John Killeen: An Appreciation

Gareth Dent

I first met John late in 1993. I had just taken my first policy job in the then Department of Employment after an extended spell in the Government Economic Service. Although I notionally had policy responsibility for the Gateways to Learning programme, one does not cast off an economist's training easily and I was intensely sceptical about the benefits of guidance for adults. If you had cut me in half at the time, it would have read 'what's your estimate of the counter-factual?'

The first meeting did not create an entirely positive impression. It was a meeting scheduled by my predecessor with NICEC Fellows. John stood out paradoxically as both very polite and combative. He seemed to have a particular bee in his bonnet about management consultants and money being wasted on what he saw as flawed evaluations of local pilots. This was not an insignificant criticism as it is important to remember that the full extent of adult guidance funding in 1993 comprised two pilot programmes, Skillchoice and Gateways to Learning, both locally differentiated, subject to short funding horizons and evaluated locally.

By this time John had already published *The Economic Value of Careers Guidance* (Killeen, White & Watts, 1992). Prompted to read this, I found myself increasingly convinced by the economic arguments. And it was here that John brought a massive strength to NICEC; he could use the sceptic's toolbox to construct the arguments that could not be dismissed as special pleading. The sceptic found himself forced to confront the question of whether practitioners could be held to account for the absence of evidence. If there were convincing theoretical arguments for guidance having an impact, why had policy-makers not funded a serious attempt at measurement?

A further conversation was decisive; the reasons for John's annoyance at local evaluations became clear. It was not that local TEC managers were incompetent in framing evaluation specifications or that management consultants were deliberately taking the money and running. It was simply that the effects that they were looking for were only ever likely to be small and would take time to emerge. Lots of small studies asking a couple of hundred of people a few weeks after a Gateways interview whether they were behaving differently were inevitably never going to convince; they were too small, too soon and the absence of a control group meant they were doomed from the start.

Slowly the idea started to form of taking some of the money from small local evaluations and using it to conduct a large robust study. This work, ultimately published in 1996, met many of John's criteria. It was limited in ambition; no outlandish claims were made for the impact that was being assessed. This was not to be a study of whether guidance changed people's lives. This extravagant idea was not current at the time and John would have been fiercely critical. Rather it was to be a study of the 'intermediate' outcomes of guidance: did somebody exposed to guidance change their behaviour over the next 12 months by either starting a course or leaving unemployment. It was to be a big study for the time, with some 800 respondents, and there was to be a comparison group made up of people not exposed to guidance.

The outcomes of this piece of research (Killeen, 1996e) are now well-known, but it is easy to overlook their novelty at the time. Participants in the Gateways programme could be clearly seen to be twice as likely to start a course as the comparison group. Never before had policy-makers had such robust evidence to argue that, if you want to create a learning society, here is something that works: we don't think it works, we know it does!

Of course, the need for evidence to support the case for public investment does not disappear in the face of a single piece of evidence. But what this study did was to set the standard by which future attempts to test the impact of guidance could be judged. The longitudinal research funded today by the DfES into the impact of guidance is following in a tradition established by John and by Michael White.

Over the time I was involved with John in the study, more things emerged from his battered leather school master's briefcase than evidence to argue for resources. Also came the arguments that convinced me that the time had come to get off the 'prove it' fence. So, for me, adult guidance moved from a two-year tour of duty to become a career. I remain immensely grateful to John for that nudge in the right direction.

John, of course, was as robust in his self-questioning as in his questioning of others. He regretted that typically British reticence which forbids social experiments. The executive summary of the study which would be used to argue successfully that the time had come to move away from pilots to funding long-term services, such as the learndirect advice service and local IAG services, concludes not with a demand for further funding for guidance but with a lament. The lament is that if we are not prepared to *deny* some people guidance, we will never be absolutely sure about its effects. Characteristically, the point is made robustly but politely.