

# The future of careers-work professionalism: fears and hopes

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**Careers** work professionalism is a personal commitment framed by an institutional policy. Without the institutional, the commitment is unsupported; without the commitment, the policy is futile. But no professionalism is given once-and-for-all. It is an attribution: meaning what different people say it means – at different times, in different settings, and from different perspectives. The meanings attributed to careers-work professionalism are all contestable. The article probes those dissonances, examining the issues they raise for our credibility, expertise, connectedness and independence. Their resolution has consequences for the public face of careers work, the partnerships we make, stakeholders we consult, research we undertake, developments we create, funding we negotiate and colleagues we attract. We have had too many temporary postponements of fear, we need a sustainable basis for hope.

## Introduction

At the heart of any defensible careers-work professionalism is a belief in the knowledge that best serves student-and client-interests. It enables professionals to rise above arbitrary pressure. The past has given us a well-trodden path to that position – training, qualification, membership, expertise, standards. They are necessary steps; the question here is ‘are they any longer sufficient?’

Widespread calls for transparency put all professionals under scrutiny; it would be rash to assume that careers workers are exempt. Factors include economic globalisation and the digital technology which makes it possible. Both have changed the way people see things: our clients and students have new ways for finding out what is going on, and working out what to do about it.

In that changing situation we should ask whether they find us sufficiently...

- **credible?** widely recognised as necessary, accessible, relevant and trusted
- **expert?** sufficiently equipped in the disciplines offering useful accounts of what people actually do
- **connected?** in touch with the partners and stakeholders who authentically speak for these realities
- **independent?** as free of arbitrary influence as our claims to impartiality assert.

These are not questions just for an élite, but for all working people. Julia Evetts (in this journal issue) lays the ground, by making a distinction between profession and professionalism. While membership of a profession is assigned to the few, professionalism can be achieved by the many. Professionalism is a quality of the way people do their work. It is not validated by our claim, but by other people’s attribution.

## How credible?

The news is not good on the attribution of value to careers work. True, much of the evidence is scattered (Hibbert, 2010), and anecdotal (Redmond, 2010). But reports of disappointment are plentiful, persistent, and consistent. That scepticism may not be ill-founded. People can sense when what we do seems no more than what they are able to do for themselves. They need not be wrong about that: formal learning is a refinement of how people convivially help each other

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(Illich, 1971) – and that is part of our shared humanity.

The internet offers more potentiality for that kind of accessibility than Illich could have dreamed of. A common contemporary manifestation is how people use the net to become their own travel agents. That is not to say that, in planning some journeys, they do not need expert help. But it does leave travel agents – and us – with questions: ‘how much of what we offer do people recognise that they need from us?’ and ‘how convincing is the claim that trained expertise is always more useful than shared experience?’

It is not unreasonable to decline what you already have. Highly-trained professionals may shudder, but the evidence – plentiful, persistent and consistent – is part of a well-documented social trend. Bauman’s (2000) characterisation of liquid modernity repositions people in celebration of recognisable experience, in rejection of unnecessary complexity, and in the protection of a comfort zone. Claims to exclusive authority do not go down well in that culture.

We are not alone in this: bankers, doctors, lawyers, journalists, and politicians are re-thinking relationships with clients, customers and constituents. In institutional terms the change is in the direction of ‘co-production’. It calls for a ‘working-with’ rather than a ‘doing-to’ culture. Services are more effective when providers and users work in reciprocal and equal relationships (Boyle et al, 2010). Much personal careers-work professionalism sets out to do that. But we are not consistently trusted for having that kind of relevance to people’s lives. We need to understand why.

Learning on the street and on the net is independent – it is people learning about their own world, not ours. Such evidence as there is suggests that it is the most-in-need of help who are least likely to trust us for help (MORI, undated).

Our credibility is established, not when we have more to say to such people, but when more of them have more to say to more of us.

