



**Quality assurance mechanisms for  
Information, Advice and Guidance:  
A critical review**

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## Executive summary

- 1) Assuring the quality and measuring the impact of guidance interventions is **multi-faceted and complex**.
- 2) **Different models** exist that have been applied to the planning, management and delivery of information, advice and guidance (IAG) services, indicating that quality assurance is often conceptualised in terms of **inputs, processes and outcomes**.
- 3) Inputs and processes are typically defined in the form of **organisational service level standards**, whilst outcome factors are often defined in the form of set **performance targets**.
- 4) Priority given to building **evidence** on what works and what does not work in guidance **varies** at different **levels**, for different **people** and for different **organisations**.
- 5) Important though inputs and processes are in quality assurance terms, it is **the 'end product'** that is **most critical** in quality assurance terms.
- 6) Quality assurance systems currently in place are regarded by users as useful, in some respects. There is **little confidence amongst users**, however, **that these systems are sufficient to assure a high quality service** at the point of delivery to the client or customer.
- 7) **Professional associations** represent one potentially powerful means of contributing to the quality assurance of service delivery, focusing as they do on customer/client protection and practitioner competence, and operating on the principle of **peer review and assessment**.
- 8) The **management of quality of IAG** needs to be built into the organisation's overall concern for quality, that is, within total quality

management. This **embraces the organisational culture and management of employees as well as the quality of service delivery.**

- 9) **Ambiguity and indeterminacy are inherent in IAG.** A key challenge to effective QA is how they are managed. This embraces both the need for a robust evidence base that informs organisational policy and practice, but also consideration of the organisation's culture and how it influences service delivery through the values and practices of employees.
- 10) Whilst achieving a balance between **cost-effectiveness and quality** services is an ideal, **there exists a paucity of relevant data** to support management decisions.
- 11) Given the **complexity** of both the processes of quality assurance and IAG, it may be worth considering the use of a **systems model** as a framework for understanding relevant inter-relationships.
- 12) **Challenges** for effective quality assurance of guidance services include inconsistent **terminology**, a lack of **data on the positive** impact of guidance on users and the need for **training support** for those involved in gathering such data.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Context

The primary purpose of the Skills White Paper (2005)<sup>1</sup> is to address the issue of Britain's poor productivity by closing the gap between education, training and organisational performance. Enhancement of information and guidance comprises part of the strategy set out in the White Paper to achieve this:

*'Information and guidance will be strengthened'*

(Part 1, Foreword, paragraph 13).

Reforms outlined in the White Paper aim to:

*'Provide information and guidance to help individuals consider the best option for them in linking skills, training and jobs as a route to achieving their ambitions.'*

(Part 1, p23)

At the core of future information and guidance services is the current infrastructure, use of which is to be optimised. learndirect Advice (IdA) is identified as a key element of this infrastructure, with an extended role and functions:

*Ultimately, our goal is to use the Ufi and online centre network to offer personal, high-quality support to individuals ... That would be available face-to-face, on-line, or by telephone, depending on the individual's needs and preferences. This would involve a combination of free and charged services, well-marketed as the best source of impartial guidance which can help individuals, and linking independent guidance services with those provided by colleges, universities and training providers.*

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<sup>1</sup> HM Government (2005) Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work, Part 1 (Cm 6483-1), Part 2 (6483-11), and Part 3 (648-111). Available online: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/skillsgettingon/> (2005 March 23<sup>rd</sup>.)

## 1.2 Scope of the study

IdA will, therefore, not only be required to develop an enhanced personal guidance service, but also operate a referral system to other agencies. Referral of customers onto other agencies is, of course, part of the current remit of IdA, but it is likely that more extensive demands will be placed on this aspect of service. This highlights the related issues of:

- the Quality Assurance procedures internal to the organisation and adopted by individual practitioners; and
- the reliability of the range of guidance services to which customers may potentially be referred.

A critical review of current arrangements for the quality assurance of information, advice and guidance (IAG) services is presented in this report which embraces a consideration of both the theory and practice of quality assurance. So far as this has been possible, the key issues of cost and value for money are also considered.

## 1.3 Objectives

Specifically, the remit for this critical review is to:

- review current QA methods and procedures for IAG;
- consider the role of self-regulation in the quality assurance of services to customers;
- highlight key issues; and
- take account of cost implications.

## 1.4 Methods

Desk research was undertaken into the evidence on the effectiveness of guidance and quality assurance procedures relevant to IAG. This sets the context for the report.

In addition, telephone interviews were used to gather data from four managers of guidance providers and six representatives of professional associations. This method ensures that the report takes user perspectives into consideration.

## 1.5 Report structure

The report comprises five sections, including this introduction. Section 2 reviews evidence from desk research into approaches to quality assurance for guidance.

Section 3 examines methods and procedures designed to assure the quality of IAG provision and presents user perspectives.

Section 4 considers self-regulation as a method of safeguarding service users against poor and bad practice. It considers the role of three relevant professional associations representing the public and private guidance sectors and also a well-established and occupationally relevant association (of counselling and psychotherapy).

Section 5 considers the place of Quality Assurance within the context of a management system.

Conclusions from this review are presented in section 6.

## 2. Quality standards and impact measures for guidance

### 2.1 Defining what is to be quality assured

Different quality assurance (QA) models exist that have been applied to the planning, management and delivery of information, advice and guidance (IAG) services. These include approaches that seek to:

- standardise the process of organisational self-assessment<sup>2</sup>;
- measure the effectiveness of IAG based upon 'ideal input' factors<sup>3</sup>;
- gather evidence to demonstrate accountability<sup>4</sup>;
- distinguish between the various input, process and outcome factors involved in the delivery of IAG<sup>5</sup> and
- apply a tri-variable model of quality assurance to IAG<sup>6</sup>.

Although these theoretical approaches differ in the detail of their content and application, common underlying themes exist which indicate that quality assurance is often conceptualised in terms of inputs, processes and outcomes. These elements of quality assurance are described briefly below.

#### *Inputs*

For example:

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<sup>2</sup> The EFQM Excellence Model is said to be the most widely used framework for organisational self-assessment in Europe and has become the basis for the majority of national and regional Quality Awards. For further details, go to: <http://www.guidance-research.org/EG/ip/theory/tp/efqm>

<sup>3</sup> Mayston, D. (2002) *Evaluating the Benefits of Guidance*, Centre for Guidance Studies: Research Report Series, University of Derby.

<sup>4</sup> Sampson, J.P., Reardon, R.C., Peterson, G.W. & Lenz, J.G. (2004) *Career Counseling and Services: a Cognitive Information Processing Approach*. Chapter 14. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

<sup>5</sup> den Boer, P., Mittendorf, K., Scheerens, J. & Sjenitzer, T. (2005) *Indicators and Benchmarks for Lifelong Guidance*. Thessaloniki: Cedefop.

<sup>6</sup> Evangelista, L. (2003) Quality assurance in guidance services – a tri-variable model. *Professionalità Journal*. No. 78 Italy: Editrice la Scula – <http://ww.orientamento.it/orientamento/tri-varibile.pdf>.

- Number and characteristics of service users and the number of sessions per user.
- Number, type and qualifications of staff available to deliver the service.
- Infrastructure, including accommodation and other relevant resources.
- Costs, including financial resources allocated to guidance by government policy makers, and time and other resources reserved by providers for guidance activities.

### *Process*

For example:

- Content of services provided, including the focus and type of activities used (e.g. information, advice, in-depth assessment) and methods (e.g. telephone, face-to-face, group work, on-line).
- Procedures, including promptness of responses to enquiries, appointment lead-times and practitioner guidelines.
- Quality assurance of the management of the service.

### *Outcomes*

For example:

- Level of user satisfaction with the service provided.
- Extent of user personal development, including the learning of decision-making and career management skills.
- Percentage of users progressing into employment, education or training.

Other terms, such as outputs, throughputs and productivity gains<sup>7</sup>, also emerge in the literature relating to quality assurance for guidance. For example, an 'output' may represent the number of client action plans produced as a result of a given level of intervention(s)<sup>8</sup>; whilst, a 'throughput' measure may represent the number of clients using the service at any given

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<sup>7</sup> Watts, A.G. & Dent, G. (in press) The 'P' Word: Productivity in the Delivery of Guidance Services. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*.

<sup>8</sup> Watts & Dent (op cit) describe the term 'output measures' linked to client satisfaction.

time. In contrast, the term 'outcome' is often used to describe the impact of the intervention on the individual client (i.e. the level of client satisfaction or the rate of progression into learning and/or work).

