BULLETIN

What is effective career guidance? Evidence from longitudinal case studies in England

This bulletin presents findings from a research project exploring what is effective career guidance. A recent review by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004) highlights the potential role for career guidance services in advancing lifelong learning goals and helping with the implementation of active labour market policies. However, there is currently a lack of compelling evidence regarding the nature of effective guidance and its benefits (Hughes *et al*., 2002), particularly on the medium-term and longer-term impacts of guidance (OECD, 2004). Despite this, the strategic, economic role of guidance has been emphasised (DTI, 1994; Employment Department, 1995) and in England, guidance provision for those under 19 years was enhanced and 'refocused' on social exclusion (DfEE, 1999). More recently, government made a significant public investment to improve guidance for adults through support for information, advice and guidance (IAG) services with the intention of developing a learning society (Irving and Slater, 2002).

What is career guidance?

In the UK, agreement on a definition of career guidance has, to date, proved elusive. Changes in the labour market (like globalisation and the development of information technology) have challenged the relevance of the established, narrow view of career transition as a one-off event at an early stage of an individual's development, replacing it with a broader understanding of how transitions into education, training and employment are more complex, more prolonged and often span lifetimes (Young and Collin, 2000).

Recent definitions have tried to capture the implications of these changes for guidance. For example, definitions proposed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2004) and the Council of the European Union (2004) emphasise the need for guidance to support multiple transitions over a prolonged time-span and neither make particular distinctions about the type of activities guidance involves.

In contrast, a discussion document from the Department for Education and Skills in the UK on information, advice and guidance (2003), distinguishes four separate levels of service provision: information, advice, guidance and personal support. Within this framework of differentiated provision, information and advice are distinguished from guidance and personal support. Guidance is defined as helping clients to:

understand their own needs relating to learning and work; set and review goals/objectives for learning and work; understand their barriers to learning and work; overcome barriers/obstacles to learning and work; and to produce learning and career action plans. Personal support is defined separately as 'intensive, one to one, continuity of support', aimed at clients who reveal severe or multiple barriers to successful entry/progression in learning and work.

Within this context of differing policy views about the nature and activities of guidance, key questions emerge: what actually occurs in a guidance interview, what exactly do clients find useful and (perhaps most importantly) what precisely does 'useful' mean in this context? These questions are being explored through a longitudinal research project being funded by the Department for Education and Skills, Access to Learning Division. Findings from the first two phases of the study are presented in this bulletin[1].

The research study

The initial phase of data collection took place in 2003/04 and consisted of fifty case studies in organisations providing

[1] The full reports for this study are available online:
Bimrose, J., S.A. Barnes, D. Hughes and M. Orton (2004) What is Effective Guidance? Evidence from Longitudinal Case Studies in England, DfES/Warwick Institute for Employment Research.
http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/publications/

guidance to adults in England. The fifty clients who participated in this study will be followed-up over a four year period (through to 2007) to track their perception of progress, changes in their identity, and key events associated with these changes.

The aim of the research is: to use a qualitative, longitudinal case study approach to investigate the nature of effective guidance for adults and how, over the longer term, it can add value to post-compulsory learning and enhance employability. It aims to answer some specific questions:

- What is effective guidance?
- What are the barriers to effective guidance?
- How can effective practice be encouraged and supported?

Whilst the significant public investment in guidance requires justification in the form of a firm evidence-base, developing this evidence-base represents certain challenges.

Methodology

The qualitative, longitudinal, case study approach adopted for this research has provided rich, thick descriptions that enable detailed comparisons to be made across a variety of English guidance contexts, with each phase informing the next. Five professional contexts were selected for the research:

1. Connexions, Information, Advice and Guidance Partnerships (IAGP) and Job Centre Plus;
2. Higher education;
3. Further education;
4. Community/outreach guidance and not-for-profit organisations (which includes organisations with charitable status); and
5. Private careers organisations and organisations offering guidance on a funded basis in the workplace.

An analytical framework derived from three categories – cognitive, affective and behavioural – was considered to offer most potential for comparing the perspectives of the client, the practitioner and an 'expert witness'. The research focused on: different perceptions of the guidance interview; the process and outcome(s) of the guidance interview; and the action necessary to achieve the next stage. Three questionnaires were used to collect data (against the same categories) from the client, the practitioner and the expert witness for the purpose of comparison. These questionnaires were completed by the practitioner and the client immediately after the interview and by an expert witness, with the recording and transcript of the interview, at a later date. This method of triangulation was used to gain an understanding of the different perspectives of effectiveness. An important finding has been that the majority of client-participants (98%) judged their guidance to be useful.

