

BULLETIN

Developing career trajectories: Researching effective guidance two years on

This *Bulletin* presents interim findings from a five year longitudinal qualitative study researching the nature of effective guidance undertaken by the Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER)¹. The evidence presented is the third year of the study and follows on from previous *Bulletins* (No. 78 and 84). Analysis of data from the follow-up interviews with participants, two years on from their case study guidance interview, is presented. This is one of many careers guidance and learning projects that have been undertaken by IER or that are currently in progress.

Introduction

A qualitative, longitudinal study investigating the nature of effective guidance in England is being conducted over the period 2002 to 2008. It has been funded by the Department for Education and Skills, Access to Learning Division. This *Bulletin* summarises the findings from the follow-up interviews with clients two years after they received guidance.

The overall aim of this study is to use a qualitative, longitudinal case study approach to investigate the nature of effective guidance for adults and how, over the longer-term, it can add value to post-compulsory learning and enhance employability. It began with a detailed investigation of 50 in-depth case studies across varied guidance contexts (2003-2004) (for the full report see Bimrose, *et al.*, 2004). Each case study included a detailed examination of a guidance interview from the perspectives of the client receiving guidance, the practitioner giving the guidance and an independent third party. The purpose of the four follow-up phases of the research, scheduled over the period 2004-2008, is to track the career progression of the 50 clients who were the recipients of guidance in these original case studies.

Of the original 50 clients, 45 were successfully contacted and interviewed by telephone one year after the case study interview (2004-2005). These follow-up interviews, one year on, tracked the achievements and aspirations of clients,

providing rich insights into contrasting career trajectories (for the full report see Bimrose, *et al.*, 2005).

Two years on, 36 clients were interviewed by telephone about their career progression over the previous year (2005-2006), findings of which are presented in this *Bulletin*. The aims of this phase of follow-up were to explore: client transitions during the second year after their case study guidance interview; and how career trajectories have been influenced by the guidance received in the initial phase of investigation. The objectives for the third year of the investigation were to:

- track the career progress of clients since the year one follow-up interview;
- determine whether progress actually achieved was indicated at their year one follow-up interview;
- investigate the clients' perceptions of the role of their initial case study guidance interview in their career progression;
- evaluate the extent to which action plans agreed in the case study interview have been implemented (and/or continue to be implemented); and
- explore the nature and value of any follow-up guidance received.

¹ For the full text of the third report presented in this *Bulletin* see: Bimrose, J., S-A. Barnes and D. Hughes (2006) *Developing Career Trajectories in England: The Role of Effective Guidance*. Coventry: Warwick Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick. <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/publications/bydate/egreportnov06.pdf>

Key findings from the initial phases of the study

In this research, 'effectiveness' has been defined as what the recipients of guidance (the clients) found useful. The majority (98%, n=49) who participated in the initial phase of this research evaluated their guidance interview as 'useful', immediately after the event. One year on, 87% (n=39) of clients still regarded their guidance as 'useful', whilst 11% (n=5) were less sure of its value. One client still felt that her guidance had been of no value.

Five strong themes emerged from the data indicating ways clients found their guidance useful. It gave access to specialist information, reduced confusion, motivated or provided new insights, confirmed ideas and built confidence.

Findings indicated that guidance is also useful to clients in supporting their transitions into and through professional learning and development. Guidance had acted as a catalyst for positive change, even where agreed action had not been implemented nor advice followed. Overall, 78 per cent (n=35) of clients who were followed-up felt that guidance had resulted in direct and positive change.

The first year of follow-ups documented further evidence of the positive impacts of guidance. One year on, over half of the clients (53%, n=24) were improving their occupational competence, by engaging with education or training. They were involved variously with up-skilling, re-skilling or training for re-entry to the labour market. Four barriers to career progression were identified, which had prevented clients from implementing the action plans agreed during the case study interview. These comprised: financial constraints; childcare commitments; health issues and local labour market conditions.

Many clients, who had recently completed higher education, were experiencing prolonged transitions into the labour market. They were using various strategies to progress their careers, including testing out various options, 'buying time' and actively trying to clarify values.

So far, the findings have emphasised the importance of incorporating the concept of 'distance travelled' by the client in evaluations of the impact of guidance. Even where no direct relationship was found between agreed action and subsequent career progress, guidance was found to have played a crucial role. Career transitions are complex and lengthy, with quantifiable outcomes (like placement into education, training or employment) alone inadequate indicators of whether a client has, actually, made progress towards a longer term career destination.

Tracking changes in client employment status and qualification level

As part of the follow-up interviews clients were asked about their highest qualification and employment status, so changes that had occurred since the case study interview could be tracked.