A degree of confusion is, perhaps unsurprisingly, often evident in relation to the terminology used by policy-makers, academics, managers and/or practitioners. For example, Sultana (2005)<sup>9</sup> draws on findings from a major European research study which examined indicators and benchmarks for guidance and concludes that:

*Key words such as 'outputs' and 'outcomes' (not to mention the distinctions between 'information', 'advice' and 'guidance') have different meanings in different national contexts (e.g. in some contexts the distinction is made between process factors in the guidance interview, while in others the focus is purely on throughputs that are measurable in quantitative terms - such as placement in jobs or in training).*

(p2)

Maguire & Killeen (2003)<sup>10</sup> have argued for the development of common, agreed terminology for different activities to assist in enabling evaluation or measurement of initiatives to be more comparable (p.7).

## 2.2 Measuring what is to be quality assured

Measuring that which is to be quality assured involves having a clear sense of:

- what is to be measured and for what purpose;

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<sup>9</sup> Sultana, R. G. (2005) *Indicators and Benchmarks in Guidance: Summary report on the conclusions of the mutual learning activity*. Cedefop/Bundesagentur für Arbeit. Consultation Meeting. Germany: Nuremburg, 27-28 October 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Maguire, M. & Killeen, J (2003) *Outcomes from Career Information and Guidance Services*. A paper prepared for an OECD review of policies for information, guidance and counselling services, commissioned jointly by the European Commission and the OECD, January 2003.

- who is the audience;
- what systems and procedures are in place for collecting and collating relevant data; and
- what management and quality assurance arrangements exist to ensure that data are acted upon in order to effect change and maintain the quality of services.

In terms of what is to be measured, inputs and processes are typically defined in the form of organisational service level standards. For example, service level standards typically exist for the minimum qualification level of staff (an input factor) and for set procedures such as answering telephone enquires within a specified number of rings (a process factor). However, outcome factors are often defined in the form of set performance targets, for example, percentage of user satisfaction rates and progression into learning<sup>11</sup> or work.

Hughes & Gration, (2005)<sup>12</sup> highlight systems and procedures for collecting and analysing data that range from localised manual paper-based approaches to highly centralised electronic database systems<sup>13</sup>. This study also identified similarities and differences in organisational arrangements relating to the use of data in order to improve the quality and impact of service delivery.<sup>14</sup> The findings demonstrate the critical importance of data being presented in an appropriate format so that it can be used effectively.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The IdA performance targets for 2005/2006 include a 90% user satisfaction rate and a 50% progression into learning rate.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, D. & Gration, G. (2005) *Indicators and Benchmarks in Guidance: UK Country Report*. European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop):Thessaloniki.

<sup>13</sup> Jobcentre Plus records data in an electronic database that is available to key managers and policy advisers via the organisation's intranet. Data are used to measure every tier of the organisation against performance targets including, volumes of activity and the targeting of priority customer groups in line with policy. IdA customer feedback is collected by an external research agency, which records and interrogates the data electronically using SPSS software. Reports are available electronically.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the quality managers of the six Careers Wales Companies meet on a regular basis as a 'Quality Managers Group' to ensure consistency of quality assurance in service delivery and determine how best to utilise relevant data.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Careers Scotland uses a sophisticated customer record management system that, in principle, makes it possible to track the range of interventions with

Measuring the quality and impact of guidance interventions is, therefore, multi-faceted and complex. Given that guidance is a human activity, subject to degrees of unpredictability and uncertainty (particularly in relation to individual values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours), it is unsurprising that its quality assurance and impact are difficult, sometimes impossible, to measure. Hughes *et al.* (2002)<sup>16</sup> emphasise the importance of recognising: that there are a wide range of factors that influence individual career choice and decision-making which can impact on outcomes; that guidance is frequently not a discrete input, but rather is embedded in other contexts (such as learning provision, employer/employee relationships and/ or within multi-strand initiatives); and that comparing the evidence available in different studies is problematic when the nature of guidance, the depth of work undertaken and client groups, often vary. Sultana (2005)<sup>17</sup> highlights the difficulty of isolating guidance interventions for the purposes of establishing causal relationships (e.g. between guidance provision and 'drop-out' rates). It is unsurprising, therefore, that an agreed set of outcome measures for guidance, or even common methods of collecting data, do not exist, except, perhaps, in a limited number of discrete programmes or areas of work.

### 2.3 From whose perspective?

It is important to recognise that providing evidence on what works and what does not work in guidance is likely to vary at differing levels, for different people and for different organisations. For example:

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service users. This system is complemented by another, which enables a variety of reports based on the data to be produced for different purposes and audiences.

<sup>16</sup> Hughes, D., Bosley S., Bowes, L., & Bysshe, S. (2002) *The economic benefits of guidance*. CeGS Research Report Series. Derby: Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby.

<sup>17</sup> Sultana, R. G. (2005) Indicators and Benchmarks in Career Guidance: Summary report on the conclusions of the mutual learning activity. Cedefop/Bundesagentur für Arbeit. Consultation Meeting. Germany: Nuremburg, 27-28 October 2005, p1 para 1.2.

- Clients and customers are likely to be most concerned with having access to high quality services designed to help support them with important career transitions (i.e. was the service accessible and useful?).
- Managers are often concerned more with formative issues (i.e. which elements of the service contributed most effectively to the outcomes achieved and how can these be best managed to contribute towards improvement?).
- Practitioners will be interested in their own job satisfaction, career development and maintaining a high level of professional integrity (e.g. providing an impartial service).
- Policy-makers tend to focus on summative evaluations and cost-benefit outcomes (i.e. did the service achieve the expected outcomes and what are the cost implications for current and future provision?).
- Employers are most likely to emphasise the importance of appropriate referrals to their companies (i.e. did the service provide an effective service in terms of signposting or supplying the 'right sort' of people for the company?).

The challenge is, therefore, how best to develop differing types of evidence relating to quality that will satisfy the needs of different stakeholders. Important though inputs and processes are in quality assurance terms, it is the 'end product' that is most critical. That is, has the intervention made a positive and meaningful difference to the client or customer and, if so, at what cost to the organisation? Hughes *et al.* (2002)<sup>18</sup> make the distinction between four levels of impact outcomes as follows:

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<sup>18</sup> Hughes, D., Bosley S., Bowes, L., & Bysshe, S. (2002) *The economic benefits of guidance*. CeGS Research Report Series. Derby: Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby.

- *Immediate outcomes*: including enhanced knowledge and skills, attitudinal and motivational changes such as decision-making skills; opportunity awareness; increased optimism about potential opportunities
- *Intermediate outcomes*: including improved search and decision-making skills such as enhanced job search ability and the ability to cope with, and plan beyond, disappointment.
- *Longer-term outcomes for the individual*: including progression to training, education/work and reducing the propensity of learners to embark upon and subsequently drop out of education or training courses.
- *Longer-term outcomes for the economy*: including increased productivity, enhanced employee recruitment and retention and improved ability to secure a job with improved pay or in shortened periods of unemployment.

There are also two additional key factors:

- the availability and accessibility of different delivery strategies, such as one-to-one interviews, group work sessions, self-directed web-based resources, self-directed resource centre based, telephone helpline; and
- the state of readiness of the individual to make best use of differing forms of intervention.

## 2.4 Conclusion

Defining what is to be quality assured, measuring this appropriately and determining from whose perspective quality could and should be considered are key challenges for guidance. In this context QA is, therefore, complex and problematic. However, existing mechanisms, together with professional development and self-regulation, offer potential ways forward.

The next section reviews some current mechanisms for the quality assurance of guidance and presents perspectives of users in four different guidance contexts: **nextstep**, higher education, learndirect *Advice* as well as that of a sole trader.

## 3 Assuring the quality of guidance

### 3.1 Introduction

Frameworks and challenges for the quality assurance of guidance have been reviewed above, in section 2. If these contribute insights to how guidance could and should be quality assured, then what is the practice? This section reviews some current mechanisms for the quality assurance of guidance and examines the practice of various guidance providers. A brief overview of two QA mechanisms, specifically the **matrix** Standard and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), is provided first. Then, the practice of service providers is examined. Views and experiences of QA procedures of a IdA manager, a **nextstep** contract manager, a manager of a higher education careers service and a sole trader are examined. Each interviewee was asked which QA mechanisms were in place within their organisations and how effective they thought these mechanisms were in assuring quality services in practice. Some conclusions are finally presented.

### 3.2 Current mechanisms

Guidance service providers determine their own QA procedures, but within the requirements of contractual requirements. For example, the **nextstep** Service Delivery Specification for 2005/2006<sup>19</sup> stipulates the conditions of contracts issued by Learning & Skills Councils (LSCs) to deliver information and advice. Objective 6 of this delivery specification is ‘to raise the quality and effectiveness of IAG services to adults’. Each contractor is held responsible for the:

*Quality assurance of LSC IA-programme funded services through the following:*

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<sup>19</sup> **nextstep** Service Delivery Specification, 2005/2006, section 2, para 17d. [Online]. Available: <http://www.lsc.gov.uk>

- *the development of a continuous, quality improvement strategy*
- *ensuring that both the contractor itself and its subcontractors achieve and maintain the **matrix** standard<sup>20</sup>.*

Two formal quality assurance mechanisms are reviewed briefly below: the **matrix** standard and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI).

