

BULLETIN

Researching effective career guidance: one year on

Learning, training and careers have been long standing areas of research by the Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER). A specific theme of current research is career guidance. This *Bulletin* presents the findings from a longitudinal qualitative study researching the nature of effective guidance, undertaken by IER¹. The evidence presented follows on from the initial findings presented in a previous *Bulletin* (No. 78). It uses data from the follow-up interviews with participants one year on from their case study guidance interview. This is one of many careers guidance and learning projects undertaken by IER.

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 first year of follow up interviews with clients.

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.

Fifty in-depth case studies were successfully completed (2003-2004) and the clients who participated in the initial investigation are being followed-up over a four year period (through to 2008). The professional contexts in which the case studies have been carried out included: further education, higher education, charitable/voluntary organisations, adult guidance organisations and the workplace.

The first phase of the follow-up investigation contacted the 50 clients from the initial case study investigation by telephone, approximately one year after the guidance interview that featured in the first report (see Bimrose *et al.*, 2004). Forty-

five of these clients agreed to be interviewed. This phase of follow up focused on the progress the clients had made over the last year, their reflections on the guidance interviews, their future plans and next steps.

The objectives for the year one follow up investigation were to:

- track the career progress of clients over the period since their case study interview;
- investigate clients' views of their guidance interview, one year on;
- examine what, exactly, was found useful by clients;
- evaluate the extent to which action plans, agreed a year ago, had been implemented; and
- explore the further guidance received by clients in the interim period together with future support needed.

Researching 'effectiveness'

The difficulties inherent in evaluating effective guidance, especially its longer-term outcomes, are well documented (Maguire, 2004; Hughes *et al.*, 2002; Killeen and White,

¹ This *Bulletin* should be cited as Bimrose, J. and Barnes, S-A. (2006) 'Researching effective career guidance: one year on' *Warwick Institute for Employment Research Bulletin*, Number 84. For the full text of the report presented in this *Bulletin* see: 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. <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/publications/bydate/2005/egreportoct05.pdf>.

2000). Despite this, a good deal of research evidence already exists, though most is from quantitative studies and much from North America. However, even with existing gaps, there is a growing body of evidence to support a claim for the positive effects of guidance (Tyers and Sinclair, 2005; Watts and Sultana, 2004).

The current study builds on recommendations that the understanding of guidance that has been derived from quantitative data should be complemented with insights that can only be gained from qualitative research, particularly longitudinal studies (a recommendation from the review of evidence: Hughes *et al.*, 2002). A case study approach was used for the initial phase of research since it encourages multiple methods of investigation, encourages an overtly involved stance and recognises the importance of context and social structure. It has also enabled detailed comparisons to be made across varied guidance contexts.

The 50 in-depth case studies, carried out in 2003-2004, examined: the client's perceptions of the guidance episode; the practitioner's perceptions of the guidance episode; the perceptions of an 'expert witness' of the guidance episode; together with the structures and operation of guidance services (see Bimrose *et al.*, 2004). Additionally, the strategies and skills used by practitioners were analysed and organised into four broad categories of activities, with 40 sub-sets. The research findings can, therefore, be used both to bring worthwhile career guidance practice into the public arena and give practitioners and clients a voice.

Key findings from the initial phase

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.

Findings indicated that guidance is useful to clients in supporting their transitions into and through professional learning and development when it: provides challenge and direction; gives access to relevant resources; can be accessed over a period of time; brings about positive change(s); and provides support and safety. The research also highlighted how some factors that influence the guidance process come from outside the immediate boundaries of the interview itself (e.g. availability of different types of resources for clients).

A typology of the guidance interview was generated from practitioner interventions across the forty-nine 'useful' interviews. Four discrete categories of activities emerged from a detailed analysis of the interview transcripts. These were: building a working alliance; exploring potential; identifying options and strategies; plus ending and following-through. Each category comprised between three and six sub-sets of activities. Not all activities of guidance were evident across all interviews, nor did any particular combination or sequence emerge.

