

# Adult guidance – where from, and where to?

Stephen McNair

**This** article is based on a presentation on adult guidance, made as part of the celebration of NICEC's 50th Anniversary. It reflects on how the policy questions in England have changed over that period, from the perspective of someone who was involved in national policy for much of that time, having come to adult guidance, like many of its founders, from adult education, where you see vividly how learning can transform the lives of adults; and with qualifications in English literature, which provides a foundation of understanding of the diverse ways in which people understand themselves and the world. Adult guidance exists to help people address the questions: 'Who am I', 'Who do I want to be?' and 'How might I get there?' Devising ways of addressing them remains a challenge for practitioners, and Government continues to be uncertain about how far it wants to engage. I suggest that four issues continue to concern us: our definition of 'guidance'; the notion of 'adulthood'; the relationship between learning and career; and the nature of professionalism. Each is discussed, before some comments on implications for the future.



## Fifty years of change

Fifty years is a long time. In 1964, we still had a fiercely stratified education system, with only 5% going to university and thence to 'graduate jobs', but there remained high skilled and respected manual jobs, and lifetime employment was both an expectation and a reality for almost all men, and for a small, but growing, number of women. We had full employment, much of it in manufacturing and extractive industries, but white collar jobs were expanding, opening doors for a growing middle class, and creating the illusion, which persists to this day, that the tide of 'social mobility' can

raise all boats. Few lived a decade beyond retirement, and for many, retirement meant five years in poor health.

Twenty years on, this world was still a fresh memory, though the reality had already been transformed. In 1984, I was appointed to head a new Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education (UDACE). Our predecessor, the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education (ACACE 1982), had convinced Government that adult guidance was worth investigating, and our first remit was to produce policy recommendations on the development of what was then called 'educational guidance for adults'. The resulting report, *The Challenge of Change*, was published in 1986 (UDACE 1986).

Thirty years later, we live in a different world. Society is ageing rapidly. Most children born today will live beyond 90, raising questions about the sustainability of an economy where retirement lasts for 30 or 40 years, not five. Despite a notionally more equal education system, and much higher participation in higher education, social and economic inequality has risen to levels not seen since they last peaked in 1914 (Piketty 2014). The notion of a predictable and continuous lifelong career has gone for almost all. While we are still the world's 6th largest manufacturing country (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2009) we employ less than half as many people to do it, and fewer are in recognisably skilled roles. The cultural dominance of the West, which was a simple fact of life in the 1960s, has gone, and perceptions of economic and political incompetence have challenged the notion that our model of capitalism and democracy are the inevitable culmination of human progress. Technological change has transformed how we live and interact, much of it for the better, but, having destroyed much skilled manual work, it is now starting to take over the professional roles which are the foundation of the

security of the middle classes. Work, for most, has become less predictable, and more precarious, and even the question of what 'work' is, is no longer self-evident.

Although this history highlights the risks of trying to predict decades into the future, it is still worth considering what are the big issues of the past, how far they remain relevant, and what we can learn from our successes and failures. I suggest that four issues continue to concern us: our definition of 'guidance'; the notion of 'adulthood'; the relationship between learning and career; and the nature of professionalism. I will discuss each in turn, before considering some implications for the future.

## What is it that we do?

The first issue is the nature of 'guidance', and its boundaries. This is partly a matter of terminology: what do we call what we do, to policymakers, practitioners, clients/ customers/ beneficiaries, and to ourselves, but also one of scope. In the late 1980s, working with a large group of experts of all kinds, UDACE sought to establish a consensus around 'guidance' as the overarching term, embracing all the ways in which 'services' (public, private and third sector) might empower adults to make decisions about their lives: helping them to answer the fundamental questions – who am I? who (not only 'what') do I want to be? and how might I get there? We did not argue that this was an ideal umbrella term, but that in the absence of any consensus, we should try to build support around one term.