### **matrix Standard**

The **matrix** Standard is 'a quality framework for the effective delivery of information, advice and guidance'<sup>21</sup>. It is made up of eight elements, four of which cover the delivery of information, advice and guidance services<sup>22</sup> and four of which relate to the management of services<sup>23</sup>. ENTO<sup>24</sup> is the guardian of the **matrix** Standard and acts as the Standard Setting Body whilst EMQC<sup>25</sup> is responsible for the assessment and accreditation of organisations to the **matrix** Standards. Organisations or companies must take the initiative to contact EMQC to organise the accreditation process, which is a costed service.

The cost of **matrix** accreditation is £550 per day<sup>26</sup>, plus expenses and VAT. The number of days required varies according to the size of the organisation.

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<sup>20</sup> The only exception to this requirement is where a specialist provider needs to be recruited to meet the needs of a specific priority group with an area. In this case, the subcontractor must achieve matrix accreditation within six months of its delivery contract. The penalty for non-compliance is termination of the contract.

<sup>21</sup> About the **matrix** Standard, [Online]. Available: <http://www.matrix-quality-standard.com>.

<sup>22</sup> These are: People are made aware of the service and how to engage with it; People's use of the service is defined and understood; People are provided with access to information and support in using it; People are supported in exploring options and making choices.

<sup>23</sup> These are: Service delivery is planned and maintained; Staff competence and support they are given are sufficient to deliver the service; Feedback on the quality of the service is obtained; Continuous quality improvement is ensured through monitoring, evaluation and action.

<sup>24</sup> Information about ENTO can be accessed at: <http://www.ento.co.uk/>

<sup>25</sup> Information about East Midlands Quality Centre (EMQC) can be accessed at: <http://www.emqc.co.uk/>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.matrix-quality-standard.com> (7<sup>th</sup> December, 2005)

### ***Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI)***

The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) is responsible for post-19 education and carries out college inspections jointly with Ofsted. ALI was established under the provisions of the Learning and Skills Act, 2000<sup>27</sup>, to bring the inspection of all aspects of adult learning and work-based learning within the remit of a single inspectorate. It also reports on the performance of training providers other than colleges which use government funding.<sup>28</sup> This includes publicly funded guidance providers. Inspections are carried out in accordance with the Common Inspection Framework<sup>29</sup> by teams of full-time inspectors and part-time associate inspectors who 'have knowledge of, and experience in, the work which they inspect'. All providers are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member<sup>30</sup>.

The aims of ALI inspections are to:

- provide an independent account of the quality of education and training, the standards achieved and the efficiency with which resources are managed;
- help bring about improvement by identifying strengths and weaknesses and by highlighting good and poor practice;
- keep the Secretary of State and the funding bodies informed about the quality and standards of education and training<sup>31</sup>.

An organisation to be inspected is required to complete a self-assessment report on specific aspects of performance. Grades<sup>32</sup> are given for areas of learning, leadership and management and are used to arrive at a judgement about the overall effectiveness of the provider. Unlike matrix, the actual costs

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<sup>27</sup> Available at: <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2000/20000021.htm>

<sup>28</sup> An article in TES, 16/12/05, reported that Education Secretary Ruth Kelly had announced that the Office for Standards in Education would become a super-inspectorate, covering all state-funded learning outside universities.

<sup>29</sup> Available at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/docs/1037.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Inspection Report (2005) IdA Advice(IdA), Adult Learning Inspectorate. Available [Online]: <http://www.ali.gov.uk>

<sup>31</sup> Self-assessment and inspection: about self-assessment. Available [Online] <http://www.ali.gov.uk/Quality+improvement/Excalibur/Products/Inspection+Toolkit/>

<sup>32</sup> Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about the quality of provision, where grade 1 = outstanding and grade 4 = inadequate.

of ALI inspections are not charged to the organisation under inspection<sup>33</sup>. Costs to the organisation relate to the preparation required for the self-assessment and those associated with the inspection visit. This includes resources needed to evidence the self-assessment; making practical arrangements for the visit; the cost of accommodation and hospitality; and the cost of a nominee to join the inspection team for the duration of the visit.

The experiences and views of four service providers of these formal QA mechanisms, together with other methods used in practice to assure the delivery of high quality services are presented next.

### 3.3 The practice of service providers

Service providers were selected for this study because of their relevance to the requirement in the Skills White Paper (2005)<sup>34</sup> for *learndirect Advice (IdA)* to refer customers to: ‘a combination of free and charged services ... linking independent guidance services with those provided by colleges, universities and training providers’. This requirement poses a key challenge for IdA: how can it be confident that service providers to whom customers are referred will provide a high quality service to customers?

#### **3.3.1 Manager of *learndirect Advice (IdA)***

Broadcast Support Services (BSS), the company delivering IdA’s telephone helpline, is an educational charity with over 30 years experience of providing information and advice to the general public, at a distance. It currently holds approximately 30 customer accounts, of which IdA’s is the largest. Telephone help-lines represent its core service. Three quality assurance mechanisms operate as a condition of the IdA contract: **matrix** accreditation; inspection by the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI); and the Contact Centre Association

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<sup>33</sup> IdA commissioned, and therefore paid for, its recent inspection.

<sup>34</sup> HM Government (2005) Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work, Part 1 (Cm 6483-1), Part 2 (6483-11), and Part 3 (648-111). Available online: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/skillsgettingon/> (2005 March 23<sup>rd</sup>.) Part 1, paragraph 74)

(CCA) accreditation. In addition to these three formal, external QA mechanisms, the IdA manager outlined the requirements that BSS has developed and recently implemented in-house, to address aspects of service delivery considered essential, but not covered by the mandatory QA procedures. Finally, training and accreditation were discussed, since these were regarded by the manager as integral to safeguarding quality services for customers.

## **Quality assurance systems**

### ***matrix** accreditation*

The company holds **matrix** accreditation. This quality assurance mechanism is regarded as 'useful', but only because it demonstrates that certain procedures are in place and operating effectively. The process of **matrix** accreditation did not result in any significant changes in company procedures.

### *Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI)*

The company recently (June, 2005) underwent an ALI inspection. The report from this inspection visit is available on their website (<http://www.ali.gov.uk>). The overall effectiveness of IdA was graded 2. Like **matrix**, it is not thought that this inspection process has resulted in any significant changes in the company.

### *Contact Centre Association Accreditation*

This accreditation process relates specifically to the efficient and effective operation of contact centres. IdA has successfully completed the process of accreditation required and since this process has no direct relevance to the remit of this report, no further comment will be made here.

### *In-house QA procedures*

Over the past 2/3 years, BSS has been developing, implementing and refining its own quality assurance procedures. The key objective for this QA system is to ensure consistency within and across services. By summer 2005, the system was fully in place, though it is continually under development. At the centre of these procedures is a 'strong ethos of feedback to staff'.

Key features of telephone calls are recorded and measured against a clear set of criteria, using a system of 'supervisor call-scoring'. These measures are implemented on a regular basis (that is, an internal standard is operated currently of 8 per adviser per month) and applied on an individual, team and service basis. Two aspects of calls are used to monitor quality: customer service (i.e. soft skills, like interpersonal communication) and content (e.g. labour market information). For the soft skills, adviser competence is scored, whilst for the content, the criteria of accuracy and appropriateness are applied.

This monitoring is undertaken by supervisors, who are themselves subject to QA procedures. 'Call-leveling sessions' are conducted amongst supervisors approximately every six months for calls within their own department and with similar regularity amongst supervisors from other services within the company. Consequently, any one supervisor will participate in this type of benchmarking session about every three months.

Feedback from the process is linked to a 'self-organised learning tool', which comprises on-line training materials linked to different sections of a telephone call (e.g. data collection).

### **Training, accreditation and professional development**

Developing staff competence is regarded as part of continuous quality improvement in the company. It comprises various elements, as outlined below.

#### *Staff training*

Time is routinely planned into advisers' schedules for training development. In addition, advisers are expected to engage in self-development activities during 'downtime' (i.e. when the centre is quiet). Typically, staff would use features of the 'self-organised learning tool', referred to above, for this purpose.

### *Accreditation of competence*

All adviser staff at levels 2 and 3 within the organisation are required to either hold, or be working towards NVQ3 or NVQ4 in Guidance, respectively. Information advisers (level 1) also have to work towards NVQ2 in customer service.

### *Membership of Professional Associations*

The company is an organisational member of the Institute for Career Guidance (ICG). Each adviser is bound, therefore, by the ICG's code of ethical conduct. Minimal use is, however, made of training courses and conferences organised by the ICG. Advisers tend not, therefore, to be connected to the wider guidance community.

