

At the Cutting Edge II Learning from research, 28-30 April, 2003

What are we taking away?

Wendy Hirsh and Jenny Bimrose

This session was designed to stimulate the final plenary panel session. It highlighted a few themes from the conference and posed some question to the delegates. It was impossible to attempt to summarise everything that had been said at such a wide ranging event, so the view presented here is selective and personal.

Themes and tensions in career guidance: what is our story?

The Cutting Edge conference pulled in researchers and practitioners from a number of different fields within guidance, working in different ways and with different client populations.

In many ways, the conference has helped us all celebrate the *diversity* of our work. However, there is a fine line between diversity and *fragmentation or incoherence*. In recent years, when the context of guidance has been changing rapidly, it has been important to be able to communicate what we do to others outside our field. The guidance community does not seem to find this easy.

One of the strongest themes in the conference has been that of *narrative*: the power for individuals of being able to tell the story of their lives, and the impact of research which conveys those stories to a wider audience.

Perhaps this theme of *story* is way of us looking at where we are and explaining it to each other and to the wider world. If we seek to do this, there seem to be five strands of the story on which we should be focusing. Each story revolves around a set of questions which others might reasonably expect us to be able to answer.

- The guidance story - how do we explain the nature of career guidance (or whatever we call it)?
- The story of who we are - who gives career guidance to other people and what skills or knowledge do they have which makes a difference?
- The story of our ideas - on what theories and evidence is our work based?
- The lifelong story - what does it really mean to have lifelong or all age guidance?
- The story of managing change - what is the relationship between our views on guidance and the public policy context?

1. The guidance story

The guidance story needs to tell others something about the *core purpose* of guidance, that is why it is important and what is the *centre of gravity* of what we do. Listening to the conference, we make big assumptions that we know what 'guidance' is and of course assume that it is of great benefit to individuals. But how to we justify these views to those who might be committing time or resources to this activity?

One of the recurrent problems with the guidance story is that we have become very hampered in the language we use when talking about our work. By attributing technical meanings to commonly-used words we seem to have deprived ourselves of all the words that normal people use to describe what guidance is about. Some of the words which people had trouble with during the conference included: careers, guidance (pretty tricky if we want to explain career guidance), options, choices, plans, paths, and decisions. Many of these are the words which individuals use when they talk about their working lives. Some of the most vivid sessions dealt with central words like work, lives, and families. Often, however, when we turn to policy matters we lose these powerful anchors for our story, succumbing to terms like 'IAG' - an expression curiously devoid of meaning to anybody. And why do we talk about 'guidance' rather than career guidance? People get guidance on all sorts of matters and need to know what kinds of matters we are talking about. So no apologies about writing here of career guidance not IAG!

On the more positive side, some interesting words and phrases appeared in the conference. Some of the striking ones included:

- The need to raise the *productivity* of guidance
- The danger of the *commodification* of guidance & learners
- Practitioners as *critical consumers* of research
- Information being *necessary but not sufficient* to supporting career decisions

If we can reclaim a more straightforward vocabulary for our work, these are some of the things which the guidance story needs to explain:

- What can individuals expect career guidance to be, and what should they expect out of it?
- How do we explain the links between career guidance and other related issues such as the school curriculum, forms of social support, worklife balance issues, etc.?
- Can we tell the story of guidance in the UK (not just England!) in the context of a wider international appreciation of how different countries and cultures address the same issues?
- How do we explain that career guidance is at the centre of the agenda about work and learning in people's lives, not an optional extra?
- Have we got adequate research on the need for, and impact of, career guidance?

2. The story of who we are

The second story we should be able to tell concerns the people who give career guidance. Some of the conference inputs have celebrated the kinds of guidance given by people to each other, often with little formal training, and in very informal settings. On the other hand we have heard considerable concern about guidance as a highly skilled occupation in danger of being lost, and a dissipation of expertise. And yet recent international research shows the UK to be relatively well resourced with trained practitioners - a finding which somewhat surprised many of us at the conference.

The story of who we are need to explain why career guidance deserves to be taken seriously as a professional service:

- What do career guidance professionals have, or what can they do, which adds particular value?
- What different roles can they play in different settings? This question is essential before we can usefully address the issue of professional training.

Once we are clearer about what career guidance professionals really do, we can address:

- How do we provide leadership for others we work closely with? This is especially important in the many situations where a small number of people with formal training in career guidance are supporting delivery by much larger numbers with very little formal training. This is the case in education, employing organisations and community settings.
- How do we equip and support ourselves? What kinds

of initial and continuing professional training do we need? What structures do we need in place to supervise and support practitioners?