One year on: achievements and aspirations

A key aim of this longitudinal study is to track clients' career progress and make an assessment of the extent to which this progress can be related to the guidance given during the case study interview. The first follow-up interviews have revealed considerable progress achieved by clients. For example, over the 12 months following the initial guidance interview:

- 58% (n=26) had found new employment;
- 36% (n=11) had gained different work experiences which had assisted their career decision-making (i.e. temping, work shadowing, volunteering);
- 29% (n=13) reported an increase in their self confidence;
- 24% (n=11) were feeling more positive or motivated about work;
- 7% (n=3) had progressed at work (e.g. received a promotion and/or improved salary package, changed job role and received more responsibility).

Overall, 78% (n=35) of the clients who were followed-up felt that guidance had resulted in direct and positive change (such as: a change in their situation, or thinking, and/or future plans; being pointed in right direction; alternative options/ideas to consider; or affirmation of ideas), whilst 31% (n=14) felt guidance had resulted in indirect positive change (such as a realisation that they wanted to achieve more in life; or increased confidence in their actions and/or decisions).

Detailed analysis of exactly what clients had been doing over the past 12 months revealed three broad themes:

- enhancing occupational competence;
- barriers to career progression; and
- prolonged transitions.

Enhancing occupational competence

Fifty-three per cent (n=24) of clients had progressed their occupational competence by undertaking some type of training both in and out of the workplace. Clients were at different stages of training. For example, clients had variously: gained a qualification; actively looked or applied for some form of training or course; changed course; unsuccessfully completed a course; or were still on a course.

Three distinct methods of enhancing occupational competence were identified: up-skilling, within the same occupational area; re-skilling for a different occupational area; and training for re-entry to the labour market after a significant period of absence.

Barriers to career progression

Part of the process of assessing whether the initial guidance interview had been useful to the client was to compare the actions agreed and documented in the 'Action Plan' from the case study interview with the client's subsequent progress. In

19 cases (42%), the client's ability to progress in the direction agreed in the action plan had been impeded by circumstances that could be argued to be outside the control of the client and beyond the remit of guidance. Four barriers to career progression were identified: childcare commitments; financial constraints; health related issues and local labour market conditions.

Prolonged transitions: career indecision

Ten clients (22%) were still trying to make a decision about which career to pursue one year after their case study interview. All were either graduates or students in the process of completing degrees, and at the time of the follow-up interview, were trying to establish their occupational preferences, priorities and associated values.

Three approaches to resolving this indecision were identified: testing out various options; buying time (in the hope that things would become clearer); and pro-actively working to clarify values. For instance:

- five clients had used the year since their case study interview to test out various options, using different strategies;
- three clients had built strategies into their career planning to give them time to experience life and reflect on their options; and
- three clients were pro-actively trying to identify personal values that would guide occupational choices. This was typically being achieved by experimenting with different types of employment and then reflecting on the positive and negative aspects.

Action plans

Action plans, usually agreed towards the end of in-depth guidance, comprised the record of the next steps required to achieve, or progress, clients' career goals. In 84% (n=42), of the initial case study interviews, action plans were used. The follow-up study, therefore, provided one method of evaluating the impact of guidance on clients by examining whether these action plans had been implemented, one year on.

The majority of the clients contacted for the follow-up (89%, n=40) had followed through on some, or all the elements of the action agreed in the interviews (this included clients who were continuing to implement action at the time of the follow-up interview).

Some clients (29%, n=13) had taken limited or no action for various reasons. Four (9%) had begun to follow through on the action agreed (for example, speaking to a tutor or prospective employer), but had received a discouraging response and consequently abandoned their plan. It is interesting to note that, similarly, twelve of the thirteen clients who had taken no or limited action did not attribute this failure to the practitioner.

It was not uncommon for practitioners to agree to undertake some action for clients. Twenty-four per cent of clients

(n=11) explained how practitioners had followed through on action agreed. This included:

- sending information or applications to the client;
- advocating (e.g. speaking to a tutor at a college or on an employment programme on behalf of the client);
- arranging a psychometric test or follow-up interview; or
- researching funding opportunities, occupations or qualifications.

