Signposter – pointing the way to personalised information

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Many institutions will experience forms of structural change as the nature of employment alters and the power of the individual increases. Much of this structural change will be organic, not imposed. It will be facilitated by individuals handling change through learning and adopting what is new and different. Over time the empowered individual will be able to judge and take more risks than is the case today.

The successful institutions of 2020 will be nodes of concentration in a knowledge and communications network.

All of this will be supported by transformational government initiatives at local and national levels.

The Signposter Programme, with its capability to identify and serve communities and encourage personal development within them, will be a key contributor to the success of these new forms of organisation and to the changes to existing organisations.

The mission and ambition of the Signposter Programme are set in this context.

Since 2000, globalisation through technology has been levelling the playing fields so that countries like India – and many others – are now able to compete equally for global knowledge work as never before.

In all parts of the world there is increasing recognition of the power of learning for all individuals and for their contribution to the economy and society.

The resulting move to personalised learning and to individuals' greater responsibility for their own development has profound effects on relationships – between employers and employees, between institutions and individuals, between Government, employers and individuals.

Within this changing dynamic in the UK and across the world, access to a rich harvest of personalised information on lifestyle choices, led by choices of learning and employment opportunities, is a prerequisite for individuals of all ages and stages.

The ambition of Signposter is to provide that access.

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The demographic context for the Signposter Programme

Chris Humphries CBE, Director General, City & Guilds, has set out a demographic challenge in his 2006 paper, *Skills in a Global Economy.*

In the paper, Mr Humphries points out that there are two primary causes of the demographic challenge facing the UK.

The first is the dramatic fall in the UK birth rate between the 1991 and 2001 census from 2.4 live births per woman lifetime to 1.6. This brings the rate to below the 'replacement rate' of 2.1. The result will be a drop of 600,000 fewer 15-24 year olds in the UK in 2020 than in 2010.

The second cause is the increased longevity due to better health care. People can and do work longer – beyond the traditional pension age. At the same time, actual working life has been shrinking, due to more young people staying in education and the growth of early retirement.

Humphries points out that the outcomes will be increased competition between industries and employers to attract young people to their occupations and businesses and older workers will seek to extend their working lives by engaging in yet more learning.

He asserts that individuals will need access to information and personalised support to be able to make informed choices. He writes:

"But to impact on the forward planning inside a college, or to be able to help a 17 or a 42 year old make an important learning or career choice, that data needs translating into very accessible information and communications available in their language, through their media and when they need it.

The UK needs a much more effective, well informed and professional careers information, advice and guidance service, supported by a national interactive website of diagnostic, information and advisory functions that makes such all-age support nationally available.

The technology to create such an Internet based system is now widely available and understood, and the data sources needed to inform it are described above, and can be extended to meet requirements as the system evolves. That system could then provide the key background information service to support locally-tailored and locally-based adult information advice and guidance services to offer additional guidance support as required."

This forms the demographic context for the vision of the Signposter Programme to 2020.

The background to the Signposter Programme

The Signposter Programme has been developed by FEdS Consultancy from around the year 2000 from the initial concept of Advancement that has its origins at UCAS.

The focus of that original concept has remained steady and tight. Certain key principles underpinning the project have remained unchanged, although the project itself has become more mature, better understood and more extensive.

The original concept has been developed into the business concept called the Signposter Programme.

FEdS worked closely with UCAS, the LSC and numerous other partners. Oracle Fujitsu and Nokia are the technology partners. Oracle has played a significant development role since the very early stages.

There is a confused and confusing part-provision of information provided by an increasing number of initiatives, some of which relate to each other but most of which do not. This led to the fourth recommendation of the Morrison Report, commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills in July 2002 to create a network, which is coherent for the individual customer:

"A plethora of organisations and products exist to inform, guide and enable learners to progress. These include course information services, job search agencies, careers services and records of achievement. However, there is no single agency that rationalises all of these functions and delivers a single pathway that learners can take that begins at course registration and takes them right through into work.** *Which Way?* **is our working title for such a tool.