### How expert?

That people find other-than-expert credibility does

not necessarily undermine expertise; but it does mean looking for what best links our expertise to their experience. One of the problems for that search is that we have no wholly-owned body-of-knowledge – we borrow from academic disciplines. The result is usefully called ‘career studies’ (McCash, 2008) – which is a subject, not a discipline. Our expertise is a selection from the behavioural sciences – largely psychology, sociology and economics. But our different text-books contain different selections, and many of them are contested.

### expressions of career and causes of career:

Some texts work well for business interests – citations include the words ‘employability’ and ‘skills’. Some reflect policy priorities – ‘markets’ and ‘quality’ frequently crop up. Some express more broadly-based interests – ‘needs’ and ‘community’ assemble into explanatory sentences. None of these expressions necessarily excludes any other; but the centre-of-gravity for each is different. And so they are contested (Bates, 1990; Harris, 1999): differently-constituted groups favour differently-argued responses, to differently-conceived situations. There is always more than one way of characterising work-life.

At first sight the ‘DOTS’ analysis (Law and Watts, 1977) looks like a complete listing of what needs to be covered. DOTS and its derivatives work well for matching self to opportunities. And the matching model has proven durable – recently reaching its 100th birthday. It is a readily-recognisable expression of a free-standing self, entering an economically-defined environment. It is content-driven when it uses differential psychology and labour economics to link a diagnosed self to career opportunities. But ‘careers studies’ now includes accounts of social influences on career management, speaking of work-life as experienced with, for, and in response to other people. Roberts and Willis initiated an examination of the explanatory power of background, attachment and allegiance (Roberts, 1977; Willis, 1977; Williamson, 2004; Law, 2008; Atkinson, 2009). Such reports fit well to narrative rather than analytic forms. They are strong on both the expression of career and the causes of career.

This more rounded and dynamic account of career calls for an understanding of how people learn for

that complexity. Careers studies therefore draws on accounts of learning as constructed from childhood, in social situations, with learning repertoires, recurring in cycles, informally, in affective layers, with multi-dimensional complexity, mapped by a stage-by-stage progression (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978; Gardner, 1983; Kolb et al, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Goleman, 1996; Illeris, 2002; Law, 2010a).

Attention to activity rather than coverage offers the helper more of an enquiring than a presiding role. The learning space becomes a place for finding and questioning – expertise shifts from content to process. And process can be re-engaged in any situation, at any stage in life. The content-driven matching model is in contention with this thinking.

**commercial interests:** The business world is impressed by the matching model. It has careers workers and human-resource people reading from the same pages in economics and psychology texts. They speak of skills-for-employability (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Commercial support for matching has pervasive effects. Our performance indicators – standards, outcomes and targets – draw heavily on DOTS-like analyses.

But even labour economics raises doubts about how far such performance correlates with commercial competitiveness (Brown et al, 2011). And competitiveness incurs massive social and environmental costs (Donkin, 2010). Both the validity and desirability of business-world claims are in question. We need more of the imagery of career-management as exploratory ‘journey’, than of competitive ‘race’ (Law and Stanbury, 2009).

Nonetheless, education and selection remain yoked. Test and exam results are used to validate the effectiveness of learning and shortlist applicants for selection. This locates careers work as beginning a procedure which is completed by recruiters.

Some career-management costs are personal. Candidates risk their own investment in the recruitment process. But these realities do not feature in recruiter-candidate contracts, nor does the recruiter pay for them in any other way. Economically-driven institutions ‘externalise’ all avoidable costs.

Ethnographies may look wider; but recruitment and selection needs to be strong on the expression of career, not its causes. Its natural interest is in finding good candidates: the matching model looks no further. The commercial world has had little difficulty in gaining policy support for such interests. Whether they rate support from career-work professionalism is an issue.

**policy interests:** Prevailing policy interest is dominated by a neo-liberal belief in the ability of markets to harness consumer choice for improving products and increasing wealth. At first sight this seems to coincide with commercial interests. However, neo-liberalism is a rejection of the idea that ‘big government’ should protect commerce. While commercial interests seek policy intervention, neo-liberalism keeps intervention to a minimum – supply-and-demand deals with everything (Harvey, 2010). The rest is externalised.

