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## Changing career guidance practice in Connexions: a question of ethics?

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What has happened to the career guidance profession in the English 14-19 sector since the formation of Connexions? This is the central focus of a research project we have just completed. Our findings, as we shall explain here, raise serious questions about the transformation of careers work in England. In part, it poses some thorny issues about the day-to-day ethics of this work that, we believe, the Institute of Career Guidance and the profession as a whole need to address.

As we reported at the start of our research (*CGT* June 2008, 'Researching for an answer'), one of our key concerns was to focus on the voices and experiences of career guidance (CG) trained practitioners themselves, which had been little heard in previous research on Connexions – not least because future policy-making for career guidance is unlikely to have an adequate evidence-base without an understanding of practitioners' perspectives.

We wanted to find out what it has meant for Careers Advisers to become Personal Advisers (PAs); how their work has evolved; what has happened to their knowledge and skills in the process; how this has affected their professional identity and status; and what they perceive their support and development needs to be for the future. What we did not expect was the extent to which day-to-day ethical dilemmas – and pressures to engage in unethical practice – emerged as a very powerful theme in their accounts.

### **Background to the research**

The initial phase of the research consisted of a national survey, from which we reported the findings in *CGT* October 2008. In brief, the survey indicated that the transfer of Connexions to local authorities (LAs) had caused major disruption and some loss of staff; that Connexions staffing levels were far lower (possibly 50% lower) than originally proposed; and that some services were having difficulty recruiting and retaining career guidance practitioners. In addition, there was a lack of clarity about appropriate qualifications for specialist *career* guidance (rather than more generic forms of guidance), and continuing professional development activities focused on career guidance were very patchy across services.

This was the background for the main phase of the project, which involved in-depth qualitative research in three different Connexions services in the North of England, representing different styles of provision and ethos. In each of these services, we aimed to interview six PAs trained in CG (by both academic and work-based routes), two senior managers, and two local stakeholders. The PAs also completed time-use diaries over two week-long periods during the summer and autumn terms of 2008. Of

17 PAs interviewed, 14 were based in schools as Education PAs (EPAs) and 3 worked with 'intensive needs' clients as Community PAs (CPAs)

In addition, we interviewed nine CG-trained PAs who had quit *Connexions* over professional disagreements with its strategy. This gave us data relating to a total of 11 *Connexions* services. The sample of PAs and ex-PAs was stratified according to period of initial qualification (pre-1994, 1994-2000, and 2001 onwards), to try and capture any differences related to changes in initial training and expectations of their professional role (although, in analysing our data, we found no significant differences between the three services or the different strata of the sample). We also talked to six national stakeholders in career guidance. Inevitably, we can only give a brief summary of our findings here, but readers can access the full report (see note 2 below).

### ***Time-use: reduced careers education and guidance***

The time-use diaries, supported by the interviews, allowed us to investigate continuity and change in the functions of CG-trained PAs. We also asked them to rate the degree to which they thought different aspects of their work was related to career guidance, and their sense of satisfaction with each activity. Because of the difference in roles, we analysed the diaries of EPAs and CPAs separately. A key issue to bear in mind is that all of the PAs felt they had unmanageably large caseloads, of up to 800 pupils in schools, or up to 80 young people with 'intensive needs'.

Overall, EPAs judged that only 39% of their time was strongly or wholly related to career guidance. For CPAs, this fell to only 12%. EPAs were more satisfied with the outcomes of activities closely related to career guidance, although there was no such correlation for CPAs – suggesting a difference in professional values depending on the particular PA role undertaken. Interestingly, the interviews with EPAs and ex-PAs reflected considerable resistance to adopting the generic Personal Adviser role promoted in early *Connexions* policy: they felt that it represented a 'jack-of-all-trades-and-master-of-none', and resented the pressure to cross boundaries of expertise which they knew they were not equipped to deliver.

As we can see from Figure 1, only about one third of the PAs' time was spent with clients, and the processes of interview preparation and follow-up were often perceived as bureaucratic and frustrating, simply limiting their time with clients rather than supplementing it with supportive activities. In addition, the possibility of undertaking in-depth career guidance in client interviews was restricted because young people came with little knowledge about their options due to reduced careers education provision – so that much time was spent giving basic information.

There has also been a major reduction in careers education activities, including groupwork and contributing to the development of the careers education curriculum. In some cases, this was linked to the 'collapse' of schools' careers education programmes. Liaison with schools seemed to be focused predominantly on the triage of clients according to categories of need, and additional liaison work tended to be with key workers from other support agencies or other PAs. A number of PAs noted, however, that other agencies sometimes refused to take referrals from them –

probably because they did not have the resources, but also possibly because of confusion over the role of the PA.

