

Editorial – The best way to reach adults

Ruth Hawthorn and Judy Alloway

What is the best way to reach adults with different kinds of disadvantage to offer them advice about learning and work? Voluntary and statutory bodies have been helping out-of-work and under-employed adults for decades - while not perhaps separating such advice out from the other ways in which they support their different client groups. Not many such bodies have been linked to more mainstream providers of careers advice, and there have been many discontinuities resulting from short-term funding, but there is considerable experience over what does, and what does not, help.

Experience has also accumulated through work by agencies more specifically focused on employment or educational advice. Disability Employment Advisers have worked in Jobcentre Plus and its DWP predecessors for many years as part of a range of programmes to reach disadvantaged service users (Ford and Watts, 2007). Since the 1980s educational guidance services for adults have explored ways to take their advice to hard-to-help adults through outreach activities (UDACE, 1986), with advisers setting up stalls in community centres or working through community groups already in touch with people who may not know of what they offer or may be too shy to seek it, or may assume that it's not for people like them.

How can this knowledge be captured to inform the wide range of bodies helping these groups today? In particular, what can be learnt from it to inform the current development of the adult advancement and careers service, due to open its doors in August 2010?

In 2008 the City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development and the CfBT Education Trust commissioned a research team to explore current good practice in this area of guidance work. The team consisted largely of NICEC Fellows and Associates with expertise in relation to a range of disadvantaged groups (Lesley Haughton, Heather Jackson, Jackie Sadler and Tricia Sharpe). They were supported by an independent research consultant, Andrew Morris, experienced in the commissioning of policy-related research as well as disseminating its findings effectively. The research built on an extensive literature review conducted by Paul Gutherson (2008) and a policy background paper by Tony Watts (2008).

The result was data collected from twelve agencies whose work focuses on, or includes, advice about learning and work for a wide range of disadvantages. Service users, staff and managers in each service shared their

expectations and challenges as well as their strategies and solutions. The services offered by the Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus, though a key part of provision, is not represented here because their participation in the study was not possible, but some of their activities are described in other articles.

As well as the difficulty of identifying good practice and capturing it, there are considerable challenges in analysing the findings in such a project. There are many different ways in which people may be disadvantaged with respect to the labour market and it is not easy to see how to amalgamate what has been learnt. While the resulting project report, *Smoothing the Path* was written by Ruth Hawthorn and Judy Alloway (2009), the process in which the key elements of good practice were drawn from the data involved the full research team.

This issue of *Career Research and Development* includes papers from Tony Watts, on why this work is so important now, and from Andrew Morris on how research of this kind can contribute to improving public and voluntary services and how best to approach it. In addition we asked some of the managers of the services that helped with the study to write their own account of their services, not just outlining what they offer clients (this is fully explored in the detailed case studies from the project, available online at <http://www.skillsdevelopment.org/default.aspx?page=866>) but bringing us up to date. Since the fieldwork was carried out, the economy has been overtaken by a severe downturn that has hit publicly-funded services and charitable bodies alike. Given that discontinuity is one of the greatest problems afflicting these services in the best of times, how do they survive a recession? What happens to the expertise? What happens to the clients?

Most importantly, as this issue of *Career Research and Development* goes to press, is the extent to which the findings from this study can be useful in shaping the adult advancement and careers service expected to start in August 2010. As Tony Watts points out, it is not expected that the core statutory services can operate on the same personal, comprehensive basis seen in the work of the agencies described here. But the core statutory services can work better *with* these agencies, involving them in their networks and supporting them with resources where possible and in ways that do not undermine their missions; and as we explain in our own article, they can use the critical success factors and key messages as a starting point from which to evaluate and enhance their own practice.

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Guest editors

References

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