'E-guidance': Can we Deliver Guidance by Email and What Issues Does That Raise? Recent Research and Evaluation in HE

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This was the question addressed at a NICEC seminar last May, which involved presentations from Lucy Madahar (Graduate Prospects), Lucy Marris, and Marcus Offer. The following article is based on a document prepared for that seminar, and links to more in-depth reports and briefings referred to here and downloadable from the web site addresses given below.

1. There's a lot of it about. Where once guidance was restricted to a handful of interventional modes and media, ICT has produced an expanding variety of ways in which the guidance practitioner can apparently deliver services to clients – including email, chat, text messaging, on-line discussion, e-learning, web sites and videoconferencing. The UK is probably a world leader in terms of the proportion of guidance users whose needs are being met by email. We have three major institutions, covering the three major sectors of guidance, involved in significant delivery of guidance by email and related media:

- Graduate Prospects had, by 2003, dealt with over 16,000 graduate enquirers by email, an average of 1000 a month, checked over 7500 CVs online, registered over 7,000 graduates to use the careers message board and talk to each other and advisers on-line, and, a late development, organised 25 chat events where a total of 450 graduates talked live to recruiters and postgraduate study experts. The service achieved accreditation against Matrix standards – a first of its kind. Graduate Prospects also funded in the last two years a pilot project to make the software supporting this activity available to local university careers services for their customised use with their own undergraduates, graduates and alumni.

- **Connexions Direct,** a national service that began as a pilot in the NE region and has still to make an impact everywhere, was set up in September 2001 and by the end of July 2003 had helped around 49,000 young people using email, chat, text messaging and the telephone, chat being the most popular medium. Usage has continued to expand significantly since. Over 50% of its enquiries deal with careers or learning issues. About one in four enquiries last year were by email.

- **Learndirect** already has Europe's largest telephone helpline and call centre. It also deals at peak times, with 700 emails per week from adults asking for information and advice on courses, career change, entry to careers, funding for learning, and childcare.

(The figures given here are illustrative and indicative rather than precise and definitive and as the use of the media is rapidly expanding, they should be checked with the agencies in question for up-to-date data)

2. This entails some practical consequences. For example, we may need to accept that a significant proportion of future interactions between guidance practitioners and their clients or students will be via ICT-based media, and that a number of these will be asynchronous and at a distance. Are practitioners able to transfer existing skills from the face-to-face situation into an on-line environment without a hitch or are new skills required? What is the impact of such new forms of intervention on older face-to-face approaches – are they (using Tony Watts' famous breakdown of CAGS) merely additional tools, alternatives to the existing services, or agents of change? Do they require strategic rethinking of the existing services, of the flow of users through a resource system that is now significantly on-line and relatively independent of place? Where do they fit alongside the traditional reception desk and careers library? How should the managers of guidance services prepare themselves and their staffs for the new forms of delivery? Will they be swamped? (Our tentative hypothesis is a ratio of 1 email to every 4 face-to-face interventions). Can ICT offer cheaper replacements for traditional services, which can deliver the cost-effective universal service while freeing practitioners to focus on the needs of the minority of those who really need significant face-to-face help? Or is there actually no saving at all, just a difference in kind, with the same demands for quality, but requiring new skills to deliver it?

3. Yes, but is it guidance? Most significantly of all, perhaps, is the way in which these new forms require a revisiting of old definitions and professional certainties. The views of the advisers who deliver the new services are a vitally determining factor. A significant number of those we surveyed continue to insist that there is some vital element of what they refer to as 'guidance' which is not, and, more importantly, cannot be, delivered other than in a face-to-face one-to-one situation.

Anything less, is of lower value, and while it may count as 'information' or 'advice', is definitely not 'guidance'. Is this a dysfunctional definition of the term guidance, or an important professional insight into the nature of what constitutes 'guidance', the essence of what happens between a guidance practitioner and her/his client?

It is suggested in response that the available official definitions of 'guidance', including the latest descriptions of 'enhanced services', ***can*** include activities and outcomes and processes deliverable by email and other on-line interventions, that email in particular is a form of intervention in its own right and with its own rules and skills, and not adequately described as a poor relation of the traditional guidance interview. As Lucy Marris says, 'Online counselling is different rather than less'(Marris, 2003). This may entail rethinking some of the management decisions made about where email sits in relation to other resources in the system, including other ICT-based resources, as well as a new emphasis on writing skills. Email itself might offer new training and development opportunities for practitioners including easier supervision.

Given that email has been extensively, if controversially, used in other even more sensitive areas where face-to-face intervention has been regarded as a sine qua non – Samaritans have used email successfully and substantially, especially with young men, and a number of psychotherapists and counsellors now operate on-line, especially in the USA – what is special about guidance that it cannot be done by email? Is the I/A/G definition of guidance really a defensible theoretical breakdown of what actually happens when guidance as an activity takes place in various media and different contexts? Technology, as always, challenges us to revisit and redefine the categories.

Chapter 10 of the report '*Managing e-guidance interventions…*' (Madahar & Offer, 2004) attempts to show that 'guidance' by whatever definition, is being done by email. We suggest that email services can deliver at least some of the outcomes of guidance, and that many of the accepted activities of guidance occur in this medium.

The contrary view may be talking of some of the current practice, but the response is that that simply shows that practitioners have not yet developed the necessary skills and that services have not properly integrated the medium into their current resource system, or developed an appropriate structure to support its use. The *Advisers' Checklist* (Offer, 2004) aims to provide a practical resource to support such training and development and will, it is hoped, be amended as our experience grows to take account of the practical skills being applied in the frontline, and in response to reports from practitioners actually engaged in using email to give guidance.

Nevertheless, as Lucy Marris shows, the objections of advisers cannot be lightly overruled. Some are enthusiastic, some quite the opposite. 'I don't feel confident, but then I don't feel that I want to gain confidence because I don't feel it's the right medium.' Can the irresistible force overcome the immovable object, or is email simply a 'case of the triumph of form over substance?' (Marris, 2003). A tool, an alternative or an agent of change? (Watts, 1996)

References and further reading

Madahar, L. (2003), *Services for Graduates. A national career development service for graduates* CSU, Manchester.

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Offer, M.S. (2004/1) *What is e-guidance? Using Information and Communications Technology Effective in Guidance Services.* HECSU Briefing, Manchester. Downloadable from www.crac.org.uk/nicec/research/archived_research/whatiseguidance.pdf

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Watts, A.G. (1996) Computers in Guidance in *Rethinking Careers Education and Guidance*, Watts, A.G., Law, B., Killeen, J., Kidd, J.M and Hawthorn, R., Routledge, (pp. 269-283).