

BULLETIN

Navigating the labour market and the role of careers guidance

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). The evidence presented is from year four of the study and follows on from previous *Bulletins* (No. 78, 84 and 87). Some findings from the analysis of data from the follow-up interviews with participants, three years on from their case study guidance interview are presented. This study is just one of many careers guidance and learning projects that have been undertaken by IER or that are currently in progress.

Background

A qualitative, longitudinal study of effective guidance in England has been conducted by the Warwick Institute for Employment Research over the period 2002 to 2008, funded by the Department for Education and Skills, Access to Learning Division (subsequently renamed Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills)¹. This Bulletin summarises the findings from the follow-up interviews with clients three years after they received careers guidance.

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of guidance by tracking the career trajectories of research participants over a five year period and to establish the role of guidance in this process. Fifty in-depth case studies were initially completed (December, 2003 to March, 2004). Forty-five of the clients who participated in the first phase of the investigation were contacted by telephone (2004-2005) approximately one year after their case study interview². Thirty-six clients were successfully contacted two years on

(2005-2006) and an analysis of their progress was presented in the third report³.

Three years on – follow-up of clients

The particular aim of this phase of the investigation was to explore client transitions during the third year after the careers guidance interviews, how these related to life changes barriers to progression and how career trajectories had been influenced by the guidance received in the initial phase of the investigation. Of the 36 clients who were interviewed for the second follow-up, 30 (83%) were successfully contacted by telephone for the third follow-up.

Key issues and themes drawn from the previous follow-up interviews were used to inform the development of this phase of the study. It looked at: the current situation of clients; career development and changes over the last 12 months reflections on the initial guidance interview (and any further guidance received); what clients thought guidance should do; self-reflection and developing career management skills decision making, influences and constraints; and plans for the next year.

¹ For the full text of the first report and more detail on the participants (clients) see: Bimrose, J., Barnes, S-A., Hughes, D. & Orton, M. (2004) *What is Effective Guidance? Evidence from Longitudinal Case Studies in England*. Coventry: Warwick Institute for Employment Research and Department for Education and Skills.

² Throughout this bulletin, the guidance interview that clients received as part of the initial, in-depth case study research investigation is referred to as the 'case study interview'.

³ Bimrose, J., Barnes, S-A. & Hughes, D. (2006) *Developing Career Trajectories in England: The Role of Effective Guidance*. Coventry: Warwick Institute for Employment Research and Department for Education and Skills.

Developing careers, skills and plans

The data collected from the follow-up interviews provided some rich insights into changes to occupational and personal roles, skills and competence development and influences on progression. Over the three years since their initial guidance interview, clients' career paths have constantly changed as they progressed in their chosen occupation; changed jobs; moved from unemployment to employment; engaged in a process of up-skilling and re-skilling; and addressed changes in their lives. Findings highlight clients' experiences and reflections on how their careers and skills were developing and their immediate and future plans, career goals and expectations.

The proportion of clients who have entered full-time employment over the period since the case study interview has increased from 22 per cent (11 of the client participants in 2003/04) to 53 per cent (16 of the client participants in 2006/07). However, several clients (30%, n=9) experienced significant changes in their personal life which prompted a re-evaluation of priorities, career goals and employment. In addition to changes in employment status, clients have, variously, over the last year:

- received a promotion and/or pay rise (10%, n=3);
- undertaken a job placement as part of a training course or occupational requirement (20%, n=6);
- completed their training course and/or gained a qualification (13%, n=4);
- gained new skills (such as learning sign language, developing IT skills etc.) (43%, n=13);
- undertaken voluntary work (17%, n=5); and/or
- changed location (including moving house and finding work abroad) (10%, n=3).

The number of clients in education and/or training has remained stable over the last few years, reflecting those clients who left higher education and moved into full-time employment, and those who entered training after their initial guidance interview and are still on their course.

Developing confidence, skills and knowledge

Clients reflected upon, and talked openly about, personal changes, their circumstances and skills. The career development of most participants is evident through their increased self-confidence, greater awareness (of opportunities, and options), together with increased self-efficacy (that is, a stronger belief in their skills and knowledge).

The majority recognised how their self-confidence had increased and many had acquired a greater self-awareness of options. For instance, clients:

- recognised the need for a higher level qualification and/or skills to progress;
- appreciated the likely nature of future job opportunities;
- recognised the value of work experience to support course and job applications; and
- understood currently available educational courses, vacancies and promotions.

Some had become more aware of the vagaries of the labour market, appreciating precisely what they needed to achieve, or complete, before their career plans could be advanced. For others, this increased awareness of labour market realities has not necessarily proved positive.

Irrespective of the precise nature of the impact on clients of increased awareness, it is interesting to note that the majority seemed able to articulate their occupational likes and dislikes more clearly (87%, n=26) and that for the majority, this had been positive. Eleven clients (37%), however, were obviously lacking in confidence in their skills, experience and/or ability to find work or make a decision.

