

Career IAG with disadvantaged adults: the policy context

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The Smoothing the Path report (Hawthorn & Alloway, 2009) is very timely in relation to the current work on developing a new adult advancement and careers service. This article outlines the origins and key design features of the new service, with particular attention to the tensions between its universal and targeted aspects. It then examines the rationale for the involvement of the voluntary and community sector in policies for career information and guidance, recent policy with regard to the involvement of this sector, and different strategies for working with the sector. Finally, it indicates some of the policy issues illuminated by the report.

The new service for adults

In England, the Government is currently restructuring career information and guidance services for adults. This followed the report of the Leitch Review of Skills (2006), which was significantly influenced by a cross-government review of information, advice and guidance services for adults (see iCeGS, 2008). The Leitch recommendations were broadly accepted by the Government (DIUS, 2007), and more details have subsequently appeared in two further White Papers (DWP/DIUS, 2007; DCSF/DIUS, 2008) and in a service prospectus (DIUS, 2008).

The information available to date indicates that a new service is to be established, which is currently referred as the 'adult advancement and careers service' (though the use of lower case indicates that this is a working title rather than the final title of the service). The service is to be run by the new Skills Funding Agency. It will be formed by bringing together two existing services:

- Careers Advice, which provides telephone and web-based services.
- *nextstep*, which provides face-to-face services.

Careers Advice is a universal service, available to all; *nextstep* is largely targeted at individuals with low skills. Careers Advice, under its previous name *learnirect*, has been heavily marketed and is widely known (Watts & Dent, 2002; 2008); *nextstep* is much less well-known (Harrison *et al.*, 2005).

A key issue in relation to the new service is the balance and relationship between its universal and targeted aspects. The Leitch Review of Skills (2006) argued that the service should have significant targeted features. Thus it should 'be charged with raising aspiration and awareness of the importance and benefits of learning, particularly among those that have missed out in the past'. In particular, it should 'lead a sustained national campaign to promote skills development among groups that would not normally consider learning'. This national action 'must be backed by local action in communities'. The service should accordingly 'build on the many existing partnerships with local organisations, engaging the hardest to reach' (p.110). It should be proactive: 'reaching out rather than waiting for people to come' (p.109). One of its key roles should be 'to energise individuals, building a culture of learning by raising awareness' (p. 25).

Leitch also emphasised, however, that the service should be available to all. This was underlined in its reference to 'a new universal careers service for England' (p.109) and in the notion that 'all adults should be entitled to a free "Skills Health Check"', which will 'identify an individual's skill needs and strengths' (p.110).

In designing the new service, an additional dimension has been added in the form of the concept of 'advancement agencies' proposed by John Denham, until recently Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, in a paper he presented some time ago to the Fabian Society (Denham, 2004). This concept is directed particularly at low-waged workers, and includes attention to information and advice on employment rights and access to in-work support as well as to information and advice on learning and work options. It potentially reinforces the targeted aspects of the service.

A further issue that is significant in relation to targeting is the relationship with Jobcentre Plus. This is strongly stressed in the joint White Paper issued by DWP/DIUS (2007), which focuses on the relationship between welfare and skills reform. Not surprisingly, therefore, many of the references to the new careers service are to its relationship with Jobcentre Plus in working with welfare recipients. Although decisions relating to application of benefit rules and entitlement to training will continue to be made by Jobcentre Plus personal advisers, all new claimants are to be signposted to the careers service, where they will be encouraged to attend a Skills Health Check; in some cases, attendance at the careers service will be mandatory. There is therefore a risk that the service will lose some of its client focus and become viewed as part of the apparatus for the managing of state benefits. Also, some co-location

of services is envisaged: although there could be a justifiable place for this within the strategy, if Jobcentre Plus becomes the main location for face-to-face services, this could further stigmatise the service. This would arguably be to the disservice of disadvantaged groups as well as undermining the prospect of a strong universal service.

I have argued elsewhere that in the design of the new service, primacy should be given to designing the universal service, with later extensions to ensure that the distinctive needs of targeted groups are satisfactorily met (Watts, 2008). In the case of the Connexions service for young people, the sequence was the reverse: the targeted service was designed first; and efforts were then made to extrapolate some elements to all young people. Many of the problems experienced by Connexions stemmed from this core design flaw (Watts, 2001).

The *Smoothing the Path* report helpfully illuminates the steps that need to be taken to ensure that the distinctive needs of different disadvantaged groups are adequately addressed in the design of the new service. This has implications for a number of aspects of the service, including:

- how the service is marketed
- how it is staffed and structured so that individuals with distinctive needs can get specialist help when it is needed
- whether eligibility criteria are applied to some aspects of the service, and if so, what form they take
- the relationship which the new service establishes with organisations in the voluntary and community sector.

