

# Careers 50/50 – reflecting on the past: innovating for the future

Lyn Barham and Wendy Hirsh

**This** paper offers a summary of, and some reflections on, a conference titled *Careers 50/50*, held in Cambridge in July 2014 by the Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) and NICEC to mark the fiftieth anniversary of CRAC. It highlights some of the main themes from small group discussion sessions held at this event, as well as from the main speakers. The first day of the conference reflected on changes in work, society and career development over the past fifty years and the second day looked to the future. Key themes included the purposes of career guidance for individuals and as perceived by policy makers, and the dangers of the ‘commodification’ of guidance. To help individuals deal with continuing change and uncertainty, delegates were hoping to improve access to guidance and to combine personal, tailored career development support with much more creative use of technologically-based information and resources.



## Introduction

In July 2014, CRAC and NICEC hosted a two-day conference entitled *Careers 50/50* to mark the fiftieth anniversary of CRAC. Career guidance practice in the UK was very limited fifty years ago when two young men, aware that they themselves had been unable to access appropriate help in developing their ideas about career choice, founded the Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) with the purpose of addressing what they saw as this unmet need. From this initial start by Adrian Bridgewater and Professor Tony Watts, CRAC has pursued a mission to provide research, expertise and innovation across the career development field.

In the process, CRAC has ‘sow(n) more seeds than it could itself develop’ (Smith, 2010: 126). One such seed is NICEC, reaching its own fortieth anniversary in 2015. The conference, co-chaired by Ellen Pearce of CRAC and Professor Tristram Hooley of NICEC, also formed part of a series of activities marking the retirement of Tony Watts. The previous issue of the NICEC Journal (Issue 33, October 2014) highlighted the work of Tony Watts and included contributions from the first two of the speakers at the *50/50* conference, Ronald Sultana and Peter Plant, both International Fellows of NICEC. This present issue of the journal, focusing on the future of career development, also includes an article by Stephen McNair, prompted by the *Careers 50/50* conference.

## Day One: Reflecting on the past

The first day reflected on the past five decades in the field of career development. Much has changed, as we look at the 50-year path to the present day, but the opening speakers were as anxious about the current state of affairs in career guidance as they were celebratory of CRAC’s and NICEC’s achievements. Professor Ronald Sultana from Malta set this scene, questioning the extent to which career guidance operates within conceptual framings which serve to reinforce existing social structures, including inequalities of wealth and power. Whilst broadly emancipatory in intent, much career guidance practice is reproductive of the status quo rather than transformative in its work with individual clients. In the context of a neoliberal capitalist system, ‘success’ for career guidance clients can be seen as achieving a viable place within a system much more concerned with economic goals than social justice. Meritocracy

is a myth when labour markets need spare capacity in order to function with low-cost efficiency.

Career guidance practice has traditionally placed the individual client at the centre of its concerns. Sultana, drawing on Habermas' typology of human interests or 'rationalities' as *technical*, *practical* or *emancipatory*, found that all three of these approaches to career guidance have the capacity to be emancipatory, although each is informed by different ideologies and beliefs about human development (Sultana, 2014). Career theory over the last fifty years has been framed according to all three of these human interests. However career practice, to fulfil its potential to be emancipatory, must inevitably engage with and acknowledge the socio-political approaches (Watts, 1996) by which it is informed and which it may serve to advance. This requires of practitioners serious reflection on the political aspects of their work and its impact:

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...in which ways does career  
education and guidance participate in  
the deployment of power?  
...and on whose behalf?  
...towards which ends?

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This theme, of the underlying purposes of career guidance, was further developed by Peter Plant from Denmark. Career guidance practitioners are encouraged by policy makers and funders to evidence the contribution of their work, but he urged a questioning of what the problem is *presented* to be. If efforts are addressed to answering a wrongly based policy question, then there is a danger of producing 'policy-based evidence'. Rather, evidence should raise questions as to the direction of policy as a factor contributing to the effectiveness, or otherwise, of career development activities.

Plant recounted worrying changes in Denmark, where the increasingly widespread provision of career development services had until recently been a cause for celebration (Plant and Valgreen, 2014). More recent 'prioritising' of services and prescription of guidance methods has been coupled with an assumption that outcomes for clients should conform

to normative, socially reproductive expectations. Increasingly, the individual worker or jobseeker is to be placed at the service of economic development. A question time contributor reflected this in referring to the 'responsibilisation' of individuals by the state: the state faced with an intractable problem of unemployment exports the blame onto individuals, vulnerable scapegoats who are at the same time serving the system's need for a reserve army of potential employees. From there, it is easy to extend the responsibility, and blame, to teachers and careers advisers, for their failure to support individuals, who are framed in this discourse as 'responsible' for their employment and wider social situation when their problems in fact arise systemically. More collective approaches were cited in some Asian and Maori societies, where the whole society takes ownership of the issue of participation by all citizens in their society, rather than framing it as an individual problem.

