

Policy Briefing: Re-framing service delivery, professional practices and professional identities in UK careers work

The purpose of this Policy Briefing is to highlight key findings from a major Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) seminar series on UK careers work that has been delivered by the Institute for Employment Research (IER) at the University of Warwick. The seminar series took place from December, 2010 to October, 2012, against a turbulent policy background, during which career policies in the UK have been reviewed, or are being reformulated. The Briefing contributes to the ongoing policy and practice debates by providing greater clarity on the future direction of travel for careers services and highlights key issues relating to emerging professional practices and identities.

Key findings

1. A move from learner-demand led systems to economic and employer-demand led systems is prevalent across the UK (McAlea and North, 2011; and Shaw, 2011). This poses serious challenges and opportunities for all-age careers services as they must be able to show how their contributions engage with individuals, employers and labour market demands (Owen, 2011). Linked to this, is their ‘added-value’ to delivery arrangements in schools, in particular the extent of career learning embedded in the curriculum for young people from an early age (McDermott, 2011). The role of careers services operating alongside Job Centres, Recruitment Agencies, Private Careers Coaching Services and careers services within Further and Higher Education needs to be visible and accessible.

The careers sector requires strong leadership and vision to define and redefine its position as a driver for economic growth and social prosperity.

2. Value and values as a profession are deeply rooted in professional identity formation recently manifested in the coming together of four professional associations to form a new UK Career Development Institute (CDI), now operating alongside a new Institute for Employability Practitioners within the Welfare Reform sector (Mulvey, 2011). The boundaries and inter-relationship between counselling, careers and employability services in public, private and voluntary/community sectors have become more fluid and blurred (Aldridge, 2012) e.g. through co-location delivery arrangements and differing social partnerships (Hughes, 2011). In times of austerity, with an increasing emphasis on ‘payment by results’, the delivery of ethical and professional services becomes more challenging for employers, managers and practitioners (Colley, 2011).

Governments must take steps to protect vulnerable individuals seeking careers support from ‘rogue traders’.

3. The new career adaptability requirement and employability imperative, particularly evident in higher education (Frigerio, 2011), together with evolving destination and performance measures, highlight the difficulties of measuring outcomes through a conventional paradigm (Mc Kenzie, 2011; Hearne & Geary, 2011). The need to understand the complexities of emerging career trajectories in volatile labour markets highlights the importance of high quality labour market intelligence (LMI) in career guidance and coaching (Bimrose, 2011). Measuring outcomes from careers service interventions has received insufficient attention (Hearne, 2011 & Hughes, 2011) and the evidence-base relating to the social and economic returns on investment for Government and individuals needs to be strengthened to understand lifestyles, pay and conditions.

Well qualified, competent career development professionals are well positioned to support 21st century career trajectories, though need to contribute more directly to the further development of the evidence base on the impact of their practice.

4. Students generally have better access to technology and social media than previously (McDermott, 2011). Whilst the application of technology is no longer a new phenomenon amongst career development professionals (Moffett, 2011; Bimrose & Barnes, 2011); the issue of whether young people seek out career websites (Howieson & Semple, 2011) and/ or careers virtual worlds (Lally, 2012), to support their own career learning remains contested territory. At a UK policy level, there has been a lack of investment in driving forward joint professional training and development for teachers and careers professionals on the integration of ICT in teaching and learning. Findings from Finland (Vuorinen & Kettunen, 2012) and Canada (Bimrose, 2011) indicate the UK is lagging behind in this regard. Likewise, ICT developments linked to Welfare Reform, improved labour market information, job application processes and vacancy handling remain somewhat distant from national careers services.

A lack of co-training and sharing of resources on the usage of ICT, labour market trends, vacancy and salary information means there is significant wastage in the public sector system.

5. Parents and carers are generally key influencers in their children's transitions from learning to work (McStravick, 2012). There are growing concerns that young people's aspirations are 'out of kilter' with the reality of skills shortages within the UK and global labour markets (Hughes, 2012).

Significant time and costs could be reduced by focusing more on career learning for parents and local communities drawing on best practice from EU countries and North America.

Employers' contributions to work experience and work-related learning for young people is under-developed (Parkes & Langtree, 2012) and studies on mental health and well-being (Robertson, 2012) demonstrate high costs in the loss of occupational identity.

Closer working links between employers, trade unions and career development professionals could achieve more transparent understanding of the actual realities of lifelong learning and work.

6. Career learning, curiosity and work identity forms at an early age (McMahon & Watson, 2012) with shortfalls in multicultural training outside of higher education (Mallam-Hassam, 2012) a cause for concern. There is significant scope for clients to be cultural teachers and informants to advise others on career service design and delivery (Barnes, 2012). The concept of all-age careers services funded by the public purse has become a myth rather than reality.

Careers policy-makers and leading careers experts must be attentive to finding the appropriate balance between youth and adult services.

7. Looking back and looking forward (from 1912 to 2012), the careers profession appears to be on the precipice of either reform, accidental injury or suicide (Roberts, 2012). There is some perceived incursion in the role of teachers and career development professionals (Andrews, 2012). Clearly, there is confusion and congestion in cross-government careers policies, with particular overlap and duplication in services for targeted young people (and adults). This is costly and professional identities are being reframed at a rapid pace from within and outside of professional associations (Hughes, 2012).

Careers guidance is at a critical crossroads. Comprehensive, high quality services should be part of an effective programme for tackling unemployment and up-skilling.

Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER) carries out leading-edge research into local, national and international policies and practices on career guidance, learning and work, details available at: www.warwick.ac.uk/go/ier/research/careers-guidance). For further information contact: Professor Jenny Bimrose, Jenny.Bimrose@warwick.ac.uk

Information on the seminar and the presentations referred to in this Briefing can be found at:

www.warwick.ac.uk/go/ier/research/semcomprfs/