Nevertheless, most clients were able to talk confidently about their career decisions, sometimes adopting a pragmatic approach to the realities of having to cover the bills, pay the rent and accommodate care responsibilities. Proximity to family, home and existing networks have emerged as important factors for many. For others, primacy has been given to an assessment of their skills, needs and abilities in relation to labour market opportunities.

Perceptions of 'career'

As part of developing an understanding of career trajectories and career decision making, clients were asked whether they thought they had a 'career'⁴. Opinions were split. Some (23%, n=7) believed that they did have a career. This was because they were in a position in which they could progress, were financially independent or had gained significant status in their organisation. The same proportion of clients (23%, n=7), in contrast, believed that they did not have a career. These clients talked more in terms of having a 'job'. The largest proportion of clients, however, did not believe that they had a career at present (37%, n=11). Rather, this was something they were working towards. A 'career' for these clients would require gaining a qualification, changing occupation, gaining more experience or achieving a higher level position in their organisation.

Overall, perceptions of what 'career' means were similar. For the majority of participants in this study, this was defined by: the requirement for higher level qualifications; reasonable experience in the field; a higher status in the organisation; the ability to progress; and a position of authority.

Career resilience

Four clients still participating in this investigation four years on were continuing to experience barriers to employment. Two particular barriers to progression that were identified were ill health and out-dated skills.

For successful career advancement, individuals need to navigate and manage difficulties that arise in a sensitive and astute manner. In nine cases (30%), there was clear evidence of career resilience. This was illustrated by clients' proactively taking control of challenging situations.

⁴ Three clients were not asked if they had a 'career', as were experiencing challenging personal circumstances and it was felt by the researcher as inappropriate.

Other examples of career resilience were demonstrated by: a client progressing her career by up-skilling, despite difficult family circumstances; a client who had moved geographical location; three struggling to find employment that fitted with their skills, qualifications and/or career goals; and two clients whose initial course applications were rejected. All have become more determined to succeed by trying other routes and were demonstrating the tenacity they will require to overcome the difficulties that have arisen.

Some clients were also dealing with setbacks in their personal lives. The majority believed that they were able to deal with these setbacks easily (43%, n=13) as they were: optimistic; confident in their own strength and skills; and were able to cope with stress. However, seven clients (23%) indicated difficulties with coping with setbacks and reported losing confidence; not knowing where to seek help; feeling frustrated and stressed; and struggling emotionally.

These examples demonstrate how many are able to manage difficulties effectively and rationalise setbacks in their career because they are self-confident, motivated, engage with positive self-reflection, are adaptable; and have developed high levels of self-efficacy. For some, however, support to manage setbacks is required.

Future plans

As in previous years, clients' future plans, both their immediate (over the next 12 months) and longer-term, were explored as part of the follow-up interview. Clients' immediate plans were categorised as active (where clients were proactively pursuing a course of action) and inactive (where plans and ideas were not being followed through). The majority (67%, n=20) were actively pursuing career plans. These included:

- applications to further and higher education;
- applications for a new job;
- completing a qualification and gaining employment;
- changing conditions of employment;
- addressing skill deficiencies;
- working towards a promotion;
- expanding business; and
- resigning from current employment.

However, eight (27%) were not actively pursuing plans or ideas. They were uncertain about their futures and were still considering options (employment, learning or travel opportunities). Four (13%) felt that their situation was unlikely to change over the next year, with many demonstrating pessimism.

Two clients (7%) were trying to deal with the consequences of ill health and future plans were focused on seeking further help from specialist advisers and recovering.

Regarding longer term plans, ten clients (33%) discussed a range of possibilities, but did not seem set or determined on one particular path. Three (10%) expressed no ideas or plans for the longer term future. The remaining clients discussed a range of ideas, including:

- undertaking further and higher education (20%, n=6);
- changing/progressing in their career or job (53%, n=16);
- learning new skills (17%, n=5); and
- planning a family (3%, n=1).

Four clients (13%) expressed concerns regarding longer-term goals relating to finances, language barriers, local labour market conditions or being over qualified.

A significant number of clients (63%, n=19) expressed a need for help and guidance in the future to achieve their plans, specifically: applying to higher education; changing career or job; gaining more experience; seeking help with personal circumstances; focusing ideas; and discussing future employment possibilities.

Distinctive ways in which clients engaged with the decisions necessary to progress their careers emerged from the data and these will be described in the next section.

Career progression and career decision making styles

Without a clear understanding of the different ways in which adults approach the career decision making process, there is a danger that practitioners will give information and advice to clients that they will find difficult to use. This study has provided the opportunity to collect and analyse data from a sample of adults of different age ranges making transitions in different circumstances, both into and out of education, employment and training over a four year period.