We proposed that 'guidance' embraces seven activities: informing, advising, counselling, assessing, enabling, advocating and feeding back, with educating added later as an eighth. Some agencies, services or individuals might offer all eight, while others might specialise in one or a few. The Government's response was surprisingly positive. They recognised the argument that better guidance could address the failings of a market in education and training, and funded us to provide development support through a National Educational Guidance Initiative. However, they were uneasy about the scope of our ambitions, and chose to support only information and advice,

and a severely limited notion of counselling – now unhelpfully renamed 'guidance'. The result was the clumsy, and limiting, term 'IAG', or more recently 'CEIAG' which brings in careers education, but which clearly excludes the remaining activities. The terms have never become widely adopted outside the profession, and the general public remains uncertain about what it is we do, and why.

In drawing these boundaries, money certainly played a role – 'counselling' sounds suspiciously expensive; but it was also ideological for an increasingly radical Government of the right. On one hand, the State has no business meddling with people's minds, while on the other, enabling clients to act, and advocating on their behalf, sounded suspiciously like asking the state's employees to campaign against it (or against their employers). The idea of 'feedback', that guidance practitioners might gather useful intelligence to inform employers and the state about policies and practices, also suggested that we might be getting a false sense of our own importance.

Over the intervening years we have seen much progress. We have a national adult careers service (NCS), but much more needs to be done to make it visible and accessible to the whole adult population. We still need a clearer consensus on what we call what we do. More fundamentally, we need to find ways of enabling the NCS, or its partners, to address the much broader vision of adult guidance which UDACE proposed, to enable adults, not just to find the 'right' course or job, but to make sense of their lives in an uncertain and rapidly changing world.

## How is 'adult' guidance different?

My second issue is 'adulthood': is 'adult guidance' different from guidance for young people? Although this has often been presented as a simple age based divide, in reality it was more complex, rooted both on history and ideology. In the late 1970s we had an established, statutory, careers service for young people, run by Local Authorities, who were also responsible for almost all the schools in their areas. Some of those services also offered limited services to adults, but this was always seen as ancillary to their main mission.

*Adult guidance – where from, and where to?*

However, in the 1970s a range of factors began to demonstrate that adults also had needs, too important to ignore. These included the exposure, in the mid-70s, of the scale of adult illiteracy, and the damage it causes; growing resistance to the systematic exclusion of women from education and the workplace; and concern about rising structural unemployment in an increasingly uncertain labour market.

Two parallel developments responded to this. The first was the creation, in 1971, of the Open University. It is easy now to underestimate what a radical and powerful innovation this was in its time. The OU opened the door to mass higher education, especially for women, and for those who had been failed by the initial education system. Crucially, it recognised from the beginning that a complex distance learning institution, where students lacked the day to day physical contact with staff and fellow learners of a traditional university, required some kind of advisory system, to ensure that learners could relate their own curricular choices to their individual needs and aspirations, and did not simply become lost in a maze of modules. At a stroke, the OU created a cohort of 'guidance' staff, and for most of the time since, it has supported, directly and indirectly, the development of guidance provision for adults more generally.

Alongside this was a more radical agenda, concerned with social exclusion, unemployment and poverty, which drove the creation of a number of specialist services, mostly funded precariously on short term project grants, offering what was usually called 'educational guidance for adults', notably in Belfast, Inner London and Bradford. For many of those working in these services, adult guidance was a political (or at least civic empowerment) project, and they did not feel at home in the world of the traditional (young peoples') careers service, with its perceived emphasis on fitting school leavers into jobs in the established labour market. Adult clients often needed much confidence building before they could contemplate entering education or the labour market. These services took from the adult education tradition the view that adults, unlike school pupils, bring experience and knowledge of the adult world which changes the nature of their learning needs and aspirations. Adult services should therefore begin from the belief that well informed adults will make good

decisions about their lives, and should be supported in implementing these, whether or not they are convenient for the state or employers.