We recommend that Government supports the development of a single learning-to-work support and guidance route map.**

The 2004 *Which Way?* Review showed that not much had changed in the intervening two years.

The Office of the e-Envoy and the Cabinet Office are concerned, beyond the fields of information on learning and employment, to create coherence across the Ministries on e-Government.

It is probable that plans may be considered to bring the Government-based systems for e-Government together into one centrally controlled network.

But, because the fields of learning and employment are subject, in the former case, to being completely devolved and, in the latter case, to being partly devolved, and because the fields of learning and employment both spread far into the private sector, it would not make sense to conceive of a network centrally controlled by the Government in Whitehall.

The development of a national, virtual infrastructure of interlocking services would make sense if we could provide the most complete and coherent access to information and advice on learning and employment opportunities for individuals throughout the UK and across the public and private sectors.

The Signposter Programme will play a significant part in the realisation of this concept.

The need for personalised information

We are living in a changing culture where:

- Individuals are expected to be increasingly self-dependent and to take responsibility for their own development.

- An individual's working life will increasingly be dependent on the ability to develop existing skills and knowledge, to acquire new skills and knowledge and to be able to transfer both skills and knowledge to different work environments.

- The discontinuous change in business development, brought about by sharpened competition and new technologies, requires individual businesses to be more nimble on their feet and to manage more deftly the skills and knowledge they require of their employees.

- Attitudes are changing towards people with disabilities who will increasingly want access to personalised information.

- Demographic changes will necessitate access to relevant information for the increasingly large proportion of older people.

The notion of loyalty has changed as individuals understand increasingly that their continued employability lies in their own hands.

For this new world, learning structures and support systems have to focus on the needs of the individual.

Increasingly, at key life moments, individuals will need access to clearly structured and relevant information, backed up by access to relevant advice and guidance.

But we have not yet made the significant change from a supply led learning system to a demand led system. Much of the necessary infrastructure is not yet in place; one of the missing pieces in that infrastructure is access to full and coherently structured information. This is the message contained in the 2004 *Which Way?* Review and is implicit in the Foster Review and the interim report by Lord Leitch.

The Signposter Programme

The Signposter Programme describes the provision electronically of information on lifestyle choices to all learners over the age of 14 – with a particular emphasis on information about choices in learning and related employment opportunities.

- This is a service free to all individuals, regardless of age or stage, up to a certain, as yet undefined, level – beyond which the learner will have the option to buy further services; for instance the option to have help constructing a CV.

- The programme is built around the needs of the individual. It is based around an i-portfolio (an intelligent portfolio), which is secure for, and wholly owned by, the individual and which is lifelong. The individual, by using his or her portfolio intelligently, activates the system to supply personalised information.

- Beyond the significant database of portfolios, the Signposter Programme will not build any databases of information. It has no need to; there are large numbers of fine databases in both the private and public sectors. The Signposter Programme is creating business partnerships with those information providers so that the Signposter search capability can access the information wanted for any transaction by an individual.

- The Signposter Programme is creating a powerful network; it has no interest in owning existing territory.

- The Signposter Programme is built on a multi technology platform. Individuals will be able to access the system through PCs, PDAs, mobile telephones and digital TV.

- There is no banner advertising or marketing on the system beyond what individuals choose to access – and there is no direct access to any individual holding a portfolio on the system.

- In the learning and related employment areas, there is the choice of two enquiry pathways: 'I want to be …' and 'What can I be?'

i-portfolio

The i-portfolio which sits at the centre of the Signposter system is important for several reasons:

- From 2005, the QAA requires that all university undergraduates have their own personal planning programme.

- In the Further Education sector there are numerous learning logs, which are more organisation-centred than individual-centred.

- The Progress File, recently discontinued by the DfES, was being developed through schools, some further education colleges and small and medium-sized enterprises, but not uniformly through any of them.