### *Appraisal System*

An annual appraisal system operates, with 3 interim reviews. This ensures that individual and service training needs are identified.

### *Recruitment policy*

Experience has demonstrated that it is difficult to recruit qualified advisers externally to levels 2 and 3 within the organisation. Those who have, in the past, been recruited with an IAG background have found it extremely difficult to make a successful transition from face-to-face interviews to telephone interviews. Customer service skills, telephone experience and the 'right attitude' have been found to be the most effective combination of skills and competence for the job of adviser. Recruits are then be trained in IAG.

The company operates a system of internal progression. For example, of the 65 lifelong learning advisers (level 3) currently employed in the organisation, not more than 10 have been recruited externally.

### **3.3.2 nextstep Contract Manager**

A contract manager for a region in Greater London was interviewed about current quality assurance arrangements in their organisation. This organisation does not get involved in any direct delivery of services, with all

services sub-contracted. Good capacity has been developed in the region, in part with **nextstep** funding. Supply of IAG services currently exceeds Learning Skills Council (LSC) targets. A clause in the current contract enables a broader range of clients to be seen than the National LSC pre NVQ level 2 sole target. To accommodate a range of provision, not all contracting organisations are guidance specialists.

Currently (2005/2006) a payment of £25 is made for each advice episode. As the **nextstep** contract is a 'standstill budget', compared with the previous financial year, it is considered that this effectively represents a funding reduction. The organisation operates a core contract which requires that 45% of clients seen should enter learning (resulting in pressure to contract with training providers in future if this figure is not achieved).

An increasing pressure is to demonstrate the impact of services delivered. In delivering high quality, enhanced guidance services, three key considerations were identified. These are the need to:

- adhere to contractual obligations;
- comply with current quality assurance systems;
- support professional practice.

### **Quality assurance systems**

#### ***matrix accreditation***

Service providers must have achieved the **matrix** Standard, though exceptionally a supplier has been used who is working towards accreditation. Support for the process of gaining accreditation is provided to all subcontractors by the contractor. For example, **matrix** workshops are organised.

Common practice is for this organisation to refer clients who do not meet the necessary eligibility criteria for advice or guidance to a range of public and

private service suppliers. Only suppliers who have achieved **matrix** accreditation are used for referrals.

#### *Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI)*

The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) is scheduled to visit the organisation sometime in the next four years. The sole focus of this QA procedure is the client experience. The 'Self Assessment' process required as a basis for inspection, whilst welcomed, is considered to be extremely detailed. Self Assessment involves the **nextstep** core team and all providers, reviewing and grading all areas of work, and drawing up development plans. For an organisation with the size of core contract of this particular organisation, it is expected that 4-5 Inspectors will visit for a period of one week.

Concern was expressed regarding the lack of relevant occupational qualifications of the Inspectors, since they observe guidance interviews and grade practitioner competence in relation to guidance interventions.

#### *In-house QA procedures*

Contracts to service providers are awarded as a result of an open tendering procedure, which guarantees transparency. Each sub-contractor is assigned achievement targets with associated unit prices. A well-established monitoring procedure is in place to ensure that contractual obligations are met. This comprises on-site visits, which are conducted as frequently as necessary, with no maximum number specified. As a minimum, each provider is visited once a year. Management information is returned by sub-contractors each month and used as the basis for determining whether contractual targets should be renegotiated. The ultimate sanction for non-compliance is financial. If contracted services are not delivered, there is a monetary 'claw back'.

#### **Training, accreditation and professional development**

A dedicated staff member has responsibility for training and quality. Their remit is to motivate and support sub-contractors to participate in staff

development. The training programme consists of a mixture of formally accredited qualifications and in-service training courses.

#### *Accreditation of competence*

A local model of professional qualification and support has been developed that extends from training support for reception staff (via the National Open College Network) through to a Master's qualification.

The National LSC requirement to deliver enhanced guidance services is that all practitioners must hold, or be working towards, an NVQ4 Guidance qualification. The local **nextstep** requirement to deliver advice is that practitioners must hold, or be working towards, an NVQ3 Guidance qualification.

#### *In-service training programme*

A training needs analysis has been undertaken across a comprehensive range of the organisation's activities and a training programme arranged to address these needs. Take-up of training opportunities is variable, since it is not possible to pay sub-contractors for attendance.

Peer assessment is being introduced, to encourage and support reflective practice. The latter has been difficult to implement because of the pressures of delivery, but is nevertheless underway.

### **3.3.3 *Manager of an HE careers service***

This campus University careers service comprises three functional sub-groups:

- a careers guidance team;
- an information team; and
- an employer contact and work experience team.

It offers a comprehensive range of services to undergraduates and post-graduates, including face-to-face interviews; access to on-line resources and

a vacancy database; a programme of events (e.g. careers fairs); practice selection and assessment tests and information about graduate first destinations. The first destination statistics (available on the University website) testifies to the excellent record this University has in terms of employment.

Located within a University with approximately 15,000 students, the careers service has a high demand for its services. One of its priorities is to work in collaboration with Academic Departments and the policy statement relating to this area of work is available on the careers service website. Other policy statements relate to Equal Opportunities and Information Collection Management. There is also a Privacy Statement available to view.

### **Quality assurance systems**

#### ***matrix** accreditation*

AGCAS has adopted the **matrix** Quality Standard for Information, Advice and Guidance Services as a framework for continuous quality improvement (CQI). This policy relates to AGCAS services in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The following statement appears on the AGCAS website:

*We believe that CQI is essential to the future development of careers work in Higher Education and for this reason, AGCAS now requires institutional members to work towards accreditation against the **matrix** standard.*

<http://www.agcas.org.uk>

As an institutional member of AGCAS and in line with this requirement, the careers service has successfully achieved **matrix** accreditation. The process took three days. It was considered a 'useful process', though a degree of scepticism was expressed about the requirement for institutions to renew their accreditation within a specified timeframe. On balance, the view of this manager was that there would be little to be gained from repeating this process.

### *Codes of practice and principles*

In addition to policy statements, Codes of practice and principles that the service works to are available for scrutiny. These include:

- the Association of Graduate Careers Service (AGCAS) Codes of Practice on Guidance;
- a Best Practice in Graduate Recruitment;
- the Guidance Council Code of Principles;
- a Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, specifically relating to career education, information and guidance; and
- Ethical Principles and Code of Professional Practice for Library and Information Professionals.

### **Training, accreditation and professional development**

#### *Accreditation of competence*

Members of staff in the careers guidance team are expected to hold a professional, post graduate qualification. Those joining the service without such a qualification are encouraged to undertake the specialist higher education guidance training offered by the University of Reading.

#### *In-service training*

A structured programme of staff development and support is in place, led by the Manager of Careers. Part of this provision is a system of peer review, currently being developed and implemented. The aim of the system is to aid personal development and feed into service evaluation by informing training needs. This system is evolving alongside a method of evaluating the effectiveness of the service, which involves collecting data from service users using focus groups.

### **3.3.4 Sole trader**

At the time of the interview, the interviewee had been operating in the capacity of sole trader for nine and a half years. She has varied employment experience and immediately before establishing herself as a sole trader, had been employed by a training provider as one of four area managers. She feels passionate about her current job, really cares about her clients and feels that she has developed a distinctive way of operating:

*I like to do a job in the way it's expected – but I like to do it my way!*

Currently, she works in an outreach capacity on various contracts. One of these is with offenders, with targets to achieve at pre-level 2. She works in a prison, operating across two **nextstep** contractors, each specifying slightly different qualification criteria for client eligibility. In addition to this contract, she works on another **nextstep** contract which includes working with clients with a disability who are qualified above level 2.

### **Quality assurance systems**

#### ***matrix accreditation***

This sole trader achieved **matrix** accreditation three and a half years ago. As part of a local IAG network, she was expected to offer this as part of the tendering process. She prefers the **matrix** Standard to its predecessor, the GAB Standards, since they were 'time-consuming, expensive and bureaucratic'. Advantages of **matrix** accreditation were identified as the face to face visit (the old-style paper review was, in her view, 'possible to fudge') and visit preparation, which requires a degree of self-reflection and of critical self-appraisal. Disadvantages were also identified: 'quality assuring business systems does not necessarily guarantee customer satisfaction'; and for a sole trader the cost of accreditation, at £1,500, was considered punitive.

#### ***Adult Learning Inspectorate***

Whilst the sole trader had not actually experienced an inspection at the time of the interview, preparations were underway for an impending inspection of the IAG network of which she was part. She appreciated that Managing

Agents were under scrutiny, as well as each sub-contractor. She understood that she might be observed and was 'a little concerned', but felt that observation was not necessarily 'a bad thing' and that informed critical feedback could improve adviser performance.