Distinctive approaches to career decision making have emerged from the data analysis. Findings from the third year follow-up corroborate and extend those identified from the second year (that is, three years into the study), where the same four styles emerged from the data, namely:

- evaluative – self-appraisal through the identification and evaluation of individual needs, values and abilities;
- strategic – cognitive processing, basing choices on a process of analysing, synthesizing, weighing up advantages and disadvantages, setting plans to achieve goals, with decisions primarily based on rational conditions;
- aspirational – based on focused but distant career goals, with career decisions inextricably intertwined with personal circumstances and priorities; and
- opportunistic – exploiting opportunities rather than making active choices about work, where plans could seem vague, undecided and uncertain.

The stability of the typologies has been striking, over a period of two years. The styles that emerged for individual participants during the second phase of investigation were further validated against data collected for the third phase of investigation. In only one case was the style assigned in the second phase amended as a result of scrutiny of data from the third phase (from a strategic style to evaluative). Additionally, two clients (7%) who were experiencing barriers to progression in the second phase of the study are

now espousing distinct career decision making strategies as a result of changed circumstances (both demonstrating opportunistic styles). This typology is, however, tentative, with the opportunity to test further the consistency and continuity with which individuals engage with these styles in the final year of the research investigation. Nevertheless, it provides powerful insights to the different approaches adopted by clients in their attempts to navigate their way around the labour market. From the typology, it is also possible to reflect on some implications for the practice of careers guidance (Bimrose and Barnes, 2007).

Reflections on guidance

Throughout this study, the effectiveness of guidance – from the perspective of the client – has been explored. Forty-nine of the 50 clients reported that the guidance received (during the case study interview) had been useful immediately after the event. This has diminished slightly over the period of the study, with 39 of the 45 (87%) clients successfully contacted one year on still regarding their case study interview as useful and 26 of the 36 clients (72%) contacted two years on. The client who had expressed a negative opinion about the guidance she received during the first phase of data collection was, two years on, identifying elements of the guidance that was useful and had acted on advice received.

Consistent with findings from the previous follow-up interviews, there is strong evidence to suggest that clients still value their guidance interviews some time after the event. Four years after their interviews, the majority still regarded their guidance as useful (77%, n=23). However, seven per cent of clients (n=2) were less sure of its usefulness, whilst 17 per cent (n=5) of clients could no longer remember the guidance they had received.

As in previous follow-up interviews, clients' perceptions about useful guidance were explored. Emerging themes were consistent with those highlighted previously. Clients defined guidance as useful when it:

- challenges ideas and understanding;
- inspires self-confidence and self-understanding;
- gives direction, focus or a plan for the future;
- provides access to information, knowledge and computer aided guidance programmes (CAG); and
- provides structured opportunities for discussion with a professional.

There is significant evidence that these adult clients are taking advantage of professional networks to: gain affirmation of their ideas and plans; illicit support and help; and access required information. Personal networks were also being used extensively as 'sounding boards' for ideas.

A significant number of clients expressed a future need for help and guidance in achieving their plans. This was required to help with: applying to higher education; changing career or job; gaining more experience; seeking help with personal circumstances; focusing ideas; and discussing future employment possibilities.

Career management competences play an important role for many clients in exploring employment and learning opportunities, finding employment, increasing their self-confidence and making career-related decisions.

Conclusions

The qualitative methodology used for this five year longitudinal study has continued to yield rich and deep insights into the effectiveness of guidance for adults over a four year period. A significant number of clients expressed a need for guidance support to achieve their plans in the future.

Overall, research findings from this fourth phase of the investigation highlight the complex interaction of individuals' private lives with education, learning, work and worklessness as these unfold and develop over time. Crucially, data illuminate tactics adopted by individuals as they navigate their way into and through the labour market, together with the role of guidance in supporting these transitions. Shifts in the workplace, changing aspirations of individuals, differences in career decision making styles, alongside the strong influence of guidance in supporting individuals' journeys are dominant and consistent themes emerging from the data. In the UK, key policy aims currently include working towards three particular goals: greater labour market flexibility; up-skilling of the workforce; and the reduction of social exclusion. The adult guidance policy landscape in England is currently under review. New structures and delivery arrangements are being considered by policy makers and stakeholders that are intended to strengthen current service provision. Key to the effective delivery of the new services will be an understanding on the part of practitioners and their managers of adaptable models of career progression which support learning and work.

Reference

Bimrose, J. & Barnes, S-A. (2007). Styles of Career Decision Making. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 16(2), 20-28.

Further information

This Bulletin summarises findings presented in the interim report: Bimrose, J. & Barnes, S-A. (2007) Navigating the labour market: career decision making and the role of guidance. Coventry: Warwick Institute for Employment Research and Department for Education and Skills. <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/publications/2008/2007/egreport08.pdf>.

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

For more information on this study plus other guidance, learning and careers projects at IER email sally-anne.barnes@warwick.ac.uk. For further information about other projects visit the IER website at www.warwick.ac.uk/IER or e-mail: ier@warwick.ac.uk.