The fifty case studies were selected as evenly as possible across the five professional contexts. Each case study is based on a digital recording of a guidance interview, questionnaire responses and baseline data from the client and practitioner, together with contextual data from the guidance organisation supplemented by key documents.

The ethical principle of 'informed consent' was strictly applied to the involvement of all participants and it is possible that this has resulted in some bias in sampling. Many clients that were approached to participate in the research were keen to help, believed that the guidance had been a personally worthwhile process and wanted to help others understand its usefulness.

Contextual comparisons

The case studies reveal considerable diversity and complexity. They have scrutinised guidance provision in a range of organisational and geographical settings, and with varied samples of clients and practitioners.

All participating organisations operated to some type of external and/or internal quality standards. The majority of organisations (90%, n = 45) operated service level agreements which required practitioners to work at multiple locations and to provide guidance under different funding streams. Many organisations experienced pressure in trying to manage the demand for guidance across varied funding agreements and budgets. In addition, good levels of in-service training support were provided for employees, with some notable exceptions where training for Connexions Personal Advisers was reported as taking preference over training for adult practitioners.

Variations were found regarding the type of intervention and its length. Of the 49 interviews reported to be 'useful' by the clients, 35 were initial within the professional context in which the interview took place and 14 were follow-up interviews. With the 14 follow-up interviews, the guidance intervention was often part of a planned, on-going schedule of interviews. Although many of the features of the initial interviews, compared with the follow-ups, were similar, some were different.

The length of the guidance interviews differed widely, with the range from 16 minutes to 1 hour 42 minutes. The two shortest interviews were both follow-ups in the community/outreach/not-for-profit organisational context, with practitioners primarily concerned that the client would feel comfortable about returning.

The age, gender and ethnicity of the clients who participated in the research were varied. Over half (58%, n = 29) were aged between 18 and 29 years; 22% (n = 11) were aged 30-39 years; and 20% (n = 10) were aged 40 and above. The sample comprised 66% (n = 33) female clients; 10% (n = 5) of clients from minority ethnic groups (all of whom were female). 14% (n = 7) of clients reported a disability. The highest qualification level of 64% (n = 32) of the clients was level 3/4; 28% (n = 14) had level 1 or 2 qualifications. Three clients had no qualifications.

A high proportion (70%, n = 35) of clients participating in the study had had previous experience of advice and guidance interviews, predominately from school, the Job Centre or previous interviews with the same practitioner or at the same organisation. In the majority of cases (66%, n = 33), the practitioner was working with no or little previous information about the client.

The age profile of the practitioners participating in the study was older than that of the clients. 62% (n = 31) of practitioners who participated in the research held a specialist qualification: specifically, a Qualification in Careers Guidance, a Diploma in Careers Guidance or a Certificate in Careers Guidance. 8 practitioners had no careers guidance related qualifications. 60% (n = 30) of the practitioners had been actively employed for over 10 years and had gained their professional experience in a wide variety of contexts.

A diverse range of participants has been captured in this research: clients varied in age, ethnic origin, gender, disability and qualification level; and practitioners varied similarly. Consistently high practitioner qualifications were evident across all contexts. Overall, it was found that guidance is delivered across varied contexts and from multiple funding streams, all with quality standards which were an accepted, often valued, feature of service delivery.

What is 'useful' guidance?

Forty-nine of the fifty clients (98%) participating in this research indicated that they had found their guidance interview useful. Similar percentages of both practitioners and expert witnesses agreed with clients that the guidance had been useful. 'Useful' guidance was found to comprise of:

- supporting positive outcomes for the client, specifically: exploring and challenging client perceptions together with giving direction, and a new awareness of learning or employment opportunities;
- giving clients access to networks, information and knowledge enabling them to feel better informed and better able to progress;
- encouraging constructive change in the client like: increasing self-confidence; developing skills; developing understanding which broadened ideas; as well as motivating, inspiring and encouraging the client;
- providing the client with a positive experience by: creating the opportunity for reflection and in-depth discussion; and by reassuring, confirming and/or clarifying plans and/or progress.

Clients, practitioners and expert witnesses were also found to have similar understandings of the nature of 'useful' guidance.

Key features of 'useful' guidance

Key features of the guidance interviews, identified by clients, practitioners and expert witnesses, were examined. These key features focused on:

- the expertise of the practitioner: that is, knowledge and skills together with their understanding of what affected individuals' education and employment opportunities;
- examples of good practice: including time allowed for reflection and discussion; the transformative power of the process; the need for guidance; and positive validations of the service; and
- the complexities of guidance: encompassing varied approaches used by practitioners and differences in the

balance of communication between the client and practitioner.