- Key to the Tomlinson thinking for development post 14 was that every individual should have an e-transcript, which was conceived by the Tomlinson Group as an electronic file to hold details of qualifications and achievement in the skills area. That should be part of a fuller portfolio. The Government's response to Tomlinson has not negated this requirement. Indeed it will form part of University Entrance requirements from 2008.

- The development at QCA of a new Framework for Achievement has further urged the need for an e-portfolio.

- In the report of the Burgess group on degree classifications, it is suggested that a transcript of performance might replace the current degree classifications.

- There is currently no coherent Government policy towards the development of e-portfolios.

- All of these points lead to the development of a lifelong portfolio, which is at the heart of a cultural change towards developing the capacity for reflective learning and providing personalised learning.

- Portfolios are increasingly the culture of the adult world of work. But corporate learning logs are rarely owned by the individual employee because others, such as compliance officers, need to have access.

The portfolio contains at least five domains, which are consonant with the Tomlinson thinking:

- Qualifications

- Tested skills, such as functional mathematics/numeracy and communications and ICT

- Personal awareness skills, which are not tested but which are recognised and developed. The development of these broad skills comes through the three related questions;
    - What have I done?
    - What have I learned from what I have been doing?
    - What evidence do I have of that learning?

- A library of evidence supporting the development of the personal awareness skills

- A statement of aspiration, which is at the heart of reflective learning responding to the questions; Where do I wish to go? How am I going to get there from where I am at the present?

The Signposter i-portfolio (intelligent portfolio) is special:

- It is owned by, and secure for, the individual.

- It is lifelong and allows the owner to migrate information in from other portfolios which need to be used at certain stages.

- It is intelligent in that proactively it brings new information to the attention of the individual as the pattern of individual preferences becomes more evident from the information placed in it.

Signposter Ltd & icom Ltd

The Programme is a private sector initiative for public benefit, run by two companies in tandem:

- Signposter Ltd, a company limited by guarantee, has responsibility for the strategic development of the learning and related employment areas.

- icom Ltd is the operational company, which also has responsibility for the strategic development of the broader lifestyle choices.

- The two companies are linked by legal contract and by a Strategic Group, made up of three Directors from each company with an independent Chairman. This will oversee that the operational developments are within the strategic frameworks set out by Signposter Ltd and by icom. The Strategic Group will also be the first point for the resolution of any dispute.

- Each company is dependent on the other for the Signposter Programme to be effective.

The companies will earn income from the services and products they develop:

- Private and public sector companies will be able to reach their strategic targets more quickly, completely and cheaply by investing in the Signposter Programme.

- Aspects of the technology developed for the Programme will become products.

- Additional information and data services will also be developed out of the Programme itself. None of these will involve the sale of any personalised information.

- Services to the individual: The essential service providing access to information on learning and employment opportunities to the individual will be free. However, beyond a certain level of information – such as the need for specialist one-to-one guidance or the development of an individual portfolio or on-line CV – fee-paying services will also be developed for the individual.

- This was indicated as a wished-for service in the UCAS/CfBT research studies by MORI in 2002 and one that young people and their parents would be prepared to pay for. Nearly 450,000 young people access UCAS for university information each year.

- A National Employment Notice Board. Individual learners will be given the opportunity to post their portfolio/CV on a national notice board, which will be re-configured in response to enquiries from organisations to reflect national, regional or local requirements – for instance for

a major food retailer considering opening a new store in Cardiff and requiring a number of people with a certain range of skills. The national notice board will become a means of accessing that information, a service provided to organisations for a fee.

- Knowledge Management. The Signposter system will be able to provide generic information of significance to workforce development programmes at the regional development level or the individual Learning and Skills Council areas as well as to private sector clients; but none of this will be personal information.

- Recruitment. Both public and private sector organisations will be able to use Signposter by providing a matrix of desired and required characteristics for potential recruits.

