

Career Development: Looking Back; Moving Forward

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Introduction

It was a great honour to give the first Annual Lecture in this series, back in 1999 (Watts, 1999). It is an even bigger honour to be invited to give this second one, as my final lecture on career development. I decided around 18 months ago to retire around now from all professional activities. I have spent the intervening time trying to complete the various programmes of work in which I have been involved, to do some summative writing, and to hand over as much as possible to others. I now hope to give more time to my other interests. I am running a class next term for the University of the Third Age on Handel operas and oratorios, and am available to anyone who wants a lecture on those wonderful works. But on career development, this is the last.

What I plan to do is to look back over my 50 years in this field, and to try to pull out some of the key lessons I would draw from the work I have done. I will include some sharp comments on the damaging developments of the last few years. I intend to follow Dylan Thomas's advice, not to go gentle into that good night. But I will end on a very positive note, because I believe there are good grounds for optimism.

Beginnings – and why it matters

I came into this field in January 1964 when Adrian Bridgewater and I set up the Careers Research and Advisory Centre – CRAC (an innocent acronym in those days). I was 21, and had started work at Cornmarket Press, which published books in the careers field. Adrian and I talked. We felt – partly on the basis of our own inadequate experiences – that this was a field in which much needed to be done, and that it would be much more possible to do it within a non-profit organisation than within a publishing company. Adrian had some business experience; I had some ideas on what we might do. So we started what would now be known as a social enterprise, registered as an educational charity.

Our aims were two-fold: to improve the quality of careers work, in schools and beyond; and to develop closer links between the worlds of education and of work. These have continued to be the core mission of my own career, as for many other people attending this lecture: to improve other people's careers. I believe passionately in the importance of this work.

There are, periodically, siren voices which urge dropping the word 'career' and finding a better one to describe our field. This is a futile quest. There is no other word that brings together learning and work, grounds them in the individual, and is about progression. Certainly we need to move away from the old definition: progression up an ordered hierarchy within a profession or organisation. This was a middle-class,

elitist concept: some people had careers; most had jobs, or no jobs. But, like many English words, it has always been richly ambiguous: we also refer to ‘careering about’, with very different connotations. The growing definition now, which we must assiduously foster and promote, is lifelong progression in learning and work. ‘Learning’ because it is about education, but also about training, and informal learning. ‘Work’ because it is about paid employment, but also about self-employment, and unpaid work within households and communities. But it is also, of its essence, about progression and development – lateral as well as vertical. In principle, this concept of career is inclusive, accessible to everyone. The core task of the careers profession is to help to make it so.

This matters, deeply. Our careers significantly define how we spend a lot of our lives, the people we become, and the contributions we make to the societies of which we are part. Our paid work represents a kind of social contract, through which we agree to devote a substantial part of our time to wider social purposes, in return for which we receive income, which we can then spend in whatever ways we choose. If we engage in forms of learning and work which utilise our distinctive abilities, interests and values, we are likely to lead more fulfilling lives. We are also likely to be more motivated and therefore more effective, with benefits for the wider society and economy.

The philosophical roots of this perspective are deep and inspiring. As Ronald Sultana has recently reminded us in a brilliant essay (Sultana, 2014), for Socrates every person has an ‘arete’ or excellence, and it is by being the best that one can be, through putting one’s talent at the service of the community, that one attains virtue. This was echoed by Karl Marx, who stated that ‘the chief guide which must direct us in the choice of a profession is the welfare of mankind and our own perfection’.

Of course, none of this can ever be perfect. Many people still experience enormous constraints on their lives, related to inequalities of many kinds. But almost all can do more than they think they can do, and one of the tasks of career development support is to help them to realise this and to do so. Career development work can thereby support social mobility, social equity and social justice.