For both clients and expert witnesses, the key feature of the guidance interview was the skills used by the practitioner. For practitioners it was the need for guidance for their clients.

Characteristics of 'effective' guidance

The research study also investigated exactly what occurred in the guidance interviews found 'useful' by clients. It identified the characteristics of these interviews by focusing exclusively on the practitioner interventions. Four discrete categories of activities emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts. These are: building a working alliance; exploring potential; identifying options and strategies; plus ending and following-through. Each category comprised between three and six sub-sets of activities. Not all activities of guidance are evident across all interviews, nor did any particular combination or sequence emerge.

All practitioners used at least one type of strategy to establish and maintain a sound working alliance with their clients. Typically, several strategies were used in combination throughout the interview.

Varied dimensions of the client's background and present circumstances were probed by practitioners. Of the factual data probed, most practitioners (80%, n = 39) investigated their client's educational and training history. Of the softer, attitudinal data, exploration of client preferences (about courses, jobs, strategies, options, etc.) was undertaken most, by 94% of practitioners (n = 46).

Practitioners used various methods to affect some measure of change in their clients' behaviour, attitudes and/or thinking. These included some standard techniques, like giving information or advice together with other non-standard techniques like offering a personal opinion.

Finally, most practitioners presented an overall summary of the interview, with a high percentage of interviews developing some sort of action plan. A majority offered some type of follow-up service to clients.

Issues arising from the study

Considerable interest in this evidence-based research from participants was recorded. Generally, there seemed to be an acceptance by managers and practitioners that there is a lack of evidence relating to the outcomes of guidance and a willingness to participate in a study which was designed to address this deficit. This is compounded by the fact that an operational ambiguity exists around information, advice and guidance terminology.

Further issues were also identified during the research. For example, the nature of the guidance intervention, involving personal, confidential information, places constraints on the research methodology that can be used to gather evidence on

the effectiveness of guidance. This, together with the use of digital recording equipment, may have had an impact on the research process and affected the client-practitioner relationship in a small number of cases. The interview transcriptions from these recordings have, however, provided an accurate and comprehensive picture of what actually occurred in guidance interviews and what clients found useful. Whilst practitioners may welcome the opportunity for formal feedback on their professional practice, they may find the process of recording interviews difficult.

Facilities and locations for guidance can be an inhibitor to effective guidance. This was found to be of particular importance where the needs of certain client groups placed particular demands (like access to libraries, electronic resources, etc.). Additionally, restrictions are generally placed on the time allowed for a guidance interview, though this varies according to the professional context.

Important influences on the guidance process come from outside the immediate boundaries of the interview itself (e.g. opportunity for follow-up, access to training support). In many cases guidance was offered as part of an ongoing process, rather than a 'one off' event. This aspect of the interview was appreciated by clients. The production of an action plan agreed by the client was a feature of most interviews. This raises questions about the extent to which organisational requirements to produce documentation from the interview drives the process.

There was evidence that the traditional matching approach to guidance is still very influential in practice. The corollary to this finding was that there was little evidence of experimentation or risk-taking with new approaches to guidance.

Conclusions

Investigating what constitutes effective guidance is complex, but the qualitative research methodology used in this study has proved robust and has provided data that allow for a significant deepening of understanding of the issues involved. The research has been particularly successful in capturing the distinctive features of provision of guidance and its usefulness.

It is important to note that a high level of agreement amongst the clients, practitioners and expert witnesses about the usefulness of the guidance intervention was found.

Of the fifty clients who participated in this research all but one stated that they had found the guidance they had received useful. 'Useful' guidance relates both to the outcomes of the guidance process and how it developed the skills and knowledge of the client. Evidence from this study indicates guidance is useful to clients when it: provides support and safety, gives access to relevant resources, continues over a period of time and brings about positive change(s).

Activities of guidance identified in the research included four broad categories of activities and forty sub-sets which characterised useful guidance. A wide range of standard techniques and strategies, some advanced and some non-standard, were used by practitioners.

Positive outcomes from 'useful' guidance achieve a measure of change in clients. This could relate to their attitudes, behaviour and/or thinking. These changes make a positive contribution to clients' transition(s) through education and training into employment. However, influence of context on the guidance process means that the outcomes of guidance are dependent, at least in part, on influences that exist outside the interview and that are beyond the control of the practitioner. By following the clients over the next four years a deeper understanding of these outcomes will be gained.

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