

Policy and practice in career guidance: The perspectives of Professor Tony Watts

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This article examines the perspectives of Professor Tony Watts regarding policy and practice in career guidance from a UK and global perspective. The goal of this article is to synthesise key insights that Tony has gained in his career and then link these insights to current policy and practice initiatives. The method used to achieve the above goal included an interview with Tony and a literature review. 17 insights are presented, with thoughts on implications for career guidance policy and practice.



Introduction

In a career spanning over 40 years, Tony Watts has blended research, policy, practice, and advocacy in career guidance in an effort to improve the quality of life in communities and nations by helping individuals, practitioners, and policy makers maximise the lifelong career management skills of citizens. One of Tony's best characteristics is being firmly grounded in what we have learned from the past and present, whilst keeping an eye on the various futures we might achieve. The goal of this article is to synthesise key insights that Tony has gained in his career and then link these insights to current policy and practice initiatives. What better way to celebrate the contributions of a motivated and talented professional than to link what he has learned to current developments in our field.

Method

The method used to achieve the above goal included an interview with Tony and a literature review. It was

decided that an interview would be the most effective tool for Tony to articulate his experience and resulting insights. Draft interview questions were prepared to provide a stimulus to elicit Tony's insights about career guidance policy and practice. After some minor revisions, the following interview questions were agreed upon:

- 1) What were the similarities and differences in promoting improved career guidance policy and career services in various countries?
- 2) What was the relative influence of national, cultural, ethnic, racial, theoretical, and economic factors in the development of career guidance policy and the delivery of career services?
- 3) What were the factors that supported and inhibited effective career guidance policy development and implementation?
- 4) What factors in the future will likely shape the nature and effectiveness of career guidance policy?

A ninety-minute video interview was completed on 11 February 2014. The audio from the interview was transcribed and key experiences and resulting insights were identified in the transcription. Tony edited the key experiences and insights for accuracy and clarity.

These experiences and insights are included in numbered paragraphs in this article (1-17).

A literature review was then completed to identify current and planned career guidance policy and practice that illustrated or amplified Tony's insights. The main portion of this article presents these seventeen insights and related career guidance initiatives. The article concludes with some thoughts on future career guidance policy and practice.

Insights and related career guidance initiatives

One of the key elements of Tony's work is his contribution to international cross-national reviews of career guidance systems. Examples of this kind of more systematic and comparative approaches were already included in the analyses of career services to young people in the European Union Member States (Watts et al, 1987; Watts et al, 1988); and a subsequent review of all-age services (Watts et al, 1994). These were complemented by more specific studies of guidance services for different user groups (Watts et al, 2010; Watts and Van Esbroeck, 1998).

A major change in the range of the cross-national reviews coincided with a growing international interest in the relationship with career guidance in the beginning of 2000s. Instead of focusing on particular age groups, themes or different sectors, the international reviews adopted a broader perspective on how guidance can contribute to national lifelong learning goals throughout the lifespan in different levels of education, in public employment services, in workplaces, and other community settings (OECD 2004).

Cross-national reviews of career guidance

Comparative studies are valuable, looking at the same phenomena across different countries. They can help us to see the range of different forms that lifelong guidance practice and policy development can take and how this concept means different things in different countries, linked to their stage of economic development, the nature of their socio-political systems and cultures, and the institutional structure of their education and employment systems.

International organisations such as OECD can have influence on lifelong guidance practice and policy development because of their authority and the quality of their technical work. What they do is to provide a mirror through which a country can look at itself.

3 There is a need to develop a tradition of policy studies to look at lifelong guidance policy development in its own right.

In the field of career guidance, comparative studies are challenging because guidance systems and policies are usually embedded in education, training and employment policies emerging from local historical, cultural, political and economic realities. In spite of these different starting points, a broad set of challenges for explicit policies for career guidance has been set by a substantial series of cross-national reviews by international organisations (Watts, 2008). Tony contributed actively in the development of this new type of working methodology which was applied in the OECD review on Career Guidance Policies in 2004. The methodology consists of four stages: a questionnaire, a country visit, a country report and an analytical synthesis report and by 2014 it has been applied in a total of 55 countries (Watts, this volume).