It is such important work. Where it is done well, it can transform people’s lives. Yet it is too often derided, usually by people who have made no effort to discover what it is or what it comprises. The roots of this derision are complex: they may have had poor career guidance themselves; or they may want to take the full credit for their own successful careers – which good career guidance would, of course, have encouraged them to do. But the arguments for serious attention to career development are, in my view, incontrovertible. And while useful career conversations can be had with many people, the contributions of careers professionals are distinctive. Their role is not only to deliver services, but also to build the capacity of others. Without them, I am convinced, no serious improvement in career development support is possible.

Progress

Over the past 50 years, we have made much progress. When I entered this field, careers services were very limited. Some schools had careers teachers, with a few

periods a week, mainly to manage a small careers library; some schools did not even do that. The Youth Employment Service visited schools, largely to match early leavers to jobs using a simple diagnostic device called the Seven Point Plan. Universities had appointments boards, focusing mainly on job placement. And that was largely it.

But in the 1960s and 1970s, this began to be transformed. The twin concepts of careers education and counselling began to evolve, based on a much more complex understanding of what was needed. The previous model had been a quasi-medical model: diagnosis and prescription, possibly using psychometric tests or other devices, with the careers adviser doing the work. Now the model shifted to learning, with the active individual at the centre. Moreover, the focus began to shift from *choosing* a career at a particular point in time (usually around the transition from full-time education to the world of work) to *constructing* a career, through the series of decisions we make throughout our lives.

This was a massive shift. Careers education programmes began to grow, in schools and colleges but also in higher education. The Youth Employment Service became the Careers Service. Services for adults began to develop: initially with the Occupational Guidance Units; later through a rich community-based tradition of educational guidance services for adults; alongside career development services within some large companies and other employers. A serious research tradition was initiated to support all this work, with attention to theory as well as empirical studies. We identified examples of good practice and sought to learn from them, as a basis for spreading good ideas and encouraging innovation and development.

We had to confront major challenges, not least the massive growth of unemployment in the late 1970s and 1980s, which challenged many of our assumptions and practices. But we did this well, and it brought the field into a position of greater prominence and respect.

We also had to address the challenges posed by the neoliberal policies pursued by the Thatcher and Major Governments, which included the marketisation of careers services in the form of contracting-out and experiments with guidance vouchers. I was critical of these developments, partly on the theoretical grounds that the key role of career guidance within such an ideological perspective was as a market-maker – a way of making the learning and labour markets work – and that it made little sense to marketise the market-maker (Watts, 1995). But the contracting-out of the Careers Service was well-managed by some very competent civil servants – I know, because I was invited by a senior civil servant of the time, Valerie Bayliss, to observe the contracting process from the inside – and it was largely successful, resulting in some fruitful energising and innovation.

Ministers have recently stated that there has been no Golden Age in the provision of careers work in this country. But I agree with Paul Chubb, who has argued in a recent blog¹ that we came pretty close to it in the mid-1990s. We had an Education Act which mandated careers education in schools and the partnership between schools and

¹ <http://adventuresincareerdevelopment.wordpress.com/2014/09/24/was-there-ever-a-golden-age-for-careers-education-and-guidance/>

the Careers Service. We had the CBI advancing the concept of ‘careers for all’ as the means of achieving a ‘skills revolution’ (CBI, 1989). We had the decision to establish a learning helpline for adults, which subsequently became Learndirect – a world leader (Watts & Dent, 2002). We had the Guidance Council, jointly sponsored by the CBI and the RSA, which brought together the key stakeholders and was supported by the Government to develop quality standards for the field (Alloway, 2008).

We also had a Labour Party paper, on which I worked with Steve Byers and Ruth Gee, which argued the case for the Careers Service to become an all-age service. So when the Labour Party came to power with a massive majority in 1998, all seemed set fair.