## **Training, accreditation and professional development**

### *Accreditation of competence*

Investment in professional development is a priority for this sole trader. A continuous search for self-improvement had led to successful completion of a range of qualifications. The point was made forcefully that the work-based qualifications had not provided the theoretical underpinning required for her job. This gap in knowledge had motivated her to undertake higher level academic qualifications. These include:

- RSA in Guidance
- NVQ 4 in Guidance
- PGCE (post 16)
- MEd (included module on Education and Guidance)
- MA Careers

In addition to formal accreditation, the sole trader regularly participated in unaccredited training events that met her personal professional development needs.

## **3.4 Conclusion**

The managers interviewed, together with the sole trader, had all complied, successfully, with QA procedures required of them by either their contractors (in the case of IdA, **nextstep** and the sole trader) or their institution (in the case of the university careers service). All, however, were very measured in their evaluations of these QA procedures. Whilst there was a consensus that the process required for **matrix** accreditation had some merits, doubts were expressed that this QA method truly delivered on its promise. The cost of **matrix** was regarded as a major disadvantage by both the sole trader and

university career service – the process did not, in their view, represent value for money in terms of benefits derived.

Only one of the managers interviewed had experience of an ALI inspection (IdA). Similarly, the view was that whilst the process had some merits, it had not resulted in significant changes to procedures or services. The costs of an ALI inspection are not quite as visible as those for the **matrix** Standard, as no fee is charged for the process for those organizations required to submit to inspection.

All those interviewed had gone beyond the minimum QA requirements regarding practitioner competence. The need to develop practitioner competence and improve services as part of quality assurance has been emphasised (Hiebert, 2004<sup>35</sup>; Magnusson & Lalande, 2005<sup>36</sup>). In addition to formal accreditation, all the interviewees were able to provide examples of how their own organisations had developed, or were developing, bespoke training programmes and systems of peer review and assessment to support continuing professional development of practitioners delivering services.

In addition to existing, formal QA procedures and systems of training and accreditation, practitioner self-regulation through membership of professional associations is one method of assuring quality services that has the potential to complement, strengthen and extend systems and procedures already in place. This will be discussed next, in section 4.

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<sup>35</sup> Hiebert, B. (2005) International Competencies for Educational and Vocational Guidance Practitioners *The Career Counsellor Newsletter No. 17.p. 11. The Canadian Career Development Foundation. January 2005 edition.*

<sup>36</sup> Magnusson, K. & Lalande, V. (2005) New Strides in Canadian Career Development Research. *The Career Counsellor Newsletter No. 17 pp.3-4. The Canadian Career Development Foundation. January 2005 edition.*

## 4. Reflective practice

### 4.1 Continuing professional development

Having the resources to engage in reflection as part of continuing professional development (CPD) is a critical issue for high quality guidance services. A recent review of policies for career information, guidance and counselling services in fourteen countries, commissioned jointly by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the European Commission, included an examination of the training, skills and qualifications of guidance workers. It found that this aspect of guidance was: 'very much under-researched'<sup>37</sup> (p.7). The study did, however, highlight a worrying trend regarding continuing professional development. Specifically, that participation rates were found to vary considerably - from 100% to 10% (p.14). This is probably because continuing professional development was found to be optional in most countries, including the UK. It is, perhaps, somewhat ironic that a profession that concerns itself with the career progression and development of its clients does not give more of a priority to the very activities that would secure the development and progression of its own practice.

So what role can professional associations play in encouraging and supporting the CPD of its members and so contribute to the quality assurance of services to clients and customers? This section considers how 'professional bodies are increasingly gathering evidence that members are striving for excellence in the service of clients' (Mulvey, 2004<sup>38</sup>). It presents three case studies of professional associations relevant to guidance: the Association of Career Professionals, the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy and the Institute of Career Guidance.

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<sup>37</sup> McCarthy, J. (2001) *The skills, training and qualifications of guidance workers*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.oecd.org> [2003, August 9].

<sup>38</sup> Mulvey, M.R. (2004) Can I stop now? The role of CPD in professional practice, in H. Reid & J. Bimrose, *Constructing the future: Reflection on practice*, Stourbridge: ICG.

## 4.2 Self regulation: the role of Professional Associations

Mulvey (2004)<sup>39</sup> argues that continuing professional development is 'implicit in working as a professional, inherent in guidance practice and beneficial to all concerned' (p.11). She notes how a recent inquiry into codes of conduct published by a range of professional associations in the UK found that the majority required their members to maintain competence and skill. A challenge for professional associations, therefore, is to support members in developing their skills, knowledge and understanding and demonstrate to the public that they have done so effectively.

### **4.2.1 Association of Career Professionals International**

The Association of Career Professionals International (ACP International) has over 2000 members in more than 30 countries around the world. Members specialize in all aspects of career services including career management and transition (outplacement), assessments, coaching, talent retention and organisational consulting. It represents a specialist professional association for career practitioners working within the private sector and the education community (universities and colleges). It:

*Supports people in their work and life changes - combining one to one personal service with web based delivery tools.*

<http://www.acpinternational.org/about/profession.html>

ACP International was established in 1989 as an international association of outplacement professionals (IAOP). It was renamed career management professionals (IACMP) in 1994 and most recently became the Association of Career Professionals International in 2003. Its Mission Statement is as follows:

*Association of Career Professionals International is dedicated to the global development of the career management profession by working to support and enhance the image, credibility and legitimacy of the*

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<sup>39</sup> Op cit

*profession and to provide guidelines, standards and structure for each member to enhance his/her skills as a professional.*

<http://www.acpinternational.org/about/mission.html>

A UK member of the ACP International expressed the view that the association was at an evolutionary stage in its journey to becoming a more recognised association for the profession. Because of this, some of its systems were embryonic and under development. A senior spokesperson for the Association indicated that it did not set out to place barriers to entry in the path of intending applicants. As an association operating on a world-wide basis, screening for membership using criteria exclusively related to accreditation was not feasible because of the variation that occurs across countries regarding both occupational titles and qualifications. Rather, the ethos of the organisation could be typified as 'trust the practitioner'. On joining, all members were required to accept, by signature, and abide by, the ethical standards, so self-regulation is a central premise. Organisational membership is under review as an option for this Association. Currently, only individuals are admitted.

### *Code of Ethics*

All members are bound by the code of ethical standards. The Standards apply to all Members of the Association of Career Professionals International and are 'intended to safeguard the public interest, the integrity and excellence of the career profession. Adherence to the Standards is a condition of membership'<sup>40</sup>. Complaints regarding breaches in ethical behaviour can be filed with 'the Chair of the International Ethics Council, with any other member of the Council, or with the Executive Director of ACP International. Complaints will be processed according to the Policies and Procedures of the ACP International Ethics Council'.

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<sup>40</sup> See website: <http://www.acpinternational.org/about/ethics.html>

Ethics Policies and Procedures were revised and simplified in April, 2005 and are available on the website<sup>41</sup>. Sanctions applied to breaches of ethical conduct comprise exclusion from membership. The senior spokesperson for the Association indicated that privacy legislation constrained their inclination to keep detailed individual records on member complaints. Further, legislation relating to liable limited their inclination to 'publicly shame' individual members found guilty of malpractice. Both the UK member and the senior representative expressed the view that self-governance and regulation were at the core of professional services delivered in the private sector. The highest standards of professional conduct were necessary to guarantee survival in the market place. Because of the current litigation culture, it was not uncommon for complaints to be lodged against individual professionals by customers of services and because some of these individuals were employed by companies, the complaint would be dealt with by the employer. It was the individual's responsibility to ensure that their professional indemnity insurance was adequate to cover such cases. The senior spokesperson felt that consequently, the Association had actually received only a small number of complaints against members. Most of these had occurred in North America.

### *Professional development*

Whilst provided, continuing professional development is not a requirement of membership. The ACP International does, though, provide ongoing learning through conferences, regional meetings, teleconferences and web based learning programmes. A certification process with the Institute of Career Certification International is promoted on the ACP International website as 'an objective way to define a level of competency and a forum for ongoing professional development'<sup>42</sup>. This provides structured progression from 'Associate', to 'Practitioner' and then 'Fellow'. In addition, training courses and other resources (e.g. publications) are marketed via the ACP International website. A UK member holds the view that professional development is a crucial feature of successful marketing of services. Because of this, it was

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<sup>41</sup> See website: [http://www.acpinternational.org/news/06-22-2005\\_1.html](http://www.acpinternational.org/news/06-22-2005_1.html)

<sup>42</sup> See website: <http://www.acpinternational.org/devel/certification/>

expected that most members would routinely ensure their competencies were updated and enhanced.