The key rationale for international policy interest in career guidance services and the international policy reviews, is that career guidance represents a public good as well as private good. Tony has emphasised that career guidance services are both the object and instrument of public policy. Based on the evidence in a number of analyses of national guidance systems, he concludes that the beneficiaries of guidance are multiple and career guidance services contribute to three broad categories of public goals and issues: learning goals, labour market goals, and social equity goals.

4 In the end, lifelong guidance is concerned with the relationship between individuals and the society of which they are part. It is also about change: helping individuals to drive change in their own lives, within a changing society. So it has to work with the richness of cultural tradition but also with the dynamics of modernisation and globalisation: it has to be positioned between these. If it doesn't, it won't work and won't have impact.

5 Guidance is about individual change and development within the social structure and how individuals contribute to their families and to the wider society. Therefore it is about helping individuals to understand the forces around them which have

potential for change and development. In the end it is about helping individuals to develop their personal careers in a social context.

6 We need to put the learner at the centre and seek to help them to develop their career management skills and be more competent in using these skills.

Paradigm shift in the concept of career and career guidance

A second rationale for policy interest in career guidance provision is the paradigm shift in the concept of career and its implications for career guidance provision. Tony has referred to this shift as a 'careerquake' where a career is not chosen; it is constructed through a series of choices people make throughout their lives and how they progress both in learning and work (Watts, 1996a). When the focus of career development is linked to lifelong learning it moves the focus from structures and institutions to the individual learner and the promotion of lifelong career management skills (Watts et al, 2010).

7 Career guidance is a lubricant of systems, helping individuals to navigate systems and exert the sense of agency which energises systems and makes them work. It is particularly concerned with helping individuals to manage transitions across systems, which is why it tends to fall between systems: one of the reasons why it is often difficult to address in policy terms. A number of structural mechanisms, qualifications frameworks for example, are also concerned with the interface between the education and training system and the labour market, and making these structures more flexible; but these too don't work unless individuals are able to navigate and activate the frameworks. In the end, career guidance is a way of addressing some of the most important issues about the relationships between individuals and systems.

8 Values are critical in career guidance: we don't talk about them enough.

Brokering the needs of the individual and the society

Guidance can perform a significant role in raising the aspirations of individuals from different backgrounds, making them aware of opportunities and supporting them to enter such opportunities. Tony views guidance as a brokerage between individual needs and societal needs addressing both individual rights and responsibilities within a societal context (Watts, 1996b). In order to do this in an ethical and quality manner, a broad understanding of the environment is required.

9 International evidence can be applied to national level policy development. There is a distinction between identifying evidence to review a policy that is believed to be correct, versus analysing evidence to determine which policy would be most appropriate given current circumstances and needs.

10 When working in another country it is crucial to pay attention to the cultural dimension and to be open to learning and reframing your own thinking rather than simply exporting ideas and systems from your own culture.

Demand for career guidance in low and middle income countries

The issue of demand for career guidance services in low and middle-income countries has been acknowledged in the international reviews. The arguments which support career guidance as a policy in its own right in more developed countries, can be applied and have a positive impact also in low and middle-income countries (Watts and Fretwell 2004; ILO, 2006). However, the international reviews have shown that the current predominant career guidance models and existing patterns in leadership and policy making in Western countries, do not constitute an effective system which would respond to all challenges that these countries face; especially in the areas for education and labour market reforms as a result of global economic developments. In addition, the priority given to lifelong guidance policy has previously

been low in these countries. The sustainability of international and bilateral donor-driven support needs to be guaranteed by sufficient attention to local context and home-grown career guidance development (European Training Foundation, 2009).