But this, too, is contestable: even commerce understands the limitations of markets. There is a long history of business altruism (Cadbury, 2010). But neo-liberalism offers no defence of it: in market thinking the sole test of value is economic competitiveness.

In the career market-place a person is sometimes the purchaser, and sometimes the vendor: both career and candidate are commodities: the process is called ‘commodification’ (Dale, 2010). Markets can work well. But their loudest voices speak of success – we hear less about people who take on more risk than they can manage, or cause more damage than we should live with. It would not be good marketing to tell us. And so all markets are lop-sided. Only one side may know what is going on. This lack of symmetry can be corrected with market regulation and help. But neo-liberal thinking takes the market to be normal – so correction is artificial, and intervention minimal. They produce minimal performance indicators to guide vendors and inform consumers. Their minimalism is derided as ‘tick-box’. It has long been understood to distort what professionals do (Marquand, 2004). The liberal in neo-liberalism is libertarian; but avoidance of interference is not the same as ready-for-anything flexibility. The careers-work professions are not unanimous on where they stand on this.

**wider-interests:** Many of the influences identified by

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fully-narrated ethnographies correspond with what recruitment and marketing externalise. That does not mean that career studies excludes economic factors: some people are more interested in how well work pays than in how closely it matches their profile. Career is for consuming as well as producing. And career studies has long been able to account for such links between life-roles (Super, 1981).

But expressions of career are linking to economy in new ways. People are as likely to speak of how they spend their income, as how they earn it. Klein (2007) is among the many who show how commercial-logo and consumer-branding feature in the iconography of self. Working-life is increasingly understood to impact family and neighbourhood, the developing world and the biosphere (Lexmond and Bradley, 2010). Work has a carbon-footprint. And we can now see how these trends develop differently in different social-and-cultural enclaves (Dorling, 2010). We can dig much deeper with this – new research usefully shows how wealth-and-culture interact with neurology (McGilchrist, 2009).

Career studies reaches far beyond selection and recruitment. Its underlying question is ‘who gets to do what in society?’ It probes access to opportunity in deeper and wider terms: ‘what expands or contracts people’s aspirations?’ and ‘what drives them on or shuts them down?’ The Milburn Report (Cabinet Office, 2009) shows how aspiration is thwarted. But it neglects Willis and his successors showing how aspiration is squeezed out of narratives early in life. Career studies takes us to where we can see how career is differently managed in different terms, by different people, with different experiences, in different settings.

Ideas narrowly rooted in employable competitiveness are a problem for this thinking – and a danger to us. Our thinking can become habitual – beliefs and values can seem unassailable givens (Tavris and Aronson, 2008). And, when that happens, people stop listening to themselves expressing the taken-for-granted. No true professionalism is trapped into that kind of intellectual ghetto – where all career professionals are trained in the same disciplines, recycle the same citations, visit the same websites, belong to the same associations. We know better, and knowing is our hold

on survival. Evolution in the direction of variety and complexity gives an organism a wider repertoire of responses. That is more useful and more engaging. And any worthwhile careers-work professionalism needs professions worth pursuing.

### How connected?

Expertise is changing. But ‘who do we need to share it with?...and listen to?’ are questions for connectedness. We can answer both on a narrower or wider scale. Our conventional partnerships are narrow: they link guidance to curriculum in a bi-lateral agreement. A consequence is that some partners are consigned to ancillary or marginal roles.

On ancillary roles: guidance and curriculum each brings a distinctive contribution to careers work. Both are professions – with their own research and development. But bi-lateral partnerships too easily favour one area of expertise over the other. No such agreement will attract able people, in either guidance or curriculum. People, well rooted in their own profession, decline the ancillary role.

On marginalisation: bi-laterality is not lateral enough. More open and more inclusive agreements allow a range of partners to form widely inter-dependent teams. The range of potential participants is expanding: in any locality people can turn for help to social enterprises, freelance coaches and informal mentors. They can also find narrative-based and interactive social-networking websites – where students become partners with professionals (Law, 2010b). And easement of curriculum controls allows more teachers to adapt their schemes to learning-for-life.