This was a more radical view of guidance than that of many existing careers services, and the tension created rival professional bodies, literature and aspirations, and two services competing for public recognition and resources. The divide has lasted for more than 30 years, and though there has been some coming together, like the creation of the Career Development Institute, in recent years Government policy has sometimes driven an increasing wedge between the two (Department for Education 2014).

These issues may not be well described as 'adult' versus 'young people's' guidance. Rather, they are a divergence of vision: is guidance about helping people to fit into the existing world, or to challenge that world? How do we help people to make sense of their lives, as lifespan expands, and patterns of paid work and everyday life become increasingly complex? The recent NIACE Mid-life Career Review project has confirmed what adult guidance workers have long known: that career decisions are no simpler, nor less important, for people in later life than for school leavers (NIACE 2014). Furthermore, the last decade of research into the older labour market and retirement shows clearly, and unsurprisingly, that people do not want to switch off their lives at retirement, and spend thirty years with their feet up (McNair 2006). Just like younger adults, they continue to want to contribute to society, with some purpose and structure to their lives, which may, or may not, involve paid work. However, we lack good models of what a society might look like, when a third of the population is 'retired', and when patterns of paid and unpaid activity across the life course are much more fluid and unpredictable. In addressing these issues, we might want to make better use of the evidence about how people manage their lives, from longitudinal studies, which have been tracking large cohorts in detail since birth (Centre for Longitudinal Studies 2014). Now that the oldest UK cohort is 68 (MRC 2014), and the oldest US cohort are now in their 90s, or dead (Vaillant 2012) we have the chance to look at whole working lives in context.

## How do learning and guidance interact?

My third issue is the relationship between learning and guidance. Adult guidance services grew from roots in radical adult education: from the notion that education gives adults the means to change their lives, to challenge the status quo and overcome disadvantage. Paid employment was only one dimension of life, and for the founding cohort of social activists, learning was central – guidance was not primarily about fitting pegs into predetermined holes, but about learning how to make new holes. The central questions were about understanding who you are, who you might become, and how to challenge the barriers to achieving that. Information and advice was obviously crucial, but secondary to the prime purpose. The proposals of The Challenge of Change implied that good guidance, which enabled people to take control of their own lives, is a learning process, in which (perhaps transformed) educational methods and institutions have a key role, but that, if resources are short, they should be put into helping people to make good decisions, rather than providing courses to pursue other peoples' purposes. Learning also raised other issues. Learning for adults is by its nature different – adults come because they choose to, not because they are required to enrol in an educational institution. From adult learning also comes the importance of group work: 'guidance clients' can learn a great deal from each other, and models of guidance based exclusively on one to one conversations ignore this potential.

In 2014, adult learning remains a Cinderella area of policy. Public recognition of its importance remains underdeveloped, and although participation in training between 20 and 50 no longer declines with age as steeply as it once did (McNair 2014), what is offered and undertaken, by many people, remains very limited, focused on the current job and statutory requirements, and is rarely designed to open horizons, to empower or to challenge preconceptions. The Web has transformed access to knowledge and (to a more limited extent) to online learning, but participation in some traditional forms of adult learning has declined steeply as Government has focused resources increasingly on young people, and on qualification bearing courses whose relevance to most adults is, at

best, questionable. In a world where much lip service is paid to 'lifelong learning', it is strange that almost 90% of all expenditure (public and private) on post school learning, is spent on people under 25. It is even odder that only 3% is spent on the third of the workforce who are over 50 (Schuller & Watson 2009).