11 One of the things about writing is that it forces you to read, to ask questions, and to conclude what you think.

12 The paper I did about career guidance under apartheid was a very important experience for me. I learned so much from that visit. It was one of the most intense experiences of my life. I was asked to give some lectures at the University of Cape Town. It was under the academic boycott, so I shouldn't have gone. But it was always a country I was very interested in, for political reasons, and I wanted to go there to find out for myself. I said to the British Council that I would do it but only if I had a chance to travel and talk with people before giving my lectures. I planned my programme very carefully: I had several friends who told me where I should go and who I should talk to. At that time, there were four key parts of the political system: the white areas, the bantustans, the urban townships, and the shanty towns where the workers were living illegally with their families – illegally because the white areas wanted their labour but not their families. I visited all four. I met hardly any white South Africans who had done this. I learned so much about the importance of political systems, economic development and culture to career guidance provision, because South Africa was so varied in all these respects. It was a rich country and a poor country. It was a black country and a white country. It was a country which aspired to liberal Western values but then denied them to most of its people. All the issues were there and I learned so much, not least about the political nature of career development.

Contribution of International Symposia on Career Development and Public Policies

Between the years 1999-2011, seven International Symposia on Career Development and Public Policies

have been designed to foster effective communication between the career guidance profession and policy-makers (Hiebert and Bezanson, 2000). The symposia have brought together interested parties from all continents to share experiences in the development of national strategies for career development and to establish networks through which experiences have been exchanged on a continuing basis. The symposia have core design features which include the designation of a country team which is responsible for preparation of a country report prior to the event. The country reports and subsequent table discussions during the symposia are synthesised and the conclusions are fed back for approval by the national delegations.

One of the outcomes of the symposia has been strong international co-operation in creating a stronger evidence base, especially on impact measurement which could be communicated to policy-makers.

13 It is important for guidance professional bodies to maintain contact with policy makers and to indicate how career guidance can contribute to key policy issues as they arise.

14 There is a lot of evidence on the impact of guidance activities but it is a matter of what you regard as evidence. Qualitative evidence is as important and valid as quantitative evidence.

15 Lifelong guidance policy studies need to be analytical and as strongly evidence-based as possible. The writing style needs to be different for policy-makers and for an academic audience. It is important to do both and they can help each other.

Examples of this can be seen in the OECD review and the subsequent handbook for policy makers where a set of common reference points are established which can be used for policy learning. There is a need to develop a system of policies that can be supported by conducting research studies which are analytically strong enough to have impact and can be legitimated. There is a strong need to create evidence where research becomes a lobbying tool.

16 In the future, technology is going to drive change in this field as it has always done in

recent times. It is crucial that the field stays up with, and ahead of, the changes in technology. Technology doesn't replace careers professionals but it enables them to do some things they couldn't do before and other things better than they could do before. We have to show how technology can be effectively linked with human agency. It will never adequately replace human agency but it can enormously enhance and extend what can be done. Career practitioners can no longer act as the source of all wisdom. They know that what they say can be checked on the internet and they have to involve and respect their clients in a different way than before.

Information and communication technology in guidance

An area of particular interest to Tony has been the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in guidance. He has been following the process from the growth of computer databases and computer-aided guidance systems through the evolution of the Internet towards analyses of technology as an agent for strategic change. He has had an active role in European conferences on computers and emerging technology in career guidance: in Brussels (1985), Cambridge (1989), Nürnberg (1992), Dublin (1996), Gothenburg (2001) and in Riga (2009). The focus of attention in these conferences has changed due to the evolution of technology, but the core underlying issue has remained much the same. Since the first conference in Brussels in 1985, he suggested that ICT could be seen in three ways: as a tool, as an alternative, or as an agent of change (Watts, 1986; Watts 1996c). He sees this still as the remaining key policy issue. Dramatic technological changes increase the potential of ICT for transforming the nature of guidance services and the ways in which they are delivered. Recent research stresses the ability of career practitioners to take advantage of, to be innovative with, and to fashion novel career service delivery formats with online technologies (e.g. Hooley et al, 2010a, 2010b; Watts, 2010).

