers was concerned with the need to overcome prejudices and to attempt to provide equal treatment for all clients. If the job of the guidance worker is seen as being the 'matching' of clients with opportunities and vice versa, then *both* aspects of impartiality appear to be equally important. One should approach both clients and opportunities without prejudice. 'It's not about treating people the same. People don't need to be treated the same; they don't want to be treated the same.' In other words, to provide fair and equal guidance may involve treating people differently to take account of issues such as class, gender, race and ability.

Another interviewee, a careers officer, initially said that an example of partial

guidance was not treating everyone the same, then very quickly reviewed this position, acknowledging that this approach risks perpetuating stereotypes. She gave an example of a guidance interview with a black woman who suffered from epilepsy. With hindsight she realised her care to avoid discussing the woman's colour avoided an important aspect of that client's identity. 'I did that person a disservice. I wouldn't do it again. I would deal with it.'

Discussion

In this section we will discuss a number of general questions which exploratory interviews with adult guidance practitioners have raised for us.

In our early talks with practitioners we uncovered considerable fears about the supposedly deleterious impact of the introduction of marketing approaches within further education following 'incorporation' of individual colleges. These fears were expressed by college guidance practitioners who were concerned that their ability to remain relatively independent of funding and recruitment considerations when seeing prospective or progressing students might be threatened. They were also expressed by careers officers and community education staff, often highly critical of FE colleges for supposedly putting recruitment before individual needs. Subsequent discussions indicate, not surprisingly, that this is a rather complex issue. One effect of a more market-led approach is that colleges inevitably tailor their portfolio of courses to match market demand. In one sense this is liberating - and also exactly what community educators say they do - meeting expressed local needs. On the other hand courses have to be cost-effective and this may have the effect of narrowing the choice of provision, and thus limiting the extent to which a full range of local needs can be met. This might be less of a problem in urban areas where competitor colleges can agree to a certain amount of specialisation, though this of course would wipe out any advantages for potential students in having a choice of provider.

Colleges now have control over their own finances, but they also have responsibilities to their employees and to the wider community to remain viable. In terms of provision of a service to students there have been both gains and losses. Education professionals tend to speak of marketing pejoratively, but some of our contacts have pointed out that reaching out more effectively to students through

advertising on local radio and paying careful attention to the design of course information and offering permanently staffed drop-in advice centres can help to make colleges more 'client-centred', one definition of impartial guidance. One of our collaborators spoke about a call to the college information centre from a secondary school teacher seeking information on behalf of a pupil. The course required was not available in the college, but the adviser was able to give details of provision elsewhere. The teacher formed a good impression of our interviewee's college and if image is an effective marketing tool, then this act of 'referral' could help to attract other school leavers in the long run. Impartial guidance is not necessarily altruistic behaviour!

An interesting question is whether the guidance worker would have felt free to point out alternative provision if the required course had been available in her college, or if she had evidence the course was poor: 'You know in that department they will be really looked after, whereas in another department it will be sink or swim.' Guidance workers appear to be divided on the former situation, reflecting different working environments, but we found no-one who would directly advise a client against a course in the latter circumstance. This apparent dissonance was either rationalised on the grounds that the worker's view might be prejudiced or incomplete, or that potential students should in any case ask the right questions and make up their own minds.

Careers officers and other adult guidance workers face similar difficulties when they are aware of differences in quality between providers of education and training. A common response is to brief the client on how to interrogate the education/training provider. One interviewee said he might use this form of words: 'All I can suggest to you is that you go and ask some searching questions, like, "What am I getting for my money? What happened to the last batch of trainees that went through that process? Can you name one organisation that respects the bit of paper you get at the end of the course?"' It is doubtful whether the experience of conflicts between workers' responsibilities to clients and loyalty to their employers

is an entirely new situation.

Another question relates to the apparent demand for impartial guidance. Impartiality is trumpeted as an important principle in guidance charters; it is clearly important to workers, but is it important to clients? The answer would appear to be that it depends on the circumstances. As we outlined in our discussion of *Issue 2*, the notion of impartiality as a crucial principle of adult guidance is sustained by workers being able to point to its absence in the practice of other agencies. This cannot be an entirely satisfactory justification. The notion of impartiality as client-centredness is seen in its most positive expression where community workers engage in a partnership with clients to explore options as part of a learning exercise. However, the call for FE colleges to provide this kind of impartial service in their advice centres may be both unrealistic and misplaced in its assumption of client vulnerability. It is surely unlikely that clients walking into a college expect to receive information about courses elsewhere. Indeed that may produce puzzlement: 'Sometimes if you start saying, "Oh, you can do that elsewhere," they think you're not interested in them, or that you're saying, "Oh you're not suitable for college."' Impartiality in particular settings may therefore work against the clients' expectations and interests.