## What is 'professional'?

Finally, we face the issue of 'professionalism'. The mix of resources for guidance is being constantly enriched by a vast wealth of online resources, and support from peers, online and face to face, increasingly offering sophisticated interactive processes, and building on complex data gathering and analysis (for example BIS 2011). However, we share with our funders, clients and Government, a proper concern to ensure that the service which our clients receive is as good as it can be. Much has been done to achieve this through the conventional routes of professionalism - quality controlled education, formal qualifications and supervised practice. Yet we know that most people will spend much more time talking about these issues to 'unqualified' people (family, friends, and workmates) than to level 6 qualified professionals. Those people will bring their own knowledge, prejudices and interests to bear on those conversations. At their best, they provide the kind of counselling, enabling and advocacy support that public services find difficult, or too expensive, but at its worst it may be seriously damaging. However, the boundaries around what is professional advice in our field will never be policed like those around financial advice. At a pragmatic level, because money is limited, we need to make more, and more appropriate, use of these informal and 'unqualified' resources. At a more conceptual level, we need to consider how the skills of the 'qualified' professionals fit into a new landscape where much more information, and peer support is available from 'non-professional' sources.

One area where there is probably more to be done is in the use of group methods, and 'courses', as supplements or alternatives to more traditional one to one models. The evidence of the power of mutual support groups is evident in mid-life review, in voluntary jobclubs, and most dramatically in the University of the Third Age, which now has a quarter

of a million members (U3A 2015). All show how a group can support and empower its members. Professionals may have a role, sometimes as a source of knowledge, more often as a facilitator; but the other group members elaborate the arguments and evidence, interpret and support each other. However, the experience of pre-retirement education, which seeks to adopt similar models and purposes, and has struggled to establish itself over some 40 years, demonstrates the difficulties of establishing (and funding) adult programmes of this kind.

## The emerging policy context

Where does adult guidance sit now in the policy environment? We believe that people's lives will be happier and more productive, and society and the economy healthier, if individuals make good personal decisions about how to use their time and resources, in paid work and other activity, rather than being directed into routes which suit funders, Government or even employers. However, the scale of investment, financial, political and institutional, in the current model of educational institutions, courses and qualifications makes it difficult for radical voices about how people learn and manage their lives to be heard. Despite a Government policy agenda to extend working life, parts of Government remain locked in an outdated model of the life course and the nature of work and life which prioritise young people and formal qualifications (DWP 2014). As a result, though the creation of the National Careers Service represents a massive step forward, we still have far to go to recognise a genuinely lifelong perspective, and to embrace the full range of issues and decisions which people face. As professionals we also have a challenge to demonstrate that guidance does indeed deliver better results for adults, and that they would not be better off left to their own devices, or to the market. We are properly critical of the performance measures which policymakers sometimes adopt: which make the measurable important, rather than the reverse. However, this means that we must rise to the challenge, to produce and sell politically, better measures of success which recognise, for example, that for some people the decision to retire 'early', or to reject a job which is humiliating and exploitative, is the 'best' decision for the individual and society.

A brief window appeared to open in the late 2000s, when policymakers became seriously interested in the notion of 'wellbeing'. Respected academics argued that, since it can be demonstrated that there is little or no correlation between wealth and happiness, perhaps Government should concentrate more resources on those things which do make people happy (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi 2011; and Layard 2011). It was an argument that chimed well with the underlying beliefs of adult guidance world, and although the argument has been driven out by economic alarms since then, it still lurks on the margins of the political landscape. Understanding how one uses one's life, what makes it rewarding and gives it meaning, is clearly central to such a vision. Can we show that guidance focused in that way would be more valuable than slotting people into any job for 13 or 26 weeks?

We also need to be seen as a profession acting for the clients. Since the 1980s it has been fashionable for politicians to suspect all professions of being the self-interested 'conspiracy against the laity'. How do we demonstrate this, without falling to the trap of becoming merely noisy and 'difficult' lobbyists for awkward individuals?

We also need a united voice, cohering around a broad notion of our mission, but allowing for diversity of practice and focus. Policymakers instinctively avoid fields where warring tribes appear to be constantly squabbling about technical issues and competing ideologies. Over 40 years we have repeatedly tried to bring together the various wings of the guidance world – from the Standing Conference of Guidance in Educational Settings (with 20 professional bodies, from the Library Association to the British Association of Counselling) in the 1980s, through the National Guidance Council, which died when it lost its funding stream, to the creation of a single professional body - the Career Development Institute - which has replaced three (but sadly not all four, since AGCAS remains separate) rival ones. We have a National Careers Council, but its life is limited, and as a Government appointed body, its ability to speak independently for the profession or for clients is limited. We have the Careers Alliance, which brings together most of the agencies providing guidance in its various forms, as a political lobby, but with fragile resources, and potentially vulnerable to the

charge of self-interest. Sadly, however, Government's latest initiative, the New Careers Company, merely emphasises the youth/adult divide once again.