And then it started to fall apart, in England at least. John Major had called the General Election early, and the Byers-Gee paper had not been published. Early in the life of the new Government, David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education, promised to publish and act upon it. But he never did. Instead, careers services for young people were overtaken by the issue of social exclusion (Watts, 2001). The Government wanted to bring together all the services concerned with young people at risk; but the only budget it controlled was that of the Careers Service; so it used this to create a new Connexions Service. This had two aims: to provide a careers service for all young people, and a holistic service for young people at risk. But all the performance measures were addressed to the latter group. Moreover, the responsibility for running the service was given to Anne Weinstock, from a Youth Service background, who shamefully banned the use of the word ‘careers’. Careers Advisers were to be rebadged as Personal Advisers; their labour market knowledge was neglected. This resulted in serious professional erosion. Moreover, whereas almost all young people had been seen at least once by a professional adviser, the proportion now fell massively.

Towards the end of its time in power, the Labour Government realised the error of its ways. A report of a group chaired by Alan Milburn (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009) pointed out that in its concern for social exclusion, the Government had neglected social mobility. There were plenty of young people who were not at risk of dropping out, but were under-performing and under-aspiring. Among its acts of repentance, the Government established a Task Force to strengthen the careers profession. Brilliantly chaired by Ruth Silver, its excellent report (Careers Profession Task Force, 2010) was accepted not only by the Labour Government but also by the Coalition Government when it came to power in 2010.

The Conservative Party had included in its Election Manifesto a commitment to establish an all-age careers service. John Hayes, the new Skills Minister, gave an inspiring speech in Belfast in which he promised to establish the all-age service, building upon the best of Connexions and Next Step (the service for adults), to safeguard the partnership between schools and the careers service, and to revitalise the professional status of career guidance. This was the second false dawn (Watts, 2013). Because each of these promises has been, in turn, betrayed.

The initial core of the problem was, as with the Labour Government, conflict with a major policy drive: in this case, school autonomy. The duty to provide careers guidance was moved to schools, to buy in services from outside: so the partnership

model was replaced by a contractor-supplier relationship. But not with the new National Careers Service, which would provide a helpline for young people but not face-to-face services – a half-baked all-age service at best. We assumed that the Connexions careers funding (around £197 million) would be transferred to schools, perhaps with some pruning in the light of austerity; but it was not. No announcement was made, but gradually we discovered that it had simply been removed. Schools were to buy in or provide services from their existing budgets. Also removed were the funding for Education-Business Partnerships and AimHigher, and the statutory duties to provide careers education and work-related learning.

We then awaited the Statutory Guidance, which schools needed to inform their budgets. Drafts were circulated for consultation, in confidence: they gradually got stronger. But, unbelievably, the version published was weaker than the first published draft: so vacuous as not to merit publication. In effect, it was clear, schools could now do what they liked: if they did little or nothing, there was no basis on which a legal challenge could be mounted. The Liberal Democrats and others made a fuss, and a supplementary Practical Guide was promised. But after endless delays, a purely advisory document was published, in the last week of the summer term just prior to the long summer break. All this demonstrated a noxious mix of incompetence and malign indifference – very different from the Conservative Government of the 1990s.

The cross-party Select Committee on Education, chaired by a Conservative MP (Graham Stuart), was deeply concerned about what was happening. It launched an inquiry, and produced an excellent, well-evidenced and well-argued report (House of Commons Education Committee, 2013). It noted the merits of the partnership model, but recognised the political difficulties of reinstating it. It made, however, a series of strong recommendations, strengthening the Statutory Guidance and giving the NCS a capacity-building role in relation to schools. Almost all its recommendations were rejected or ignored by the Government.

Shamefully, they were also ignored by the National Careers Council, a body set up by John Hayes before he left his post to advise the Government on careers matters. I was a member of this body, and I and another member, Heather Jackson, resigned prior to its first report. We did so because of the way in which the processes of the Council were manipulated in the final stages to produce a report for Ministers that failed to address the key issues identified by the Select Committee, and that colluded with what we viewed as unacceptable Government policies.² I regret that we had to do what we did, but I have never doubted that it was the right thing to do.