Discussion groups throughout the day were asked to frame their suggestions around 'what we should remember, and do more of' from the past fifty years and those 'things we should forget, or do less of' in the coming years. Whilst groups were structured to address different client groups and settings, a number of cross-cutting themes emerged. One such was the need to 'forget' approaches that are based on assumptions that clients conform to a standard model, whether as schools students or those approaching retirement. Essential to providing good career support is listening to the specific needs of individuals: not pushing unprocessed information at school students, nor – in the workplace – for employers to treat workers as undifferentiated assets, but rather as people each with unique potential for change, development and contribution to the enterprise.

Conversely, the discussion groups wanted to see more approaches focused on developing career management skills so that people of all ages can address their career progress in conjunction with their overall wellbeing. This was highlighted by groups discussing guidance work in schools, in employing organisations and the transition to retirement. Whilst raising individuals' aspirations is a concern across the course of working life, it is seldom achieved through uncoordinated 'inspirational' inputs and piecemeal, tick-box provision to satisfy policy makers who

want measurable processes. Instead it needs well-trained school staff and professionally qualified career practitioners working within coordinated networks with each other and the wider world of employment and communities. Such networks provide experiential learning (for school students, in the workplace and for those developing research careers, as well for those within vocational and FE pathways); such learning is fluid and intergenerational, but is not amenable to simple measurement in a 'What works?' sense. Rather, it provides and encourages supportive networks addressing individual needs in individualised ways.

Blue sky thinking addressed the potential to do things differently: for example, employers with accessible premises (such as large supermarket chains) could use their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes to provide on-site career support for their own staff and for the public. Such integration with other activities of everyday life would not only greatly improve access to career services, but also position paid and volunteer work alongside other valuable social roles.

Inputs from Stephen McNair and Tony Watts addressed the 'reflecting on the past' conference theme. McNair, whose article appears later in this issue, depicted the stratified, class-ridden society of 1964 when only 5% of the population (mainly male) entered university. Gender, ethnicity and age balances in the workforce were very different then from now. Such structural division has been succeeded by dramatic inequalities in wealth and associated differences in life chances. Watts described the past dearth of career information, now much improved, but cautioned that the recent commodification of career guidance processes risks pushing career support practice towards mechanistic processes rather than individually tailored support from career professionals.

At the heart of career development work sit clients who almost universally want a better world. A university careers adviser commented on the very strong response by students to employment opportunities which encompass 'work to change the world' in NGOs, charities and social enterprises. Conference participants carried away from Day 1 the need to hold in mind the bold and diverse aspirations of our clients for a decent role in a better world.

## Day Two: Innovating for the future

The second day of the conference turned from reflecting on the past to looking forward to the next fifty years in career development. The international flavour of Day 1 was sustained with contributions from India and Canada as well as the UK. Some research fields capturing popular attention, including neuroscience and behavioural economics, were explored to see if they may yield fresh insights into issues of learning and career choice.

Abhijit Bhaduri from Wipro – a global IT, consulting and outsourcing company headquartered in Bangalore – looked at the changing nature of work and careers. He highlighted two major features of labour market change. Continuing proliferation in kinds of work will challenge the labels of standardised 'occupations' (doctor, lawyer etc) replacing them with varied combinations of work tasks and skills in many 'shades' like the many variations in one colour we see on paint colour charts. The second continuing trend will be automation. The work likely to require human input will be either 'high tech or high touch' (the latter being personal services); but erosion can be expected in some previously secure professional fields like accountancy and some aspects of healthcare. 'Pockets of growth' in jobs will occur and challenge individuals to shift their existing skills into these new areas. Although the central message about continuous learning and re-skilling is a very familiar one, Bhaduri's vision of the future is more nuanced than the rather hackneyed career narrative about 'changing your career several times' over a working life. He sees individuals as needing to develop both generic strengths (such as working with people, complex problem-solving and the ability to learn across disciplines) and specific areas of expertise, which they will need to adjust continuously over time as opportunities shift.

Tom Hartley, a cognitive neuroscientist from the University of York, helped the delegates put what he called 'neurohype' into perspective and gain some appreciation of what neuroscience may tell us about what is going on in the human brain as we think, understand, learn and feel. Hartley emphasised the

need to integrate important understanding from psychology with what we can now see from images of brain activity. Neuroscience is already shedding light on different mechanisms at work in the brain as we learn in both unconscious and conscious ways: the former useful for routine tasks but the latter key to dealing with unexpected problems. Training, for example to be a London taxi driver or a musician, leads to measureable change to particular structures in the brain. It will be fascinating to see what will be discovered about the role of nature (our genes) and nurture (our experiences and training) in influencing our aptitudes. Neuroscience is also revealing the importance of intuitive behaviour and *‘that what we call the “mind”, our conscious thoughts and memories, is a small part of what makes us behave in the way we do.’* So maybe we should not expect career decision-making to appear conscious or rational. Knowing more about how our brains work may help us in time to learn and to make decisions more effectively.

