The Emerging Research Infrastructure in Career Education and Guidance: an Informal Briefing

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This briefing was written to clarify the relationship between the National Careers Research Database and the National Research Forum for Information, Advice and Guidance on Learning and Work. Happily both are at a very early stage and can develop in ways that support each other. Indeed the Guidance Council is carrying out a wide-ranging consultation before recommending the shape of the National Research Forum.

National Careers Research Database (NRCD)

In late 2002, the University of Warwick's Institute for Employment Research (IER) received funding from the Department for Employment and Skills (DfES) to set up the NCRD. The IER is carrying this out over two years in collaboration with the Centre for Guidance Studies (CeGS) at the University of Derby, and the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC). It follows from four related but separate initiatives:

* a European Social Fund (ESF) ADAPT project involving the University of East London and other UK and European partners that explored the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to support the knowledge development of guidance practitioners;

* an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) bid from the IER supported by a range of partners from the guidance community (including the Guidance Council) which outlined the case for a research database;

* a conference in May 2002 organised by the Guidance Council (GC) in association with CeGS, University of Derby funded by the DfES at Stoke Rochford on the future of research in Career Guidance; and

* a feasibility study for a national research database commissioned by the DfES and carried out in the summer of 2002 by CeGS, NICEC and IER.

The NRCD project is linked to another project analysing the long term impact of various guidance interventions on adult clients over five years.

The NRCD is not limited to a simple database of research reports. It is currently seen as consisting of three elements:

i. Future Trends: labour market information focusing on market changes and skills needs. This component grew out of an ADAPT project in which the University of East London was the lead partner.

ii. A Research Database: to be linked to a comprehensive library of guidance materials known as the National Learning Resource for Guidance based at CeGS (and incorporating the NICEC library as well as that of the ICG).

iii. Effective Guidance: this is the collective learning dimension, divided into six strands (equal opportunities, impact analysis, using research in practice, improving practice, lifelong learning, and international perspectives).

During the life of the project function (iii) will be developed by six separate groups of experts drawn from different guidance sectors and roles (policy, practice, research) who will identify gaps, key areas or problems in that particular aspect of guidance work. The 'product' will be developed through a website which will contain the research database but also six separate discussion forums, to be subdivided along lines suggested by the participating experts. When this 'learning community' is launched it will be open to the whole field, including practitioners, managers, policymakers, trainers and researchers. The aim is to provide a resource for all these groups as well as to encourage participation.

One feature of this project at present is its use of ICT and post-structuralist language, and this could be confusing to the uninitiated. The medium of presentation is described as a 'comprehensive telematics platform...It will support collaboration, knowledge transformation and the creation of a dynamic community of practice and research' (Project Summary, November 2002). The technical support is provided by an organisation called theknownet.

Another feature which is at first sight rather confusing is that the website is currently called the Guidance for Adults Research *Forum*. This is partly explained by the shared parentage of the two initiatives: the name was agreed at the end of the ADAPT project in 2000 before the initiative divided in two. And it is early days, so both the language and the technology can be adapted better to serve the goals of this project and distinguish it from the other.

The NCRD project is being evaluated by Marcus Offer, NICEC fellow.

The National IAG Research Forum (NRF)

This too has its roots in the Stoke Rochford conference of May 2002. The DfES is funding the Guidance Council (GC) to establish a forum 'through a process of consultation and design followed by a two-year period of pilot activity' (Consultation Document, February 2003). The objectives of the forum are (summarised from the same document):

i. to develop a coherent research strategy relevant to policy and practice;

ii. to identify research priorities, linking closely with the NCRD;

iii. to 'provide a strategically co-ordinated approach to research into IAG' to support investment decisions;

iv. to bring a wide range of potential stakeholders into the decision-making about research funding, and encourage the use of findings to inform policy and practice.

As far as can be seen from the questions in the consultation document (www.guidancecouncil.com/consultation/index2.asp) the NRF may consist of a large group of representatives from different interested bodies, rather like the GC itself, though this is still all to be decided. Possible roles include acting like one of the academic research councils, deciding priorities for public research funding and organising peer review of research proposals; or being more proactive, providing research mentors to encourage practitioners and others to undertake research and advising on other sources of research funding.

NICEC has a role in this development stage of the NRF, and will be putting together a paper mapping key agencies and publications and identifying major research gaps.

The DfES is to be congratulated in opening these decisions to external experts and hopefully it will reduce the all-too-familiar overlap and gaps. The NRF will also be in a position to monitor government response to policy recommendations emerging from research commissioned by the DfES and other departments.

The distinction and relationship between the two initiatives

The first is becoming clear, and the second should be symbiotic: one bringing research within reach of policy and practice, and the other providing a research policy and strategy body. But:

i. Unless the two bodies actually merge there are issues around the name of the NRCD website which at present imply that the website *is* the Forum.

ii. The NRF will include work with young people, and it would be sensible if the NRCD could also be expanded to do so.

iii. Because the DfES covers England only, there has been some concern that the scope of both initiatives would be restricted geographically. However the NRF has been given the go-ahead to work over the whole of the UK and to make its work available internationally and there are already plans to extend the NRCD to Scotland. It is the DfES's intention that both should cover all four home countries and it seems only a matter of time before that will happen.

iv. A number of the same people are likely to be involved in both, so the sooner the working relationship between them can be resolved the easier it will be for the field to understand what is going on.

Other related initiatives

EPPI

The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) is part of the Social Science Research Unit (SSRU) at the Institute of Education, University of London. One of its activities is a Research Evidence in Education Library, providing a 'centralised resource for people wishing to undertake reviews of available research and those wishing to use reviews to inform policy and practice'. Systematic literature reviews are undertaken by thematic Review Groups. CeGS has been commissioned to establish a Review Group on transitions for young people within educational contexts. This involves a group of experts drawn from a wide range of oragnisations such as NICEC, NACGT, Connexions Services, The Children & Young People's Unit, IER and CeGS who are all involved in advising on the development of the systematic literature review. Through EPPI the Review Group Team will be given training in how to conduct literature reviews. EPPI is close to an education version of the medical Cochrane Library (www.update-software.com/cochrane) which is likely to inform the model for the database part of the NCRD (with small groups of researchers and practitioners taking responsibility for the maintenance of different sections of the database and updating simple mini-literature reviews on different topics).

Guidenet (www.guidenet.org)

This is an EU Leonardo da Vinci-funded pilot project led by Careers Europe with eight other European partners. It aims to establish a European network of expertise, offering 'the UK Guidance community an opportunity to network and establish links with a wide range of guidance and education organisations throughout the EU, EEA and pre-accession countries. The Guidenet project will establish a transnational network of expertise to gather together guidance initiatives, evaluate and comment upon them and to disseminate them as widely as possible within the guidance communities in Europe. That there is a need for

such a network can be demonstrated by the interest shown in practice and developments in other countries by policy makers and practitioners in Europe. The primary target groups for Guidenet are guidance counsellors, guidance organisations, policy makers and other actors in the guidance field at all levels nationally and transnationally.' The project runs for three years ending in November 2004. Links have already been established between GUIDENET and the National Careers Research Database/Forum.

Note

This briefing was seen in draft by Cathy Bereznicki, Jenny Bimrose, Geoff Ford, Deirdre Hughes, John Killeen and Malcolm Maguire. I have gratefully incorporated their comments, but any errors or omissions are my own.