The rest of this article concentrates on the last of these.

Rationale

The rationale for the involvement of the voluntary and community sector in policies for career information and guidance was outlined in the OECD Career Guidance Policy Review (OECD, 2004). According to OECD, the merits of policy strategies that work through community-based organisations include their greater knowledge of, and acceptability to, particular client groups, and the contribution such organisations can make to community capacity building. Some accordingly held the view that these organisations should be used as the conduit for most public services, including those in the career information and guidance field. On the other hand, others took the view that this sector was fragmented, idiosyncratic, and sometimes anti-government and anti-bureaucratic, and that it too often consumed public funds without

discernible outcomes. OECD accordingly concluded that the sector had a contribution to make to career guidance strategies for adults, but alongside – rather than as a substitute for – more formal services (p.65).

In more general terms, the contribution that the voluntary sector can make to the effective delivery of public services has been viewed by the Labour Government as being important to the achievement of its policy agenda (HM Treasury, 2002). In contrast to previous policies of managing service delivery entirely within the public sector, and to the policies introduced by the Conservative Government during the early 1990s of contracting services out to the private sector, the Labour Government has placed more emphasis on service delivery through contracting based on partnerships (Etherington, 2003a). In particular, it has viewed the voluntary and community sector as a potential partner, contractor and recipient of public funds in the delivery of its social welfare agenda (Plowden, 2001).

A number of benefits are claimed for this policy. In particular, the voluntary sector is recognised as bringing distinctive benefits to public service provision through:

- its specialist expertise
- its access to communities and individuals who are 'hard to reach'
- its capacity to respond flexibly and innovatively to their needs (Etherington, 2003b).

The policy has offered both opportunities and threats to voluntary-sector organisations. On the one hand, it has offered them increased resources, including supports for developing their capacity. On the other hand, there are risks that the enhanced pressure for public accountability will undermine the independence and flexibility that arguably are sources of their distinctive strengths. This can lead to 'mission drift', gradually drawing such organisations away from their original purposes and ethos (Etherington, 2003a).

At the same time, concerns have been raised about whether the voluntary sector can develop the capacity to deliver public services on the scale required and with adequate quality control (see NACVS, 2002). This raises issues about the extent to which contracting out services to the voluntary sector should be regarded as a replacement of public service provision, or as complementary to such provision; and if the latter, how the relationships between the two forms of provision should be defined and managed.

Recent policy

Since 1998, public policy in relation to career information, advice and guidance services has included an important role for the voluntary and community sector. The policy framework published by DfEE (1998) outlined a partnership approach, and stated that 'effective local partnerships should ... include substantial participation by community and voluntary groups, which are often the most accessible agencies for local people' (para.5.2). This broad strategy was effectively reinforced by the emphasis placed within the subsequent National Policy Framework (DfES, 2003) on services for adults without a Level 2 qualification.

An evaluation of the (initially 76) partnerships by Irving & Slater (2002) indicated that in addition to 11 pre-defined priority groups (learning difficulties, disabilities, basic skills, low/outdated skills, areas of high unemployment, unemployed, English language needs, rural areas, older clients, labour market returners, offenders), other priority groups addressed included lone parents, refugees, homeless people, asylum seekers, ethnic minorities, people with mental health problems, employees with low qualifications, those facing large-scale redundancies/restructuring, and women returners. In total, 29 per cent of full members of partnerships, and 52 per cent of associate members, were from the voluntary and community sector.

In 2004, publicly-funded information, advice and guidance services for adults were rebranded as *nextstep*. Contracts were put out on tender in the 47 Learning and Skills Council (LSC) areas. Many went to careers service companies (for a brief history of these companies, see Watts & McGowan, 2007, Appendix 3). The contractors were required to sub-contract at least 60 per cent of the monies to other organisations, many of them in the voluntary and community sector. These had to be accredited in terms of the *matrix* quality standard. In some areas, the voluntary and community organisations were organised into a consortium to enable them to participate in a more effective way.

In 2008, the *nextstep* service was re-procured on a regional basis, covering each of the nine LSC regions (with two contracts in the north west region, so making ten contracts in total). The extent of subcontracting was left for the prime contractor to decide. The service specification in the tender document included:

'Having in place outreach arrangements for accessing and delivering services to specific customer groups and communities such as older people, low-skilled women, people from ethnic minority backgrounds and people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who are sometimes hard to reach through traditional means.'