The senior representative of the association expressed the view that a threat to the credibility of the profession of career counseling, consulting or coaching is the growth in highly marketed coaching certificates that are not deeply based in career development theory, but are generic to the process of 'coaching', which only took root in the late 1990s. A growth industry, this seems to be largely unregulated, with anyone free to establish themselves and market 'coaching services'. Developing a common language, meaningful to potential customers and clients on the international stage is thought to be a major, and urgent, challenge to the broader community of career counseling, development and guidance.

#### *Membership categories*

ACP International offers four categories of individual membership: Professional Member (\$150 pa); Associate Member (\$150 pa); Student Member (\$75 pa); and Retired Member (\$60 pa)<sup>43</sup>. In addition, membership as a 'Corporate Supplier' is available (\$625 pa)<sup>44</sup>.

#### **4.2.2 British Association of Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP)**

BACP is the 'largest and broadest body within the sector'. A senior representative of the organisation indicated that it currently has over 25,000 individual members worldwide<sup>45</sup>, as well as approximately 1,000 organisational members – making a total membership of over 40,000. Through its work, it ensures that 'it meets its remit of public protection, whilst also developing and informing members'<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> <https://secure.acpinternational.org/application.html>

<sup>44</sup> <https://secure.acpinternational.org/supplier.html>

<sup>45</sup> [http://www.bacp.co.uk/join\\_bacp/](http://www.bacp.co.uk/join_bacp/)

<sup>46</sup> See the BACP website at: [http://www.bacp.co.uk/about\\_bacp/profile\\_history.html](http://www.bacp.co.uk/about_bacp/profile_history.html)

The British Association for Counselling developed from the Standing Conference for the Advancement of Counselling, a group of organisations inaugurated in 1970. Membership was extended to individual members with the aid of a grant from the Home Office Voluntary Service Unit when, in 1977 the British Association for Counselling was founded. The headquarters were moved from London to Rugby in 1978. In September 1999, the Association changed its name to the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP).

Its mission is:

*To be the leading professional body for counselling and psychotherapy and an automatic reference point for anyone seeking information on counselling and psychotherapy in the United Kingdom.*

<http://www.bacp.co.uk>

BACP is a Learned Society, a company limited by guarantee and a registered Charity. It operates specialist interest divisions that focus on informing members and the public in the following areas: children and young people; healthcare; the workplace; Higher and Further Education; spiritual and pastoral; independent and group practice; and equality and diversity. These sectoral groups are complemented with cross-sector forums, including: diversity; coaching; training and learning and supervision.

#### *Committee structure*

Volunteer members of the Association sit on various committees and working groups of BACP, which ultimately report to its Board of Governors. All are involved in developing, implementing and monitoring policies in accordance with the aims and objectives of the Association. The Board of Governors delegates special functions to a range of committees, including the:

- Professional Conduct Committee (which monitors policy and standards on good practice for the profession; devises and maintains rules for professional conduct; and sets policy for handling complaints); and the

- Professional Standards Committee (which advises on policy, criteria and procedures relating to registration and statutory regulation and is also responsible for the development of policy on accreditation for individuals, training courses and service providers).

### *Ethical Framework*

The Association sets, promotes and maintains standards for the profession. Two mechanisms are in place for this purpose: the 'Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy'; and the 'Professional Conduct Procedure'. These exist to 'ensure that members of BACP abide by an accepted and approved code of conduct and accountability'.

### *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy*<sup>47</sup>

The Framework was revised April 2002. It provides guidance on good practice in counselling and psychotherapy and makes explicit the values, principles and personal moral qualities required for effective counselling and psychotherapy.

### *Professional Conduct Procedure*<sup>48</sup>

The aim of the Professional Conduct Procedure is to:

*afford protection to the public and to protect the name of BACP and the profession of counselling and psychotherapy as conducted by both individual and organisational members of the Association.*

The procedure has been developed to deal with any alleged breaches of conduct and has been designed so that:

*a person who is not satisfied with an individual or organisational member of BACP should have the opportunity to air their grievance or to make a complaint and seek resolution.*

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<sup>47</sup> For full text, see: [http://www.bacp.co.uk/ethical\\_framework/](http://www.bacp.co.uk/ethical_framework/)

<sup>48</sup> For full text, see: [http://www.bacp.co.uk/prof\\_conduct/index.html](http://www.bacp.co.uk/prof_conduct/index.html)

[http://www.bacp.co.uk/prof\\_conduct/making\\_complaint.html](http://www.bacp.co.uk/prof_conduct/making_complaint.html)

For complaints of sufficient seriousness, termination of membership may result. Three categories of misconduct are identified: professional misconduct; professional malpractice; and bringing the profession into disrepute. Where the outcome of a complaint or portion of the complaint is upheld, this will be publicly reported, both in BACP's Journal and on the website, together with any sanction imposed. The Association's response to the charge of bringing the profession into disrepute includes the discretion to take disciplinary proceedings against members convicted of a criminal offence or who have civil or professional findings against them that should have been declared when applying for membership or arising during the membership). An appeal's procedure is available for members against whom a complaint is made.

The panels convened to deal with complaints comprise members trained up to lay magistrate standard. A senior representative stated that the Association 'executes its civil burden of professional responsibility to a high level'. The same source indicated that the number of complaints against a member numbered approximately one hundred. About forty of these are accepted and processed. Whilst this is a very small proportion of the membership, it is thought that in terms of the Public Protection agenda, it represents an important contribution.

#### *UK Register of Counsellors*

This Register represents a response to a 'growing public concern'. Its aim is:

*To provide the public and others with an understandable, specific UK standard that recognises counsellors who offer safe and accountable practice.*

(Available: <http://www.ukrconline.org.uk/>)

Specifically, it sets out to:

- Offer impartial information and therefore, protection, to the general public
- Advise both insurers and employers in matters relating to competence
- Recognise good counselling in many appropriate contexts

(Available: <http://www.ukrconline.org.uk/>)

To achieve registration, an independent counsellor must have achieved accreditation through a recognised organisation (i.e. the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), the COSCA (Counselling and Psychotherapy in Scotland), Federation of Drug and Alcohol Professionals (FDAP) and the United Kingdom Association of Humanistic Psychology Practitioners (UKAHPP)), though not all those who are accredited are registered. A registered counsellor must:

- be appropriately trained and qualified
- work to a Code of Ethics & Practice
- be subject to a Complaints Procedure

(Available: <http://www.ukrconline.org.uk/>)

Individual accredited status is renewed annually, through the assessment of continuing professional development and supervision. Additionally, the Association carries out random monthly audits on 5% of the renewal applications.

The BACP<sup>49</sup> advocates using a registered counsellor, because 'it offers reassurance and a 'hallmark' of good practice. It ensures a support system in the event of misunderstanding within a counselling contract'.

#### *Professional development*

BACP sets recognised standards for the delivery of education and training. By awarding accredited status to suitable counselling and psychotherapy courses, BACP claims that it 'enables those starting and advancing in the field

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<sup>49</sup> Available at: <http://www.ukrconline.org.uk>

to achieve a level of excellence recognised throughout the profession'. Those individuals who have successfully achieved BACP accredited status are nationally recognised as counsellors, psychotherapists, supervisors and trainers, practising to high professional standards. At the centre of the re-accreditation process is continuing professional development and reflective practice. By these means, BACP seeks to ensure that 'accredited members remain at the forefront of the profession'.

A programme of conferences, seminars, workshops and other training events is run each year, which provides continuing professional development opportunities for members and associated professionals.

Government are increasingly exerting pressure on the 'talking therapies' to regulate. The Health Professions Council has been identified as the possible regulator of Counselling and Psychotherapy. The Department of Health's goal is for these professions to be regulated by 2008. However, the whole issue of the regulation of non-medical health professions is currently under review. The opinion of the BACP member interviewed was that it is unlikely that this process would be as rigorous as the current BACP Register.

#### *Membership categories*

BACP offers three categories of membership: student (£54 pa); Associate (£112 pa); and Affiliate (£79 pa). In addition, organisational membership is available as follows: Local Voluntary or Charitable (£171 pa); National Voluntary or Charitable (£224 pa); and Commercial (£420 pa)<sup>50</sup>.

#### **4.2.3 Institute of Career Guidance (ICG)**

The Institute of Careers Officers was founded in 1961 as a result of a 'growing liaison' between the Association of Juvenile Employment and Welfare Officers and the Youth Employment Staffs Guild. It subsequently changed its name to the Institute of Career Guidance. The mission of the ICG is:

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<sup>50</sup> [http://www.bacp.co.uk/join\\_bacp/membership\\_categories.html](http://www.bacp.co.uk/join_bacp/membership_categories.html)

*To promote the delivery and development of high quality services that enable informed educational, training and occupational choices, and effective career management.*

<http://www.icg-uk.org/missionandaims.html>

Its aims are to:

- Be the informed centre for ethical and best practice, research and development, education and training for all those interested in the practice, growth and influence and future of guidance.
- Be the leading professional association for guidance practitioners in the UK - the organisation for experts on choices for learning and work.
- Support best practice in whatever context our members operate and to be the focal point for all guidance practitioners - researchers, guidance workers, managers and trainers - to share their knowledge and enjoyment of the profession in which they are engaged
- Work collaboratively with other organisations and agencies interested or involved in guidance to influence policy makers and to promote quality standards.
- Raise awareness of and promote the benefits of guidance.