<b>Figure 1: Time use by activities</b>	<b>EPAs</b>	<b>CPAs</b>
Client interviews	35.8%	35.2%
Interview prep/follow-up	18.5%	21.9%
Groupwork	6.2%	0.7%
Liaison	14.0%	11.0%
Admin/emails	7.4%	13.7%
Continuing professional development	6.0%	4.3%
Other career guidance	1.7%	0%
Travel	10.3%	13.2%

Very little liaison took place with employers or other opportunity providers, and PAs complained that they had minimal time for researching the local labour market or routes into higher education. This led to a sense of being increasingly de-skilled. Moreover, no mention was made of any race or gender equality initiatives. Principally, however, CG-trained PAs felt that increasing amounts of time were being spent on the *tracking* of young people, rather than on their guidance and support. This leads us to consider the ethical issues which arose in interviews with the PAs and ex-PAs.

### ***Conduct unbecoming?***

Alan Cribb (2009) has argued that the marketisation of public services introduces ‘ethical drift’, encouraging the ritualistic meeting of targets as well as sheer cheating and manipulation. This situation poses practitioners with serious dilemmas – how can we do our job *and* do the ‘right thing’? When should we comply? Or conscientiously object? Or adopt a stance of ‘principled infidelity’? Such dilemmas confronted CG-trained PAs on an on-going basis; indeed, facing ethical decisions day-to-day was a significant, but invisible, part of their work.

EPAs struggled with dilemmas about how to offer interviews to all Year 11 pupils. Though the size of their caseloads made this almost impossible, they believed strongly that career guidance was a universal entitlement that would benefit most young people. Some resolved this dilemma by offering 10-minute interviews, but felt these were inadequate; others offered group interviews, though compromising depth and confidentiality. Another issue that troubled them was giving career guidance when their knowledge base had been eroded through lack of time for research.

CPAs in particular faced difficult decisions about which young people they could help, when the size of their ‘intensive needs’ caseloads meant that it was impossible to help them all. The responsibility for these decisions became highly individualised for each practitioner, and some of the interviews reflect how they vacillated between giving intensive help to one youngster in particular difficulties, and ‘trying to help

them all a little bit', as one PA put it. It was clear, however, that many PAs and ex-PAs had felt pressure from management to prioritise not the most needy of their clients, but those most likely to exit from the 'NEET' register (not in education, employment or training). This was compounded by an increasing focus on tracking and surveillance of young people, and inadequate time and resources for supporting them. One ex-PA complained that they felt their role had become one of social control rather than social support, while another told us: "Ringing people, going round, knocking on doors and hassling people, I felt like I worked for the Gestapo."

The pressure from Connexions managers to meet unrealistic targets set by government for 'NEET' reduction was also manifested in other ways. Some spoke of being pressurised to place young people in completely unsuitable provision, unrelated to their vocational aspirations – anathema to the ethics of someone trained in career guidance! This might be a course unrelated to the client's actual vocational aspiration, or it might be a pre-vocational programme such as e2e for a young person capable of progressing to a Level 2 or 3 college course or apprenticeship. Some PAs had been told to delay recording young people as 'NEET' in order to improve figures. One ex-PA told of a manager who had instructed staff to forge young people's signatures in order to meet targets. These were all activities that the PAs considered unethical. Without exception, supervision sessions – which are supposed to be of a clinical, supportive nature – were reported to be managerial, focused on progress towards targets, and often disciplinary and conflictual in nature.

PAs resisted these pressures as best they could, some more consistently and openly than others. However, they paid a price for their resistance, over and above the stress it created. One PA lost his job during the research project, as his refusal to place young people in inappropriate 'opportunities' resulted in non-renewal of his short-term contract. Ex-PAs had quit their jobs rather than continue facing pressures to behave unethically, or continually find themselves in open conflict with their managers. Whilst these experiences were often compounded by emotional burn-out, and a desire to find work where they could deploy and develop their career guidance expertise, ethical considerations played a major part in ex-PAs' decisions to leave Connexions.

### ***The erosion of career guidance practice?***

Our findings indicate that, whatever the policies of the new UK government on career guidance for young people, it has to take into account the evidence that capacity in career guidance has been eroded in at least four ways: firstly, from a simple reduction in numbers due to redundancies, burn-out or disillusionment; secondly, from a reduction in career guidance-related activities; thirdly, from de-skilling; and finally, from serious pressures to undermine the ethical basis of our profession.

In disseminating our findings among practitioners so far, the feedback we have had has been overwhelmingly positive. Many practitioners have confirmed that our findings resonate strongly with their own experiences. Whilst there might be different experiences in some other Connexions services, our evidence demonstrates why policy and managerial pressures push practice in this direction – and the coming austerity drive is likely to make matters worse. In this context, we need open debate

about how to defend the capacity of the career guidance profession in the 14-19 sector, and in particular, its capacity to engage in genuinely ethical practice.

### **Notes**

1. Our research project, *The impact of 14-19 reforms on career guidance in England*, was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, grant ref: RES-000-22-2588, and we are grateful for their support.
2. The full final report of the project is available at: <http://www.e-space.mmu.ac.uk/e-space/handle/2173/95437>. Detailed working papers on the time-use diary and national survey are also available from [h.colley@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:h.colley@mmu.ac.uk)

### **Reference**

Cribb, A. (2009) Professional ethics: whose responsibility? In S.Gewirtz, P.Mahony, I.Hextall and A.Cribb (Eds) *Changing Teacher Professionalism: international trends, challenges and ways forward*. London: Routledge.