On the notion of impartiality as fairness, course providers have an arguable right to expect that information about courses in different institutions are given equal prominence, leaving potential students to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages attached to each option. As we discovered, some projects develop preferential relationships with a particular provider, giving considerable advantages to adult learners, but also limiting choice and denying potential students to other institutions. In reality, however, these monopoly situations often occur where there is only one local provider and travel to another would be impractical for most clients. In this case impartiality is less of an issue.

What is unquestionably realistic, however, in all situations, is the client's right to

equality of treatment. Adult guidance workers collectively tend to be highly committed to a person-centred approach to their work. The importance of valuing clients is a central tenet of their professional identity. Nevertheless both clients and workers are affected by cultural assumptions and stereotypes, and all workers have feelings and are judgmental to some extent. Our impression is that guidance work generally *is* benefiting from increased awareness of equal opportunities and considerable efforts in associated staff development.

The suggestion made at the start of our investigation was that the extent to which guidance was perceived as impartial depended on a range of variables. These variables were categorised as social/political, organisational, worker-related, client-related and implementation-related. The issues identified in this study can be related to these variables in the following way.

Social/political variables identified in the course of interviews include two related aspects of currently dominant ideology. These are, firstly, the emphasis on competition between providers of education, training and guidance services, and, secondly, the corresponding encouragement to clients of these services to define themselves as customers or consumers, shopping around between various service providers. The first emphasis is embodied in the incorporation of further education colleges and the removal of careers services from local authority control, while the second aspect shows in political support for student charters and voucher schemes. Among our interviewees, guidance staff in colleges were probably the most aware of, and most affected by, these developments, but almost everyone we spoke to seemed conscious both of the range of players now operating in the guidance field, and of the consequent atmosphere of uncertainty surrounding the future of their own particular service.

Organisational variables which emerged in the study included the availability or accessibility within the organisation of information about education and training opportunities. Careers officers, for example, appeared to feel that an important

safeguard of their impartiality lay in a plentiful supply of college and university prospectuses and details of local training programmes. Active membership of a guidance network or adult education forum was also highlighted as a factor which encouraged impartial guidance. However, it was also clear that some aspects of an organisation could be perceived as operating against impartiality. College-based workers described a situation at the pre-entry guidance stage in which their own efforts to be impartial were effectively negated by subject departments engaging in recruitment at all costs. Pressure of time - due to staffing restrictions - was also seen by some of our interviewees as inhibiting impartial practice.

Worker-related variables were evident throughout this study, particularly in respect of professional ideologies and ethical codes. All of our interviewees were at least conscious of what were perceived to be obligations on their part towards their clients. To what extent these perceptions resulted from professional training or from the culture of their work was outside the scope of this study. However, notions of 'empowerment', 'client-centredness', 'non-judgmentalism' and 'impartiality' were frequently invoked. Cognitive dissonance was greatest when individual ethics appeared to conflict with organisational demands - as in the case of a qualified careers officer providing a pre-entry guidance service within a very market-oriented college.

Client-related variables were less frequently mentioned, with the striking exception of the Citizen's Advice Bureau manager, who was concerned about the need to be impartial between clients rather than between different service providers. Dependent on volunteer guidance workers, she was particularly aware of preconceptions about client types - as scroungers, the undeserving, whingers, etc. - which could result in unequal or inappropriate provision of help. As a result, much stress was placed, in the training of volunteers, on the identification and recognition of prejudices and on the importance of impartial treatment of clients. On reflection, it is difficult to understand why more of our interviewees did not raise this as an issue.

Implementation-related variables helped us to separate factors affecting a stated commitment to, or belief in, impartial guidance, from factors affecting whether this belief was translated into practice. Almost all of the issues discussed in relation to the first four variables are relevant in this respect, and have tended to obscure a convenient distinction of this nature.