More recently, as part of the preparations for the new adult advancement and careers service, ten prototypes have been established to explore the best ways of establishing local networking and partnership arrangements. Some are local-authority-led; some are voluntary-sector-led. Part of their role is to explore ways of linking to the wider range of agencies and organisations which the concept of 'advancement' brings into the frame, addressing wider barriers to learning and work.

Models of delivery

A series of evaluations of community-based guidance provision in Kent (Haughton & Watts, 2000; 2001; Barker *et al.*, 2005) suggested that there were three main strategies for working with voluntary and community organisations:

- encouraging *referrals* from such organisations to mainstream career information, advice and guidance (IAG) services
- using such organisations as bases for *outreach* work by mainstream career IAG services
- engaging in *capacity building* – developing the organisations' own capacity to deliver career IAG services.

The strategy for capacity building could include:

- provision of *resources*, including printed resources and software.
- *training* in career information, advice and guidance competences
- support in meeting the *matrix quality standards*.

An additional feature of the work which emerged strongly in the evaluation by Barker *et al.* (2005) was the role of community-based services in brokering learning: identifying unmet learning needs, and brokering learning provision to meet them. Brokerage is a strong element of current government policy, but in the Train to Gain programme is focused largely on brokerage between employers and learning providers. There is an important and under-developed role for attending to individual needs within the Train to Gain programme (Bysshe, 2007; Newton *et al.*, 2008). But in addition there is considerable scope for directly brokering learning on behalf of individuals (Hawthorn & Watts, 2004).

The evaluation by Barker *et al.* (2005) supported many of the claimed benefits for building the career IAG capacity of voluntary and community organisations, including the enhanced access they provide to hard-to-reach communities and individuals, and their flexibility in responding to their needs. All the indications were that

such capacity building had reinforced such organisations' purposes and ethos rather than deflecting from them. On the other hand, there was no indication that the career IAG provision in the voluntary and community sector could be extended to the point where it would replace public service provision. Indeed, its development was significantly dependent on the support offered by such provision, and seemed likely to remain so. In the majority of cases, involvement had resulted in an increased awareness of the professional capabilities required to deliver career IAG and a clearer sense of the organisation's limits in this respect.

Issues

A key aspect of the new advancement and careers service for adults is how it will engage with the disadvantaged groups that are the focus of the *Smoothing the Path* report (Hawthorn & Alloway, 2009). The report strongly endorses the critical role of the voluntary and community sector in this respect. Important questions illuminated by the report include:

- how the contribution of the voluntary and community sector can be maximised
- what its relationship should be with the mainstream services provided by the new service
- what forms of support voluntary and community organisations need from the new service.
- what models of delivery are most effective with particular target-groups
- what adaptations need to be made to the mainstream services to ensure that particular target-groups can use them effectively.

In a sense, one can see the dynamics of the new service as being based significantly on resolving tensions along two continua: that between the universal and targeted service; and at the targeted end, that between the culture of the voluntary and community sector and that of Jobcentre Plus. Much depends on where the key design features of the service arrangements are located on these two continua.

In relation to the second, the nature of the service relationship offered by voluntary and community agencies differs markedly from that offered by Jobcentre Plus. The latter is an official agency with powers to determine access to benefits: it accordingly establishes formal time-bound relationships with its clients, with careful steps being taken to assure the safety of its staff. In the case of voluntary agencies, on the other hand, clients are received in a very different way, symbolised in the welcoming cup of tea (ibid, p.27), and the relationship with them is much more informal, client-centred and open-ended. It accordingly tends to be more holistic in nature, and may involve an advocacy role with employers and other opportunity providers.

The benefits of incorporating a strong role for such agencies within the new service are evident from the report. They are likely to be much more attractive to many disadvantaged adults, and to give them the support they need to achieve effective outcomes.

If they are to play this role, the contracting arrangements need to attend to and respect their distinctive nature, and the dynamics which are critical to their success. The report emphasises in particular the need for longer-term funding, and for targets which are realistic and include measures of soft outcomes.

There are inevitably tensions between the ethos of the voluntary and community sector and a public service subject to cost constraints and public accountability. The notion of an open-ended commitment to individuals who walk in through the door can be very resource-intensive. There are balances to be struck between the time given to such clients and to seeking out other potential clients who may be in equal or greater need. Open-ended commitments may encourage dependence. They may also encourage workers to give extra support beyond what they are being paid for. In recognising that 'this is regrettably a widespread necessity, but cannot be part of a sustained solution (ibid, p.41), the report acknowledges that in the end some boundaries have to be drawn.

But the culture of voluntary agencies is to push these boundaries as far as they can be stretched. In portraying their work with such clarity and sensitivity, the report merits the closest attention from those responsible for the design of the new service.

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