17 The increased need for guidance on a lifelong basis means that there is a strong case for expanding services. But how do we do that,

at a time when there are also great pressures to restrict public spending? Technology can enable cost-effective solutions in terms of access and quality. In addition, though, the argument that career guidance is a public good does not necessarily mean that governments should pay for everything. There is also a market for guidance services and this is a key policy issue for the future. In the OECD review we argued that governments have three roles in relation to the market: to grow the market, to quality-assure the market and to compensate for market failure. Governments could, for example, support the development of a brand linked to quality and could then encourage private- as well as public-sector services to meet the quality standards attached to that brand. They could then promote the brand as a way of building access to a public good, but incorporating the market and other people paying for at least some of it. I don't think any country has yet adequately grappled with this issue.

Recommendations on the development and implementation of future career guidance policy and career services

Some of the notions presented by Tony can be identified in the design and implementation of the International Symposia on Career Development and Public Policies, as well as within the structured European co-operation in the lifelong guidance practice and policy development since mid-1980s. Tony was a member of the European Commission Lifelong Guidance Expert Group which met between 2002 and 2007 and after that he has been working as an expert consultant of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN). The ELGPN aims to assist the European Union (EU) Member States and the European Commission in developing European co-operation on lifelong guidance in both the education and the employment sectors. Tony has contributed to the working methodology of the Network and how to stimulate innovation and convergence through pooling of ideas on mutual problems and solutions; testing of ideas and innovation; showcasing of good practice;

and streamlining practical operations and services by sharing insights across different countries.

Drawing from the national experiences the Network has developed concrete tools, such as the European Resource Kit for policy makers (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network, 2012) to help policy-makers and other stakeholders to review existing lifelong guidance provision within their country or region, and to identify issues requiring attention and gaps that need to be filled, drawing from practices in other European countries. The style of writing includes evidence from academic research, but it is also aimed at generating dialogue between practitioners, academics and policy makers.

In line with Tony's recommendations mentioned earlier, this process can be broken down to a continuous policy improvement cycle with the following sequences: translation and customisation of the jointly developed tools; facilitation of the national policy development with the help of structured tools; sharing the experiences in mutual policy learning events by means of common reference points and, finally, drawing joint reflections for future national development or to feed the European level policy discourse. The ELGPN members have reported that participation in the Network has enriched their awareness of possible responses to common challenges and given fresh perspectives into their national guidance provision (ELGPN, 2012).

When expanding the guidance services towards a coherent brand, guidance has to be examined both as an integrated entity and part of a broader social context. A national lifelong guidance can be described in three main dimensions: as a *policy*, as an *activity* of individual organisations or networked services (sometimes in collaborative contracts between the public administration and the private and voluntary sectors), and as an individual *process*. Lifelong guidance provision is directed by official documents such as laws, decrees and plans, as well as unofficial traditions. As citizens progress in constructing their life or career, they may look for services from several professional groups or service providers. Effective policies for lifelong guidance and consistent service provision therefore need to involve relevant ministries, authorities and stakeholders in all the three levels (ELGPN, 2012).

Conclusion

While the seventeen experiences and insights contributed by Tony in this article represent only a small sample of his contributions to the field, these insights show the breadth and depth of topics he has considered, including (a) cross-national reviews of career guidance, (b) changes in the concept of career and career guidance, (c) balancing the needs of the individual and the society, (d) the demand for career guidance in low and middle income countries, (e) the use of international symposia as a policy development tool, and (f) the evolving information and communication technology in guidance. Probably most important, these insights help us to focus our efforts in theory, research, practice, and policy where they will do the most good. It will be helpful to return to these insights from time to time to reflect on the ways in which our field changes and the ways in which it remains the same.



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