- This will at least allow potential applicants to make an earlier judgement as to whether they are suitable or not by matching their own profile to that required by the recruiting organisations. Reducing the number of 'hopeless' applications is an important cost saving for companies.

- e-Learning. In addition to providing information on learning and employment opportunities, Signposter will provide direct links into learning opportunities. This could be a route to a wider market for corporate universities wishing to make fuller use of non-competitive learning resources.

- Another possible example is the probation service. Probation officers are required to provide a 'Thinking Skills' course for people committed to community service.

Strategic alliances & partnerships

Significant work with partners will need to be carried out so that individual enquirers can have access to a complete and coherent range of information and advice, both on learning opportunities and on employment opportunities.

Significant areas are already covered by UCAS, City & Guilds, learndirect, HotCourses and others – but these do not interlink – and there are additional areas that will need to be drawn in:

- Professional Bodies

- Chartered Institutes

- The growing, mutual opportunities to be gained by linking closely to the Sector Skills Councils Network

- Trade and Business Organisations such as the Confederation of British Chambers of Commerce, the CBI and the TUC

- Private sector job agencies for which there is currently no network

- Awarding Bodies and Examining Bodies:

  – In the vocational field there are over 100 different bodies but City & Guilds has some 52% of the market.

  – QCA has the remit to develop the national database of qualifications held by individuals.

Work experience and personal development

Work experience should be a significant part of this Signposter development.

96% of young people in Key Stage 4 have up to 10 days work experience and for many of them this can be a life-changing experience. As the work-related curriculum is now statutory, that percentage is moving nearer the 100% mark. Work experience would have played a key part of the Tomlinson proposal for Core Learning, and it will play a key part in the proposed specialised diplomas.

This experience should be a learning experience as well as an experience of work. This forms the basis of the work FEdS has carried out with Marks & Spencer and HSBC to reformat their work experience – for something like 5,000 young people each year in these two companies – into an opportunity to develop their personal and inter-personal skills.

There is, at the moment, little direct knowledge of the numbers taking part in work experience and little knowledge of the benefits the individuals and organisations gain.

Whilst it is not possible to expect companies of all shapes and sizes to send back information on young people's work experience, it would be entirely reasonable and feasible that there should be a 'psychological contract' with young people doing work experience to complete an on-line self assessment – either on their own or with a peer group or with a teacher or mentor or parent.

This would be the learning process of the young person, reflecting on the three key questions:

- What have I been doing?

- What have I learned?

- What evidence do I have of that learning?

The Association of School and College Leaders is fully supportive of this development. So too is the Department for Education and Skills.

The individual learners would use the exercise to include relevant items in the e-portfolio that they will be encouraged to develop within the Signposter framework.

This same form, properly designed, could give both qualitative and quantitative information, providing a better appreciation both to companies and to central government, of the impact of this still, as yet, largely unknown investment of resource by individuals, companies, schools and the Government.

This would engage every year an entire year group.

Such a feedback from the individual learner would go direct to Signposter, which would have the capacity to manage this incoming data and to cut it in a variety of ways to provide information for individual companies, central government and regional authorities.

What are the implications for career education and guidance practice?

Signposter provides, at long last, an opportunity to ensure that the development of career management skills is user-led – supported by professional support as required. Through Signposter, individuals are empowered to explore their own learning and employment needs and aspirations alongside other lifestyle opportunities.

If they choose to use all of Signposter's functionality, individuals will have begun to learn to develop and manage their own careers, including learning, through means that are natural to them and relevant to their family and social contexts. The implications for career education and guidance are significant.

In the future, career education and guidance professionals will be able to work as facilitators in the career development of their clientele in an individually focused way that has frequently been unachievable in the past.

Signposter fits seamlessly into the 'Life-Role Relevance in Curriculum' model discussed by Bill Law elsewhere in this issue of the NICEC Journal.

Organisations involved in, or interested in, career education and guidance will have the opportunity to explore the Signposter Programme and its implications for career education and guidance in the coming months.

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