As was reinforced by what happened next. The published NCC report (NCC, 2013) was loosely written and bland. It included an appeal for a ‘culture change’, without defining with any precision what this should involve. The new Minister, Matthew Hancock, issued what he called an Inspiration Vision Statement (HM Government, 2013), which contained no reference whatsoever to the roles of careers professionals or careers programmes. Instead, it seemed, all that was needed was for young people to have contact with employers and people in jobs. In effect, careers professionals were now written out of the policy script: a direct betrayal of the last of the

² For the record, the correspondence from Heather Jackson and myself leading up to our resignation has been deposited on the iCeGS website: <http://www.derby.ac.uk/research/icegs/news/2014/icegs-policy-and-research-e-briefing-october-2014.html>

Government's earlier promises. Hancock claimed that this represented a 'big culture change', directly invoking the Council's terminology. One might have expected the Council at least to point out that the Minister's interpretation was not its own. But at no stage has it done so: indeed, its Chair welcomed the Government's statement, without reservation. The Council very belatedly, in its second and final report published this September, affirmed the role of careers professionals, but did not juxtapose this with the Government's position, which it has never publicly challenged in any way. Instead, its main interest seems to have been self-promotion. It is accordingly culpable of having colluded not only with the massive erosion of careers provision for young people but also with the mindless marginalisation of the careers profession.

Its position has contrasted remarkably with the position of the Select Committee, and its Conservative MP Chair, who have continued to challenge the Government on this issue with clarity, integrity and tenacity. This included an interview last December with Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education. We knew that the political narrative underlying the Government's careers policies was that John Hayes's good intentions required support not only from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (which has largely fulfilled his promises in relation to provision for adults) but also from the Department for Education, where he had been blocked by Michael Gove. But Gove had resisted meetings with the careers sector, and had never spoken publicly on the topic. Now he did. It was an extraordinary interchange.

He commented that more should be done to engage employers with schools, but also stated, explicitly and unequivocally: 'What I emphatically do not believe is that we need a cadre of careers advisers to operate in between these two'. He set up an idealised view of the role of careers advisers, with perfect knowledge of the labour market and of the psychology and motivations of individuals, and then inferred that because they could not be such 'supermen and superwomen', they should not be made available at all. This was a remarkable non sequitur: on this basis, we would not engage in any human endeavours at all. Then, to add insult to injury, he challenged the 'intellectual rigour' and the 'self-interest' of those who had 'populated the debate' on this topic; when asked to name who he meant, he refused. Intellectual rigour is based on evidence and reasoned argument: both were conspicuously absent from his own statements. In using this term, he sought to rubbish all the work we have carefully built up over the years – of which he had patently read barely a word. All this from a Secretary of State for Education. It was a disgraceful performance, arrogant and ignorant, which demeaned his office. More important, it indicated the poverty of the intellectual foundations on which the Government's careers policies for young people had been based.

The policies pursued by this Government have been among the most damaging I have seen in any country; they have also been pursued with an extraordinary mixture not only of betrayal, mendacity and incompetence but also of casuistry. In the Parliamentary debates on the statutory duty in the Education Act, it was assumed by all that the duty was referring to access to independent and impartial individual guidance from a careers professional. But in the latest revised Statutory Guidance, it now seems that this is not the case. There must be elements external to the school, but the requirement to be impartial can be met, apparently, though access to a range of

partial sources – in other words, employers and learning providers. This is pure casuistry. What on earth is the point of a statutory duty based on such definitions?

Employers do have important contributions to make. But they are essentially complementary to, and indeed dependent for their effectiveness upon, the roles of careers professionals and careers programmes. The Careers Sector Stakeholders Alliance (2014) produced a careful and measured document arguing this, which has been endorsed by many employers and employer organisations – though, disappointingly, not by the CBI or the National Careers Council. No response has been evident from the Government.