<http://www.icg-uk.org/missionandaims.html>

The ICG is governed by its Board (comprising seven members) and the Council (comprising Board members, regional representatives and chairs of committees). The Institute's Council agrees the strategic aims, and professional direction of the Institute. There are three committees: Research, Professional Development, Ethics and Standards and Adult Guidance, with membership comprising approximately forty volunteers.

#### *Code of Ethics*

The Ethics and Standards Committee consists of twelve volunteers, who have been approved by the membership and Committee members to sit on this Committee. It is responsible for safeguarding professional standards for its

members through the code of ethics. This code specifies principles to which all members commit as a condition of membership. These principles comprise: equality of opportunity; impartiality; accessibility; confidentiality; responsibility to clients and professional development. A formal procedure exists for any breach of this code, which is operated through the Ethics and Standards Committee. Penalties that can be exerted for proven malpractice relate to expulsion from the Institute.

#### *Professional development*

The ICG offers a range of continuing professional development (CPD) training programmes to members and associated professionals, designed to develop and support best practice.

Additionally, it also manages the Qualification in Guidance (QCG), on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills. This is a one year, full time, off-the-job training offered by fourteen UK universities. Through its QCG Advisory Committee, the ICG 'maintains the quality of the Qualification in Careers Guidance (QCG), ensuring that it remains fit for purpose as the initial guidance qualification in the UK'.

The Professional Development Committee is a Standing Committee of Council. Its role is to ensure 'effective and seamless linkages between initial training and continuing professional development and it is responsible for making recommendations and providing advice to Council on the strategic and professional direction for initial training.

#### *Register of Practitioners*

The Institute operates a Directory of Registered Career Practitioners. Members who wish to have their details added to the online directory must be on the ICG Register of Guidance Practitioners. Criteria for admission to this register are currently: being a full member of the Institute with a recognised qualification at level 4 or above; having a commitment to CPD; practising guidance; and having affirmed that they will work within the Institute's Code of Ethical Practice

### *Membership categories*

ICG offers five categories of individual membership: full member (£96 pa); full member: lower income (£68 pa); full member: retired (£54 pa); full member: unwaged (£30 pa); and student member (£30 pa). In addition, organisational membership is available (£310 pa)<sup>51</sup>.

### 4.3 Conclusion

Professional associations represent a potentially powerful means of complementing and strengthening formal QA systems. They are increasingly attending to regulatory practices that require evidence of continuing professional development. Perhaps the real power of the professional association is that it operates on the principle of peer review. There are no contractual requirements imposed on individual members. Membership is usually voluntary, so motivation is high to comply with procedures that make clear statements about professional status and competence. In addition, in terms of cost implications, the cost of membership is likely to be borne by the individual practitioner, (except, of course, in the case of organisational membership). The potential for synergy between association membership and more formal employment requirements is great, though, in common with other areas related to training, is one for which the actual evidence of impact is currently lacking.

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<sup>51</sup> <http://www.icg-uk.org/categories.html>

## 5. Managing Quality Assurance

### 5.1 Perspectives on Quality

Services differ from products because they are 'simultaneously produced and consumed', and customers 'are involved in the production of many services'<sup>52</sup>. Hence a definition of service quality is 'meeting and/or exceeding customers' expectations'. It is difficult, however, 'to define and deliver what meets customers' needs, let alone provide services that do what they are designed to do'. Consequently, 'surrogates of quality' are used. These surrogates 'invariably equate quality with delivery, (that is, the achievement of quantitative targets that focus on economy and efficiency)' <sup>53</sup>.

A common framework for analysing quality is time waited: timeliness, completeness, courtesy, consistency, accessibility and convenience, accuracy, responsiveness<sup>54</sup>. So:

[R]ather than remaining a more or less separate or imperfectly integrated control system, [total quality management] is the *generation of structures and a culture of quality to pervade all aspects of the organisation* ... quality management principles become the taken-for-granted assumptions that govern working relationships - vertically and horizontally – within the organisation, *and* with suppliers and customers<sup>55</sup> (italics in original).

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<sup>52</sup> Legge, K. (1995) *Human Resource Management: Rhetorics and Realities*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, (p 213).

<sup>53</sup> Legge, (1995) *Human Resource Management: Rhetorics and Realities*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, (pp 237-238).

<sup>54</sup> Evans, J.R. & Dean, J.W. (2000) *Total Quality: Management, Organisation, and Strategy*, Cincinnati, OH: South-Western College Publishing.

<sup>55</sup> Legge, K. (1995) *Human Resource Management: Rhetorics and Realities*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, (p 219).

## 5.2 Perspectives on Managing

For the managers of organisations (as for IAG clients), the world 'is an essentially ambiguous place in which we cannot realistically make detailed plans'<sup>56</sup>. In his discussion of how managers need 'to make meaning' in this ambiguity, Watson<sup>57</sup> cites one of the characteristics that Peters and Waterman (1982)<sup>58</sup> identified in 'excellent' organisations: the simultaneous use of 'loose-tight controls'. Watson<sup>59</sup> writes (p 17): 'in managing organisations, loose-tight controls - using culture and shared values - work better than traditional 'tight' ones. This is, first, because it fits with what human beings are essentially like (meaning-making creatures) and, second, because it fits with what the world is like (an unpredictable and ambiguous place).' He then points to the significance of language, dialogue, and rhetoric in managers': the construction of meaning.

Eccles and Nohria (1992)<sup>60</sup> analyse management as using rhetoric, taking action, and recognising individual identities. For them, rhetoric need not be deception or extraneous decoration, but what can stimulate action:

'Rhetoric is something that can be used and abused, but it *cannot* be avoided (original italics). Rather, it constantly serves to frame the way we see the world. In our view, rhetoric is used well when it mobilizes actions of people in a way that contributes both to the individuals as people and to the performance of organisations as a whole'.

They go on to argue that 'robust', or powerful, rhetoric:

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<sup>56</sup> Watson, T.J. (1994) *In Search of Management: Culture, Chaos and Control in Managerial Work*. London: Routledge, (p 16).

<sup>57</sup> Op cit

<sup>58</sup> Peters, T.J. & Waterman, R.H. Jr. (1982) *In Search of Excellence*, New York: Harper & Row.

<sup>59</sup> Op cit

<sup>60</sup> Eccles, R.G. & Nohria, N., with Berkley, J. (1992) *Beyond the Hype: Rediscovering the Essence of Management*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, (p 10).

- combines 'an imaginative vision of the future, a realistic portrayal of the present, and a selective depiction of the past which can serve as a contrast to the future'; (p 32)
- employs a variety of devices such as metaphors, analogies, stories, myths, slogans, maxims; and
- is broad and flexible enough (retains sufficient ambiguity) 'to incorporate the different meanings, emphases, and interpretations that different people will inevitably give it' (p 35). It transmits 'a common message to a large number of people, while being able to impart specific meanings and interpretations to these ideas depending on the situation in hand' (p 36).

In addition, they<sup>61</sup> write of the 'rhetoric of rationalization' (which is how quality assurance could perhaps be categorised). 'Cloaking actions with the rhetoric of rationality is a way for managers to build legitimacy for their actions. The objective, unbiased, impersonal, and logical nature of rational reasoning makes it more palatable to others and more persuasive.' It gives:

*'people in the company a framework for thinking about the activities they were engaged in, and a sense of mastery over these activities* (original italics). In essence, we found that the rhetoric of rationality was crucial in the way it allowed people to get a grasp on an uncertain and constantly changing environment.

What was most important, however, was that this rhetoric of rationality did *not* interfere with the way managers really acted (original italics). The plans were sufficiently flexible in and of themselves that they were not seen as overly constraining to managers.'

The management of quality of IAG needs to be built into the organisation's overall concern for quality, that is, within total quality management. This

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<sup>61</sup> Eccles, R.G. & Nohria, N., with Berkley, J. (1992) *Beyond the Hype: Rediscovering the Essence of Management*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, (pp 52-53).

embraces the organisational culture and management of employees as well as the quality of their service delivery.

QA is largely explicitly concerned with controlling procedures, but managers' use of rhetoric (both negative and positive) must also be recognised. (It is perhaps worth noting that IdA's provision of guidance is informed by two aspects of contemporary management discourse: individual empowerment and managerial efficiency).