3. The story of our ideas

If career guidance wishes to be seen as a profession, it needs a clear body of knowledge and shared ideas (or theories) which underpin practice. These theories undoubtedly exist, but are not widely or clearly articulated. There also needs to be on-going research and development to keeps ideas developing and flowing into practice. We should be able to explain to others what good guidance should look like, independently of short-term government agendas.

Some of the questions we need to be able to answer might be:

- What do we know about careers? For example the social, political, economic and psychological contexts, how people deal with work, how labour markets work and how they are changing.
- How do we research and learn about careers and guidance? How do we make research findings available to practitioners in a form they will feel is both interesting and useful? How can researchers more easily access the insights and concerns of practitioners? How can we fund wider research on career guidance?
- Given what we know about careers, what feels problematic in current delivery of guidance? Do we have evidence for this?
- How would we deliver if we really could choose (i.e. independently of current public policies)? How would ICT or other options support our models of ideal delivery?

4. The lifelong story

Guidance researchers and practitioners are closer than most to a real understanding of the need for lifelong learning and how this relates to working life. Yet publicly funded guidance for adults either targets only some groups (e.g. the long term unemployed) or consists of 'pilot' schemes which then fold when funding ceases. Most career advice given to employed adults is little influenced by 'professional' career guidance which, as a result of funding regimes, is overly concentrated on those still in education or those out of work.

- What might be more sustainable models for adult guidance, for employed as well as unemployed adults?
- How can the 'market(s) for guidance' develop to make all age guidance a reality? How could we combine public funding with other sources of finance, and employer support?

5. The story of managing change

The final story is about how the guidance community can deal positively with a changing context, especially of public policy. We have to be mature enough to deal with such change, make the most of opportunities offered, and influence policy for the better.

- How can we recognise the reality of public policy, without seeing ourselves overly constrained by it in both research and development of practice?
- Can we maintain a line of sight with firm ideas while dealing with the ever-changing funding and policy hoops of the publicly funded guidance sector? Do we have the skills to roll with these punches without losing confidence in our principles and our skills? The diagram shows the ideal of keeping a strong link between research and practice, whatever the public policy structures in between.



Research POLICY Practice

- How can we better influence public policy and the policies of other key groups (e.g. employers, voluntary sector organisations, educational institutions)? Can the guidance community speak with a clear and united voice on public policy issues?

If the guidance community, of both practitioners and researchers, offers a fragmented and incoherent message to its stakeholders and sponsors, we should not be surprised if we feel uncomfortable with public policy.

This conference has shown that practitioners and researchers are ready to answer these questions and to develop much more dynamic and coherent 'stories' of what career guidance is, how it can help and where it should be going.

The final panel session Ruth Hawthorn

The final session of the conference was a panel discussion chaired by Jenny Bimrose. The panellists were Cathy Bereznicki (Chief Executive, Guidance Council), Malcolm Maguire (Director, NICEC), Tim Oates (QCA), and Dr Linden West, Canterbury Christ Church University College. During the conference the home groups had drawn up questions that arose from their discussions that they wanted to address to the panel members. Jenny had grouped these as follows:

Effectiveness

What are the characteristics of effective guidance and how can they be sustained in the current policy context? Cathy Bereznicki recalled the research carried out by MORI (2001) that looked at what people wanted – people want 'help'. The relation between guidance and policy is a dynamic, and an inevitable one. We need to be confident about the framework of what we do, and put it in context and not beat ourselves because we are being honest about the uncertainties in what we do. The Guidance Council (GC) is looking at guidance from between 3 and 93 and effectiveness must be judged against the whole journey. The GC had already noted that guidance for the 14-19 phase was not well connected with other government policies.

How do we want to be measured? Tim Oates responded that we need to know what we do, who we see, and what they want. We know from the QCA that the measures we adopt will shape what we do. Later he reminded colleagues that we must identify our own measures and apply them ourselves and not wait for outside agencies to do it for us. He pointed out that the same issues were being debated in medicine and education. Linden West urged us not to underestimate de-professionalising forces at work across all communities of practice and reminded us of the significance of language in discussions both with clients and policy-makers. Language doesn't just reflect reality, but shapes it, so we need to think whose language is being used and what the significance of that is.

What should be the current drivers of the guidance community that would create a 'centre of gravity' and ensure independence? Linden West commented that the guidance community needs to be able to identify what it is grounded in, and what it wants to 'talk back' to power about, or it risks losing its centre of gravity. Jenny Bimrose commented that perhaps across all sectors it is the client that is the centre of gravity. Tim Oates suggested that we should think about careers guidance as a public service and urge that it be seen as a public institution by policy-makers

Research & practice

How can we use research evidence to inform delivery and practice? Malcolm Maguire pointed out that we need to be sophisticated about what research can do. Although research findings provide some answers they also provoke more questions. Also he warned that all 'findings' are open to interpretation and practitioners as well as policymakers can be selective in the evidence they use.