Clients' future plans

Clients' future plans were probed as part of the follow-up study. These can be differentiated into active or inactive plans: those who are currently following through on their plans (active) and those who are still considering what to do next (inactive).

Active future plans included 47% of clients (n=21) actively seeking employment. Other active future plans included: working towards a promotion or job change; undertaking or completing a training course; developing a varied portfolio of experience relevant to employment; changing location, at home or abroad; taking or planning a gap year; and researching different educational and employment opportunities.

Inactive future plans included those clients who are still considering options, but have not yet taken any action. This included those clients (36%, n=16) with education or training aspirations, either for re-entry to the labour market or up-skilling. Inactivity seems, therefore, to be caused by various factors linked to a client's particular circumstances and experiences.

Clients' reflections on their guidance interview

Forty-nine of the 50 clients who participated in the first phase of data collection stated that they had found their case study interview useful. One year on, clients were asked whether, looking back over the past year, their views had changed. Of the 45 clients contacted, 87% (n=39) reported that they still regarded their case study interview as useful, whilst 11% (n=5) were now uncertain whether it had actually been useful. One client still felt that her interview had not been useful.

Where clients still felt the guidance received during their case study interview was useful, reasons were probed. Five categories emerged. Guidance was still regarded as useful where it: had provided specialist information; had helped to reduce confusion; had proved to be either motivational or revelatory; had been confirmatory in some way; and/or had helped build self-confidence.

Further guidance and future support

Twenty-seven (60%) of the 45 clients who were successfully contacted had received further guidance since their case study interview. Clients reported that the further guidance they had

received was: motivational; pivotal in one client gaining employment; and helpful in clarifying training options.

It was found that influences on career progress and support had not solely been from guidance practitioners. Thirty-three per cent of clients (n=15) were influenced, helped or supported by family and friends.

Twelve clients (27%) who were followed-up said that they knew that they could get further guidance if they needed it and that this was important to them.

Clients identified future support that they felt was necessary to help them progress, including:

- talking to a guidance practitioner, either formally and informally;
- getting help from a mentor or progression centre;
- learning about trends in specific occupations and what is happening in the economy by drawing upon the practitioners' knowledge;
- being able to talk to someone who had been in a similar situation;
- getting advice on job and course applications, help with CV writing and psychometric testing;
- finding out about work placements, work experience and training opportunities; and
- accessing additional information (e.g. on financial support for training, educational courses, qualifications required, routes into different careers and vacancy information).

Several of the clients who identified future support in the form of seeing the practitioner again, had appointments to see the practitioner in the near future.

Nine clients (20%) that were successfully contacted said that they did not want or need any further guidance in the future. These clients were clear on their direction and the next steps to achieve their career aspirations.

Conclusions and issues arising

As noted in the first bulletin, investigating what constitutes effective guidance is complex, but the qualitative methodology used for this longitudinal study continues to provide an appropriate investigative and analytic framework.

The research evidence has shown that the measurement of the impact of guidance needs to take account of 'distance travelled' by the client. Participants in this research reported that, even where they had not implemented the action agreed or taken the advice offered, their guidance had acted as a catalyst for constructive change in various ways. This finding emphasises the need to consider career transition as a complex, often lengthy process, where outcomes (like placement into education, training or employment) are inadequate indicators of whether a client has, indeed, made progress towards a longer term career goal.

In some cases, it seems that the clients' career development may be affected by the research process. Examples include where a client decided to return for additional guidance as a result of reviewing his progress over the year with the researcher or where a researcher confirmed a client's understanding of the source of particular information. This will be considered in future phases of the investigation.

Findings from the first year of follow-up have been used to inform the approach to the second year of follow-up². As the career trajectories of individual clients become more differentiated, the interview protocols will, increasingly, have to take this into account. Additionally, careful attention will be given to the effect of the research process on the progress of clients.

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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.

More information on this report plus other guidance, learning and careers projects at IER can be found at <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/glacier> or by contacting Sally-Anne Barnes at sally-anne.barnes@warwick.ac.uk.

² The year two report, 'Developing career trajectories in England: the role of effective guidance', can now be downloaded from <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/publications/bydate/egreportnov06.pdf>.