## 6 Reflections & Conclusions

### 6.1 The provision of IAG

The whole IAG process is characterised by **ambiguity** and **indeterminateness**. First, there is an 'operational ambiguity' in guidance<sup>62</sup> with uncertainty related to what exactly is 'career' and what is 'guidance'. Second, having or making a career is about making personal meaning in an ambiguous world. Individuals may be uncertain of the issues they want help from an IAG service to resolve, or find them complex, dynamic and/or ambiguous. Third, the very nature of 'career' implicates the future. The benefit of IAG can only be identified in terms of choice of pathway, direction, pace, staging-points, the opening (and not closing) of doors, not of ultimate achievement of goal: IAG is **open-ended**. Hence judgement of its efficacy is likely to change over time as the future unfolds; how it was valued will depend upon when that judgement is made.

### 6.2 Stakeholders and expectations

There are many **stakeholders** in the IdA service: callers, advisers, service managers, call-centre contractors, the IdA, Learning and Skills Council, Adult Learning Inspectorate, Department for Education and Skills, and other government policy makers. Hence there are many and diverse **expectations** of the service.

Definitions of the key elements of the service and expectations of outcomes, boundaries and standards (on the part of callers, advisers, service managers, and government policy-setters etc.) are key issues. These need to be addressed, not only to satisfy clients but also to provide the basis for quality assurance. How can realistic expectations be achieved (shaped)?

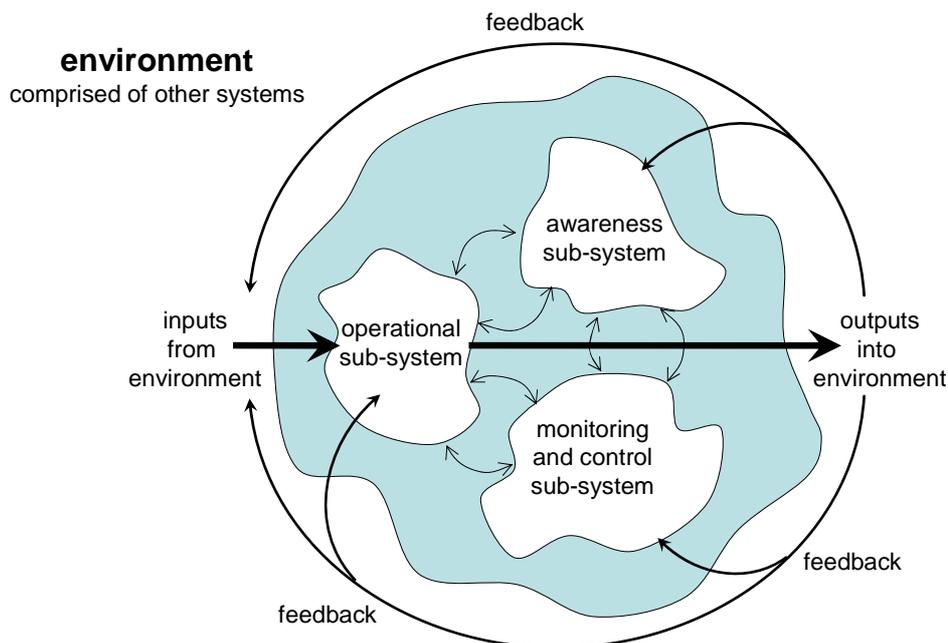
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<sup>62</sup> Barnes, S-A. (2005) *What is effective guidance? Evidence from longitudinal case studies in England*, Warwick Institute for Employment Research, No 78. Barnes, IER Bulletin, p 3

Given that the process of IAG is indeterminate, how can client satisfaction be assured at the (sometimes arbitrary) points at which it is assessed? Perhaps this issue is partly resolved by encouraging the client to be aware of small gains along the way. This is implied in the IdA web-site, which refers to the caller making notes before the call to identify what they want to discuss; working through interest and skills exercises in the 'Futures' package; and agreeing an action plan with the adviser at the end of interview. It would seem important that the caller achieves some transferable learning from the call - to use by themselves in the future (such as a decision-making strategy).

### 6.3 Managing ambiguity

It may be worth considering the use of a **systems model** to conceptualise holistically the complex and dynamic process of career (Collin, 1990<sup>63</sup>; Patton & McMahon, 1999<sup>64</sup>). A (career) system has three sub-systems:



**Figure 1 Model of an open system**

<sup>63</sup> Collin, A. (1990) Mid life career change research. In Young, R. A. and Borgen, W.A. (Eds) *Methodological Approaches to the Study of Career*, Praeger, 197-220.

<sup>64</sup> Patton, W. & McMahon, M. (1999) *Career Development and Systems Theory: A New Relationship*, Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks Cole Publishing Company.

These three sub-systems comprise:

- the operational sub-system transforms inputs to outputs;
- the awareness sub-system scans the environment for opportunities and threats; and
- the monitoring and control sub-system makes internal adjustments in response to feedback from the reception of the outputs in the environment.

Inputs to the career system could include previous experience and qualifications, availability of jobs, child care, etc. Outputs might be the development of further skills, job satisfaction, stress, etc., affecting other systems in the environment to a lesser or greater degree. Those and other **changes to those systems** can have knock-on **effects upon the career system** through its inputs and the reception of its outputs. Such a model could be used as the basis for discussion between adviser and customer/client, to map, for example, the possible effects of various options. Customers/clients could be encouraged to use it on their own to monitor changing circumstances and the implications for their career. At a meta-level, the model could also be used by policy-makers or service managers to map the changing world of work and its implications for IAG.

Because **ambiguity is inherent** in both IAG and organisations, rhetoric is inevitable, but **what is needed is 'robust rhetoric'** (Eccles & Nohria, 1992<sup>65</sup>) at all levels (government, centre managers, advisers). Using the notion of 'loose-tight' controls (Watson, 1994<sup>66</sup>) and rhetoric (Eccles & Nohria<sup>67</sup>), it would be worth considering how service managers could influence the quality of service delivery by combining the existing 'tight' controls of 'rational' quality procedures (as in ALI, with surrogates such as call connection rates, or the

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<sup>65</sup> Eccles, R.G. & Nohria, N., with Berkley, J. (1992) *Beyond the Hype: Rediscovering the Essence of Management*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

<sup>66</sup> Watson, T.J. (1994) *In Search of Management: Culture, Chaos and Control in Managerial Work*. London: Routledge

<sup>67</sup> Op cit

**matrix** Standard) with the 'loose' controls of culture and values. Total quality management appears to be recognised in the **matrix** standard (e.g. element 6), but could be developed explicitly. More specifically, the organisational and employee culture could be appropriately influenced where, through both **rhetoric and practice**, IAG service delivery managers demonstrated effective concern for the careers of their call centre (IdA) employees. This could influence how those employees both interpreted and responded to the career concerns of callers, and thereby inform the quality of their service delivery.

#### 6.4 Cost-effectiveness versus quality

A balance needs to be achieved between **cost-effectiveness and quality**. Pass *et al.* (2000)<sup>68</sup> cite cost-effectiveness as the achievement of the maximum provision of a good or service from given quantities of resource inputs. It is often used where organisations have a given level of expenditure to provide a maximum amount of service, in a situation where service outputs cannot be valued in monetary terms. Some quality assurance models for career guidance (e.g. Sampson *et al.*, 2004<sup>69</sup>) recognise the critical importance of relating cost of delivery with the quality and effectiveness of delivery. However, there exists a paucity of data relating to costs and benefits and how these can be broken down and analysed either by specific target group(s) and/or by specific guidance interventions.

#### 6.5 Defining and measuring what is to be quality assured

Finally, four key challenges related to defining and measuring what is to be quality assured in guidance can be identified:

- The **terminology** used to describe quality assurance and how this links to evaluation or measurement of initiatives needs to be made not only more **explicit**, but also more **consistent** within and across

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<sup>68</sup> Pass, C., Lowen, B. & Davies, L. (2000) *Dictionary of Economics* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Glasgow: Harper Collins.

<sup>69</sup> Sampson, J.P., Reardon, R.C., Peterson, G.W. & Lenz, J.G. (2004) *Career Counseling and Services: a Cognitive Information Processing Approach*, Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

organisations, so that data can become more generalisable and comparable.

- A further critical challenge is how best to design an **organisationally user-friendly data management system** that has both meaning and relevant application to managers and practitioners. There is scope to review this in terms of existing 'centralised' data management systems and how these relate to more 'localised' policies and practices.
- The guidance community also faces a major challenge regarding the extent to which **data** have been gathered and analysed **to demonstrate particular delivery strategies are more effective than others for the majority of clients**. Similarly, are certain strategies only effective for certain individuals or target groups?
- Those engaged in delivering guidance activities are often **not sufficiently trained in techniques of data gathering and analysis** to help explain the impact of their work. Whilst the term 'quality' is seldom disputed, the term 'measure' or 'performance indicator' may pose a potential threat to some, the latter being viewed as punitive in scope, rather than for the purpose of service evaluation and development.