We now have a new Secretary of State, Nicky Morgan. We await whether there will be some change of direction and act of repentance, comparable to that under the Labour Government. I am not holding my breath.

So what can we conclude from all this? The story of the two false dawns can be interpreted in two main ways. Both were examples of the career development agenda being overtaken by larger government agendas – social exclusion and school autonomy respectively. But in both cases the damage caused was greatly exacerbated by two powerful individuals – Anne Weinstock and Michael Gove – who displayed extraordinary ignorance and unwillingness to listen and learn. As so often in history, what happened was a mix of structural forces and of people.

On the more recent events, the Government's casuistry has been aided by the semantic confusion within the field. In particular, we use the term 'career guidance' both generically, to cover all interventions, and specifically, to cover one-to-one interviews with a careers professional. I admit some culpability here, because it was the adoption of the generic usage in the OECD (2004) report, for which I was jointly responsible with Richard Sweet, that enabled the Government in its Statutory Guidance to apply this usage and thereby exclude the contributions of careers professionals. We urgently need to address this. My proposal is that we embargo the usage of 'career guidance', and adopt 'career development' as the generic term, and 'career counselling' for the one-to-one professional interventions. This is an issue that the CDI needs to address.

The other key conclusion I draw from the saga is that the field must stand up for itself more strongly. There has been far too much collusion, and not enough concerted affirmation. We must hold to our values, and never be afraid to speak truth to power.

Reflections

Enough of this. In my more pessimistic moments, it feels that all that we built up over so many years has been wantonly destroyed. Certainly, the poverty of the thinking underpinning the constant references to 'inspirational talks' from employers as some kind of panacea takes me back to when we started in the 1960s, ignoring so much of what we have learned since.

But, of course, it has not been destroyed. Much of what we have built up is still there, to provide a basis on which to build further. So, looking back on 50 years in this field,

what have we achieved? Speaking personally, I would identify five significant changes in which I have been involved, along with many other people.

The first I have already mentioned: the move to a focus on learning as the core concept in career development. This includes addressing individuals' conceptual development, in their understanding both of themselves and of the opportunities available to them, and helping them to develop their competences for constructing their career – which include where and when to look for help. It should incorporate active experiences, programmatic learning, and supported reflection on such learning to convert it into actions that are well-informed and well-thought-through.

Second, we have developed a research culture and a research tradition, based on a multi-disciplinary approach. Psychology will always be a core discipline, because at its heart career development is about individuals; but because it is always about individuals in social contexts, it needs in addition to draw from labour market economics and sociology – including socio-political perspectives. It can also draw fruitfully from other disciplines like philosophy, history and literature. In my view, the tradition we have built up in the UK is broader in these respects than in the USA and most other countries: we should value this.

Third, we have developed a strong tradition of innovation, linked significantly though not exclusively to technology. Having reviewed the first efforts in the USA to apply computers to career development in the 1970s, and been involved in some of the first major projects to do so in the UK, it has been amazing to see the transformations that have taken place as technology has advanced. Managing technology as an agent of change, and its interactive relationship to human interventions, will remain a core challenge.

Fourth, we have established a tradition of policy discourses and policy studies, linked to a vision of lifelong career development. The core argument is that career development is a public good as well as a private good: a key lubricant of learning systems, of labour markets and of social equity. It accordingly requires public policies to deliver it and make it available to all, lifelong. The attention given in recent years to lifelong career development policies, strategies and systems by organisations like OECD, the European Commission, UNESCO, ILO and the World Bank is remarkable, and a major advance.

This is closely linked to a fifth significant change, which is the internationalisation of this field, with many more opportunities for countries to learn from each other. An important role here is played by international studies, based on strong analytical frameworks which enable the similarities and differences between countries to be identified. It is through such studies that countries can recognise the contingent nature of practices they take for granted, and explore possibilities for innovation and change.