Highest qualification gained

At the time of the case study interview, 76% of clients (n=38) had a Level 4 or below qualification. Two years on, 53% (n=19) had a Level 4 or below qualification. Twenty-four per cent of clients (n=12) had a Level 5 or above qualification at the time of the case study interview, two years on 47% (n=17) have a Level 5 or above qualification. Of the seven clients with either no qualifications or a Level 1 qualification at the time of their case study interview, four were contacted for the second follow-up and three reported gaining higher level qualifications.

Whilst it should be stressed that no general claims of causality can be made regarding the relationship between guidance and increased qualifications, these data are consistent with previous findings from this study, which indicated that over half of the clients (53%, n=24) were engaging with education or training for the purpose of progressing their careers.

Employment status changes

Since receiving guidance during the case study interview, the employment status of many clients participating in this study had changed. Data indicated the impact of care responsibilities, changes in occupation, hours worked and promotions. Data showed how changes recorded included: different jobs; promotion within the same job; engagement with voluntary work and training and/or education. (Caution is required in interpreting these data, as the cohort numbers have decreased slightly over the course of the research.)

Across all organisational contexts in which guidance was given, the number of unemployed clients has decreased over the period since the case study interview.

Whilst cohort data relating to qualification level and employment status indicate general career trends for the research sample, they provide only limited understanding of the detailed career trajectories of individuals as they unfold. What difficulties have clients overcome in pursuing education or employment goals? How have they tried to overcome obstacles? What have been the successes? What techniques and strategies have been used by clients to achieve success? Answers to these, and other, questions will be explored in the next section.

Career trajectories: navigating barriers, maximising opportunities

Details of the career trajectories of 36 clients over a three year period (extending from the initial case study, through two follow-up phases of investigation) have been recorded. This section summarises the progress of these individuals and offers a threefold categorisation of client responses to their circumstances, typifying: career disengagement, career investment and career change. It also comments on the role of guidance in this process for some clients.

Career disengaged

At the time of the second follow-up interview, nine clients were grappling with problems that were preventing them from realising their career aspirations. In many cases, clients regarded these problems as insurmountable and felt disengaged from the labour market. Three sets of circumstances can be identified, which have resulted in the labour market marginalisation of individuals trying to deal with them. These were: health problems; unfavourable local labour markets; and childcare responsibilities.

It should be noted that in the first year follow-up, one additional barrier was identified, financial constraints. For those grappling with financial constraints, circumstances had changed over the intervening period, together with their priorities. One example is of a client who felt trapped in a job he disliked by financial commitments. He had, subsequently, re-considered an earlier career interest in teaching, with research subsequently undertaken revealing how it was, after all, feasible to enter training. One other example relates to a client who had had her second child and returned to work full-time. So, time constraints had become the primary barrier for her, rather than finance.

Career investors

At the time of their second, follow-up interview, eleven clients were continuing to invest in their own human capital development to improve their labour market value. These clients were variously:

- securing the qualifications needed to pursue ambitions;
- securing work experience to enhance their chances of achieving longer term career aims; and
- investing in further higher qualifications to enter their chosen areas, so were currently undertaking graduate training schemes.

A career investor, a single mother of a school-age child, had enrolled as a full-time mature student at her local FE College. Training to be a hairdresser was this client's original ambition, but the nearest college offering the course was too distant, given childcare responsibilities. As an alternative, she enrolled on an Adult Returners' Course. Two years after her case study interview, she was doing what she described as 'social science subjects, with women's bits!', together with GCSE Maths and English. The course also provided the opportunity to achieve formal accreditation in other subjects, which include sociology, psychology, study skills, research methods and ICT. She regards the guidance support she received as 'very helpful', which proved to be 'a stepping stone'. Her longer term career goal is to enrol on an Access to Higher Education course.

All of these eleven clients had recognised that achieving a high level career goal involves considerable investment, not only in educational qualifications, but also in the workplace experience they can offer potential employers. They were all

prepared to sacrifice short-term rewards to secure longer term ambitions. As a consequence, they are engaged in prolonged career transitions; often with uncertainty attached to the possible outcomes. This is increasingly typical of the career trajectories of many young people making their transitions from education into the labour market (Elias, *et al.*, 2005) and represents particular challenges for guidance (Roberts, 1997).

Career change

The distinguishing feature of the career trajectories of the remaining sixteen clients was the career changes they had made in the two years since their initial guidance interview. Two types of career changers were identified:

Strategic careerists

Eight clients saw their current occupational position and/or organisational attachment as one phase of a career that involved relatively frequent changes in the nature of their employment. They were committed to 'moving on' and saw their careers as something they actively constructed. They were reconciled to the need to adapt and update their skills, knowledge and understanding constantly.

A strategic careerist, a young male client, had been employed in financial administration since leaving University. He had organised his initial guidance interview because he felt 'trapped' in this job and wanted something that used his degree subject. However, various constraints (financial and geographical) were proving to be problematic. When he left university, he had thought of teaching, but not pursued this idea. He had started thinking about this option again. After undertaking some research, he realised that it was financially feasible and submitted an application for teacher training. Two years on, this client had resigned from his job and started a PGCE course, with the intention of teaching in a secondary school.