Behavioural economics, like neuro-science, has been in vogue over recent years. Lynne Bezanson from the Canadian Career Development Foundation gallantly stepped outside her usual work interests to help the conference explore how – if at all – behavioural economics might be of relevance to career development. Behavioural economics takes the theme of unconscious decision-making one step further, suggesting that human beings are ‘cognitively wired’ for ‘predictably irrational’ decision-making (Kahneman, 2011). Previous experiences and decisions can ‘prime’ us and lock us into patterns of thought and behaviour which are both predictable and not effective. Behavioural economics has to date concentrated mostly on decisions that can be measured in financial or efficiency terms, but may over the coming years give us new understanding of how to support individuals in challenging their previously ‘primed’ or ‘anchored’ career thoughts and unlock their opportunities.

John Lees highlighted the uncertainty faced by individuals, especially when employers are not really interested in helping individuals plan for or develop their careers. He sees individuals as ambivalent about taking control of their own decisions, including how to play the ‘end game’ of retirement. Jon Turner from the University of Edinburgh, like John Lees, emphasised the increasing value placed by employers on individuals

who have the opportunity and ability to learn from a range of experiences. Employability skills, including experiential learning, is therefore something for us to take further in the coming years. Jimmy Brannigan from NETpositive Futures reminded the conference of the environmental sustainability agenda – another example of those links between individuals and wider society which was such a strong theme across the two days.

Two small group discussion sessions in different parts of Day 2 encouraged delegates to explore with each other their views on future careers and future career development practices respectively. This time the groups were asked for both these topics to reflect on *continuity and change*: challenges, ideas and practices that will still be relevant over coming years on the one hand and changing or new ones on the other.

Delegates identified several key themes in relation to the future of work and careers. Technologically driven change will be all around us, creating the risk of ever-widening gaps between those who can keep pace and those who are less agile and may become further detached or excluded from work. Technology will also influence the location of work and the nationalities of workers, but with some types of work being much easier to move geographically than others. Questions were raised about the future dominance both of ‘jobs’ (as opposed to more fluid ways of defining work and deploying skills) and the influence of large companies (as opposed to micro businesses). Most of these changes were seen as further extensions of existing trends. Some of the career issues raised included the over-stretched psychological contract with ever more pressure to be flexible placed on the employee and a risk of too little support from the employer for either re-skilling (including time to learn) or worklife balance. Several groups were interested in implications for young people just starting out on education and work. Will all these pressures and uncertainties make them ask ‘Who do you want to be?’ and not just ‘What do you want to do?’ Will the education system be radical enough to equip future generations with the generic and employability skills they will need?

In relation to their discussion of future career interventions, the delegates were interested in how best to combine personal, tailored career development support with much more creative use

of technologically-based information and resources. Several groups hoped that better trained career professionals would have a strong presence over the coming years, often in facilitative roles. Individuals will be using diverse sources of career support including peers, parents, teachers, alumni of universities and colleges, employers and industry/professional bodies. The integration of career support into learning and work is a big challenge for leaders both in education and employing organisations and our current language around career guidance is not easy for them to understand or find immediately relevant. There is scope to link career development support more strongly both with individual financial planning and with health and wellbeing.

All conferences have a mood as well as their specific content. This one, held at a difficult moment in the short history of careers work in the UK was, perhaps surprisingly, rather optimistic in a calmly reflective and collaborative way. The irresistible charm of Cambridge in summer may have had a lot to do with it, as did many old friendships renewed, new connections made and the brilliant timing of Michael Gove's sacking as Education Secretary.

So as we look forward to the next fifty years of career development, we take with us a powerful sense of the need to see the individual in the context of wider society, to examine real evidence of labour market trends and to be vigilant with regard to the purposes others may have for career development interventions. New fields of research, as yet only embryonic, may help us understand how individuals could adopt more effective approaches to decision-making and to learning. Career professionals are faced with the exciting challenge of working with educators, employers and many other networks to help individuals prepare for and navigate what Tony Watts referred to as their '*possible, probable and preferable futures*.'

## References

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## For correspondence

Lyn Barham  
NICEC Fellow  
lynbarham@gmail.com

Wendy Hirsh  
NICEC Fellow  
wh@ringmer.demon.co.uk