I have written quite a lot on all these matters. My main reason for writing is simple: I do not know what I think until I have written it. In conversation one can get away with loose, exploratory thinking, but in writing it down one has to weigh up the arguments and the evidence, and decide what it all means and where one stands. It is hard work, but important; and if published, it adds to the body of knowledge on which others can draw. I commend it to you as a professional practice.

A lot of my writing has been in collaboration with others. The test of collaboration is whether, when the work is completed, you think that you could have written something better, more easily, on your own. There have been one or two occasions when this thought has crossed my mind! But in most cases, I have been immensely fortunate in my collaborators: Bill Law and other NICEC colleagues, Jim Sampson, Ronald Sultana, Ian Jamieson, Andy Miller, Richard Sweet, Tristram Hooley and others. I have learned so much from them, and am clear that what we produced together was much better than what I could have produced alone.

The other activity which has taken up a lot of my time, again with many other people, is building infrastructures within the career development field which can harness energies and support communities of practice. CRAC, NICEC, the Guidance Council, iCeGS, the International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy, the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network, the Careers Sector Stakeholders Alliance: all have played important roles. Histories have now been written of several of these organisations (Alloway, 2008; Smith, 2010; Hyde, 2014; Watts, 2014; Watts, Bezanson & McCarthy, 2014). I have always been interested in the relationship between formal organisational structures and networks: most of these initiatives have been hybrids in this respect, enabling creative balances between sustainability and flexibility. All have been dependent upon small groups of people, often initially two or three, coming together to make something happen. I have been enormously fortunate to work together with so many dedicated and creative people in these and many other projects.

As I leave this field after 50 years, I feel very optimistic about the future. We have very strong foundations on which to continue to build. Internationally, we have IAEVG, along with ICCDPP and the tradition of international policy symposia. In Europe – I am a passionate European – we have three networks: ELGPN for policy, Euroguidance for practice, and NICE for training and research. All these will need to continue to evolve and change, but the base is there.

In the UK, we now have the basis of a world-class quality-assurance system with a service standard (Matrix), organisational standards (nationally validated through the Quality in Careers Standard), and professional standards developed by the new Career Development Institute representing the profession as a whole. The previous professional splintering of the field was a significant source of weakness. I do urge all of you to join the CDI and make it a success. In particular, I hope that those who are members of AGCAS, the one organisation which has stayed outside the fold, to resolve its relationship with CDI. I have heard all its arguments, and have been unimpressed by them. Either AGCAS is a professional association, in which case it should join CDI; or it is not, in which case it should actively encourage its members to do so. If there was ever a time for the profession to come together and to affirm its professionalism, this is it. For a relatively privileged group like those in universities to stand outside this process is, in my view, indefensible.

A related development which has particularly delighted me is the evolution of NICEC from a research and development organisation into a learned society – unique in the world, so far as I am aware – and the partnership it has forged with the CDI through which the excellent NICEC journal is distributed to all CDI members. This is an

important development, providing a bridge between research and practice which affirms and strengthens the enhanced professionalism of the field.

I am also thrilled by the way in which iCeGS has developed over the last few years. Deirdre Hughes did a fine job in building up the centre, but when she left there was a hiatus, and the university could easily have dismantled it. To its great credit it did not do so, and under Tristram Hooley the centre has moved to a new level both intellectually and in the range of its work. I have worked recently with an international consultancy company which has reviewed career development service providers globally, and it described iCeGS as, in the wondrous jargon of such companies, a 'best-in-class' research centre, in world terms. The university's motivation for setting up the centre was that, as a teaching-led university, it should concentrate its research activities in niches linked to its values – which included extending access to opportunities. It should be very proud of its support for the centre, and what the centre has achieved.

I have been very privileged to work in a field populated by so many good people, dedicated to helping others through their work. Despite my astringent comments in parts of this lecture, I have immensely enjoyed my career in careers, have derived rich satisfactions from it, and have made many great friends through it. As that wonderful actor John Le Mesurier said in his last words: 'It's all been rather lovely.'

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