Opportunistic careerists

This term describes those individuals who have taken opportunities that have presented themselves, however unexpected, and tried (often successfully) to turn them to their advantage. Eight clients in this study demonstrated this approach to career change.

One client displaying this type of trajectory is a middle-aged man who had been out of work since April 2003 after suffering a stroke caused by job-related stress. A career change was recommended by the medical consultant. At the time of his initial case study interview, the client was very uncertain (given his medical history) about the viability of his returning to full-time employment, but was concerned about his financial situation. The unexpected hospitalisation of his wife had placed a further strain on the family's finances. He decided to return to part-time employment, initially, to test out his resilience to work.

Two years on: clients' reflections on their guidance interview

A key objective of this research study is to evaluate the effectiveness of guidance interventions, from the perspective of the client. Two years on, the proportion of clients contacted who regarded their case study interview as useful had reduced further, to 72% (n=26). However, the client who had expressed a negative opinion about the guidance she had received during the first phase of data collection was now able to identify ways in which she had, in fact, acted on advice received in her case study interview. This finding supports the expectation that, where an effective challenge is made within a guidance interview relating to an unrealistic career belief or expectation, the client's initial reaction is likely to be negative. In the light of events unfolding subsequently, the client may, however, be able to reflect on the realistic nature of the guidance.

Of the remaining ten clients followed up two years on, five (14%) were either less sure about the usefulness of the guidance received, or believed that, with the benefit of hindsight, it had been of limited use. A further five (14%) could no longer recollect the guidance they had received sufficiently well to feel able to comment on its usefulness. This represents an increase in the number of clients who expressed uncertainty about the usefulness of their case study interview one year later (11%, n=5).

Future support and additional help required

Over half of the clients in the sample (53%, n=19) would consider seeking further guidance sometime in the future. Those clients that stated they would return for career guidance to:

- access and utilise resources for job hunting;
- obtain further information on different courses;
- get help with future direction;
- get advice on application and CV writing; and
- discuss ideas.

Some clients discussed their ideas of how information, advice and guidance services could be improved to meet their needs. They identified the need for: better distribution of information; help with accessing and paying for training; access to careers advisers locally; access to careers advice when applying for higher education; (for students) structured careers lectures and/or a higher education module for careers education and guidance; and more support for mothers with dependant children wishing to return to work.

Conclusions

Analysis of the career trajectories of the 36 individuals who participated in the second follow-up phase of this study provides insights into how careers develop in the labour market in England, with a multiplicity of factors combining to

produce complex patterns of movement. Additionally, it increases understanding of how individuals respond to the particular circumstances in which they find themselves and how they attempt to progress their careers.

The evidence from this study suggests that individuals do, indeed, see themselves as having a 'career'. This is particularly apparent in the group of nine individuals who were currently disengaged and/or regard themselves as marginalised from formal employment, since they feel frustrated that, despite their considerable efforts, they have failed to re-enter what they regard as mainstream career opportunities.

The majority of clients in this study, whether or not disengaged from formal employment, saw their career as being both located, and developing, within employing organisations – rather than as autonomous workers or self-employed. Only five of the 36 interviewed expressed any interest in self-employment (two in garden design; one aspiring artist; one unspecified and a fifth who was working autonomously across different teaching institutions because of redundancy). The others were either aspiring towards, or working in, organisational careers like: medicine; paramedical professions; teaching; insurance; hospitality; marketing; events management; social work; social care; work with offenders; community work; and driving examiner. Moreover, the majority recognised and accepted the need to invest, sometimes considerable, resources, to increase their market value.

References

- Bimrose, J., Barnes, S-A., Hughes, D. and Orton, M. (2004) *What is Effective Guidance? Evidence from Longitudinal Case Studies in England*. DfES/Warwick Institute for Employment Research.
- Bimrose, J., Barnes, S-A., and Hughes, D. (2005) *Effective Guidance One Year On: Evidence from Longitudinal Case Studies in England*. DfES/Warwick Institute for Employment Research.
- Elias, P., Davies, R., Purcell, K., and Wilton, N. (2005) *The Class of '99: A Study of the Early Labour Market Experience of Recent Graduates*, DfES Research Report, Sheffield.
- Roberts, K. (1997) 'Prolonged transitions to uncertain destinations: the implications for careers guidance', *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* 25(3); pp. 345-360.

Further information

This study was conducted by Jenny Bimrose, Sally-Anne Barnes and others at IER, together with researchers from the Centre for Guidance Studies (University of Derby) and the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling.

The 'Three years on' report will be published in early 2008. For more information on this report plus other guidance, learning and careers projects at IER contact Sally-Anne Barnes at sally-anne.barnes@warwick.ac.uk.