Conclusion

Our survey suggests that adult guidance practitioners generally are concerned about their obligations in relation to giving impartial guidance. Some will have given a good deal of careful thought to both the importance of impartiality and to its practical applications. These are likely to be practitioners who are aware, for example, that: being impartial in respect of the different options available could bring them into conflict with other parts of their organisations, or other aspects of their roles; that being 'client-centred' and being 'impartial' are not necessarily the same thing; that clients may arrive with their own prejudices, which will require to be addressed; and that impartial guidance does not simply consist of supplying clients with as much information as possible.

Respondents also suggested practical advice for the provision of impartial guidance. For example: being impartial can have more to do with the nature of the worker-client interaction than with the supply of information available; impartial guidance might involve equipping clients with the *questions* to ask opportunity providers; that rather than engage in a fruitless pursuit of 'perfect impartiality', guidance workers should content themselves with a commitment to declare openly the limitations of their ability to provide a completely full and impartial service, a kind of guidance 'health warning'.

Impartiality is clearly an important principle in adult guidance. As one of our interviewees put it: 'The context in which advice is given has to be seen as impartial. The giver of advice shouldn't be seen to benefit from that advice. There should be no evidence of self-interest or self-seeking by the giver of advice.' However, the assumption that because workers feel impartiality in guidance is a good thing it will happen is not warranted. 'Perfect impartiality' is often unattainable for good practical reasons. Feelings amongst practitioners about the importance of the principle of impartiality in adult guidance are sustained by a view of others as behaving partially; this view is unfair because it is based on rather simplistic assumptions about the transactions between clients and workers. The view that impartiality is compromised simply by the arrival of new market principles in post-school education is also not entirely supported.

More work in this area is called for, particularly to observe the effect of new funding arrangements on the tensions observed between course selectors and guidance practitioners. The argument that the funding arrangements of colleges is a disincentive to impartial guidance requires close examination. The Secretary of State for Scotland has recently argued that the previous method of financing FE provision led to inequalities in funding between local authorities and between colleges within the same authority, and has indicated an intention to move towards an approach: "... which rewarded efficiency and quality of provision. It should also be transparent and equitable in its treatment of colleges and students' (SOED, 1995). Consultations are presently taking place over the use of quality indicators and outcomes to determine at least a part of funding (SOEID, 1995). Currently 98% of recurrent funding is allocated according to a formula which 'rewards' colleges for every student who has completed 25% of their course, or obtained the qualification. Observers have commented that it is manifestly not in the interests of colleges simply to fill places on courses, without more sophisticated matching of the interests and present competence of students to the curriculum demands, as well as providing counselling to establish the suitability of the course in line with the individual's aspirations. By this assessment the move to

formula funding should be a disincentive to the more obvious forms of partial guidance.

Our work also points to the need to explore more fully the different perceptions of guidance workers in different contexts. The implications of Scottish local government changes also need to be examined as adult educators set out their stall under different funding arrangements and inside different frames of reference.

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APPENDIX 1

CONFIDENTIAL

Impartiality Research: Interview Schedule

Name of Interviewee:

Work Setting:.....

Interviewer: Date:

Begin something like:*the NAEGA/ICG charter, A Guidance Entitlement for Adults, says that guidance agencies should, 'be independent of the interests of any supporting agency or institution', and should 'be delivered by trained advisers whose competence and impartiality can be proven'. Everyone in guidance agrees that impartiality is a good thing, but it seems likely that all of us in the guidance community have different notions of what impartiality actually is.*

Q 1 *What do you think impartiality in adult guidance is?*

Probing to check how impartiality is defined. Write here for review at end of interview.

Q2 *Why do you fee behaving impartially is important in your guidance work?*

Probing to check sources of influence, like 'humanistic' values, professional charters, managerial imperatives etc.

Q3 *Would you describe for me an example of a situation where you behaved impartially.*

Probing to verify what feature(s) of the example are key to operating impartially; maybe checking how common/unusual such practice is for interviewee and organisation.

Q4 *What would be an example of guidance practice which WRS not impartial?*

Probing to determine whether partial behaviour is ever ascribed to interviewee/organization or only to others/organisations

Q5 *What kinds of things make behaving impartially easy or hard to attain?*

Probing could explore the '5 tentative variables', without 'leading'.

Q6 *Is it easier for you to behave impartially in some situations than in others, or with certain groups of clients?*

Probing could explore perception of colleagues' approaches.

Q7 Something like: *thank you for being very open with me about your practice...together we've explored the notion of impartiality at length. In the light of our discussion, I wonder if you feel you want to change or elaborate on your definition of impartiality in any way. You said.....*

Q8 *Anything you feel we haven't covered?*