## A global context

These are all technical challenges for us to tackle as guidance professionals, but we should not ignore the wider picture, most of whose challenges are not new, but more urgent than in 1964, when most of the defining features of today's economy and society were inconceivable.

No 'career decision' made today can be relied on to be sustainable in twenty years' time, or even ten. Some of today's graduates go into jobs which simply did not exist when they left school three years ago, or when they chose their GCSEs. The changing global economy, climate change, and new patterns of migration will all transform what work might mean in this country and worldwide. The collapse of confidence in democratic government may radically change the relationship between individual and the state, undermining some of our most cherished certainties. Medical developments will extend life for many, raising questions about how people plan for and manage the decades of 'retirement', and we are increasingly vulnerable to global epidemics. Inequality of wealth, at levels not seen for a century, will transform life chances for many if not all of us (Piketty 2014). Perhaps the most unpredictable, but radical influence, will be technological change. The current consensus of specialists in artificial intelligence, is that within 40 years machine intelligence will have overtaken human (Bostrom 2014), and our relationship with the machines will become like chimpanzees with us. What will 'work' mean then?

We will not solve all these issues, and the one certainty is that most predictions will prove wrong. Against this background, we need to develop a range of services to help our clients to understand this, and to develop resourcefulness and resilience, and strategies for mutual support, to cope with the unexpected. The radical vision of the pioneers of adult guidance - that guidance can help people to make sense of their lives and transform their worlds - has never been more vital.

## References

- Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education (1982) *Continuing education: from policies to practice*, Leicester: ACACE.
- Bibby, D. et al. (2014) *Estimation of the labour market returns to qualifications gained in English further education*. BIS Research Paper 195. London: BIS.
- Bostrom, N. (2014) *Superintelligence: paths, dangers, strategies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Centre for Longitudinal Studies (2014) <http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/> (accessed 18th February 2015)
- Department for Education (2014) <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-careers-and-enterprise-company-for-schools> (accessed 18th February 2015)
- Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (2011) *Measuring the economic impact of further education*, BIS Research Paper 38. London: BIS.
- DWP (2014) *Fuller working lives: a framework for action*. London: Department of Work and Pensions.
- Layard, R. (2011) *Happiness: lessons from a new science*. London: Penguin.
- McNair, S. (2006) "What do Older Workers Want?" *Social Policy & Society* 5 (4),
- McNair, S. (2012) *Older people's learning in 2012: a survey*, Leicester: NIACE.
- MRC (2014) <http://www.nshd.mrc.ac.uk/> (accessed 18th February 2015)
- NIACE (2014) <http://shop.niace.org.uk/midlife-pilot-findings.htm> (accessed 18th February 2015)
- Piketty, T. (2014) *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- PricewaterhouseCoopers (2009) *The Future of UK Manufacturing*. PwC: London.
- Schuller, T. and Watson, D. (2009) *Learning through life: inquiry into the future for lifelong learning*, Leicester: NIACE.

*Adult guidance – where from, and where to?*

Stiglitz, J.E., Sen, A., Fitoussi, J.-P. (2011) *How's Life: measuring well-being*. Paris: OECD.

U3A (2015) <http://www.u3a.org.uk/> (accessed 18th February 2015)

UDACE (1986) *The challenge of change: developing educational guidance for adults*, Leicester: NIACE.

Vaillant, G.E. (2012) *Triumphs of Experience*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

## For correspondence

Stephen McNair  
NICEC Fellow

Stephen.McNair@niace.org.uk