What are the conditions which have to be met if practitioners are to be 'critical consumers' of research? Linden West warned that research can mystify as well as illuminate. It can also seem very remote – 'so what?' But there is great potential for teachers and guidance workers to be researchers themselves. It may also help address the all-too-prevalent initiative fatigue: autobiographical

reflection can be good way to re-invigorate a professional (why did I do this in the first place?). This kind of research doesn't attract a lot of money but it's not very expensive either: we don't have to wait for those in power to give us permission (and it can be done as part of a Masters degree).

What action would you suggest to build links between practitioners and researchers? Tim Oates commented that researchers inhabit a very different world. They need to be specialists and some are spectacularly bad at communicating and at relating their work to practice. Practitioners should ask questions all the time, for example, to deconstruct ideas like flexibility. They should contact local higher education institutions when meeting with local networks; build workshops into conferences, put 'keeping up to date with research' into job descriptions. Guidance should be on the agenda of NERF and other DfES research centres.

How can the National Careers Research Forum develop to support research? Cathy Bereznicki reported that the GC consultation had shown enthusiastic support for a forum but that it shouldn't be too bureaucratic or monolithic in the way some other research councils are. It will develop over the next two years in response to need, aiming to be efficient and effective, not to duplicate other activities, and be independent. The Guidance Council did not aim to run it but during this time to hold it 'in trust' for the guidance community.

Influencing policy

How do we/ could we influence policy? Cathy Bereznicki made a four-step suggestion: carry out independent research; present the issues from an authoritative perspective; package them constructively and intelligently to influence public policy makers; do the same for the other key stakeholder groups. In short, create an issues agenda and gather people around it. Indeed, for its tenth birthday in October the Guidance Council is planning to publish an agenda, with five or six key campaigning points, backed up by case studies. This will be linked to a state-of-the-nation report on guidance in the UK that could serve as a benchmark to be revisited in successive years.

'Career guidance is a high priority for public policy making at the international level, but in England is under threat.' Does the panel agree? Malcolm Maguire did not agree that career guidance was under threat within current policy, and mentioned the numerous ways in which guidance had risen on the policy agenda in recent years. Tim Oates pointed out that the government is adopting the US economic strategy of de-regulation, but that the Chancellor is interested in the more European agenda of social cohesion/inclusion, so we need to link guidance to that. Linden West thought that the divisions between policy and research were a particularly English phenomenon and were not so apparent in Scotland and Wales.

Jenny then turned the questioning to the participants and asked them:

What actions would you like to see coming out of this conference and who should take them forward?

On measures of effectiveness:

Margaret Dane, of AGCAS, supported the call to focus on better measures of effectiveness, pointing out that this can be long term, or developmental, and that we need to include whether or not the person themselves feels it makes a difference to them. Dierdre Hughes, of CeGS (Centre for Guidance Studies), thought that the characteristics of effective guidance were that it should be: inspirational, underpinned by intelligence, innovative, and inclusive, covering all age, all sectors. Saskia Kent, of WEETU (Women's Employment Enterprise and Training Unit) in Norwich pointed out the paradox that effective guidance is often invisible. But it is easy to demonstrate there is a need: thousands of people ring up her service every year asking for it!

On practitioners' use of research:

Margaret Dane pointed out that for practitioners the use of research is a matter of habit. There'll always be too much work and we need to find ways to make it easier to access – but the main gain is that it helps us to see things differently. 'Take time to think, take time to read. Let it influence our practice'. Lyn Barham of NICEC pointed out that the concept of 'the guidance community' was problematic, and there wasn't a straightforward description of the relationship between research and practice in the community as a whole. For example, in the voluntary sector, practitioners may be critical users of research in their special areas while unaware of guidance research.

On influencing policy:

Saskia Kent expressed her concern about future of adult guidance, because of the government appears to be diverting resources to the Connexions service and away from adult work, so she called on the conference to look for ways of arguing for more funding. Although we often feel compelled to offer 'numbers' to policy makers, Wendy Hirsh reminded colleagues of the considerable power of qualitative research that reports findings in the words of the people who say it. She thought the debate between the relative worth of large scale quantitative research against small-scale qualitative was unhelpful. Large scale surveys can still include open-ended aspects that allow for some more personal stories. Similarly, if qualitative work was conducted on larger samples, we could combine the power of personal narratives with analysis of such data to improve our understanding of career and guidance issues.

Notes

Wendy Hirsh is a NICEC Fellow and Associate Fellow of the Institute for Employment Studies and Jenny Bimrose is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick. Ruth Hawthorn is currently Deputy Chair of NICEC. The *Cutting Edge III* conference will be held in Swanwick in Derbyshire from 11-13 December 2006.