Multi-laterality includes stakeholders as well as partners. While partners work on help, stakeholders work on how help takes account of their needs. Some interests – like families’ – are personal-and-particular; others – like business people’s – are professional-and-general. There are overlaps: families may be business people, some mentors are also teachers. But the most multifariously involved are students and clients. They are both partners and stakeholders. Indeed, a major role for careers work is to enable them to claim their stake in society.

Bi-lateral agreements do not connect with this multi-lateral reality. But individual professionals work with it – having personal networks as diverse as any.

And so, institutionally, we need to re-map the territories on which our agreements are negotiated. We seek people in command of useful knowledge, able to fire-up commitment, alive to the importance of the work, trusted to take on its challenge. Not all professionals qualify. Nor will enlisting people who happen to be available find them. They need institutionalised programme management, with a distinctive range of management abilities:

- **educational:** actively engaging able partners, in well-designed programmes and evaluation
- **leadership:** credibly positioning the work, so that actual and potential partners and stakeholders are attracted
- **organising:** efficiently coordinating material, logistics, budgeting and reporting.

This is not a job for one-or-two people. Indeed, few organisations are in a position to set this up just for careers work. It is best integrated in programmes of personal-and-social well-being. Multi-lateral agreements integrate learning for integrated lives – finding integers connecting one source to another, expertise to experience, and learning to life. Such multi-laterality is supported by network modelling, showing how diversified connectedness emancipates action by expanding repertoires (Dennett, 2003).

Our best hope of ensuring that we work with open and impressive people is to ensure that our professionalism is open and impressive. The future of careers work is multi-lateral.

## How independent?

All of the interests in careers work have an ethical dimension. There is an underlying 'oughtness' in the celebration of competitive success and market efficiency. Career studies is also ethically-charged, suggesting values for work-life's impact on experience – from the personal to the planetary. All assign

meaning and purpose to what careers workers do – by asking not just 'how can we change things?' but 'why should we try?' – calling for ethical as well as a theoretical justifications. As Helen Colley (2011) shows, our ethics needs a closer look.

Acting ethically is acting on principle. Its basis-for-action is what enlightenment figures uphold as human rights (Todorov, 2009). Rights are not implemented on behalf of sectional interests or personal preference, they resist arbitrary pressure, and – sooner or later – must mean taking a stand. That entails facing-up to inconvenient truths and being self-critical. Such independence means being aware of influences that we have been dependent on, and wondering what to do about it. This needs bigger ideas than can come from personal preferences and sectional interests.

The ideas must be big enough, but also address what working people recognise in their lives. The Milburn report is about high-end aspiration, ambition, and achievement. But this occupies a narrow segment in Maslow's (1970) oft-cited hierarchy. There is more to say about the involvement, responsiveness and commitment that people bring to their work. That greater motivational gamut includes the humanity of both the aspirationally competitive and the socially committed: not all impressive careers are pursued by careerists. Such thinking re-embeds work-life in society-as-a-whole, legitimising what all parts of society can recognise as valuable. Its grasp is life-wide – linking work-life to all life. Its reach is life-long – once found, ceaselessly relevant. That work-life is now characterised as occupational citizenship (Standing, 2009). Citizenship is the more inclusive concept – it locates work as one of many ways in which people lay claim to their membership of society.

Career studies is big enough to frame such thinking. But such thinking needs a strong institutional base, with policies and arrangements making room for independent integrity. Without institutional professionalism individuals are too-little supported and too-much exposed. Without personal professionalism, institutional policies are futile. But we find that our employer organisations cannot be relied on to support this kind of independence. Any organisation – whether in curriculum or guidance – has its ethos. And evidence (Foskett et al, 2004) shows that competitive



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institutions deal in terms which support survival. Prioritising the maintenance of funding streams side-lines professional priorities. A secure ethical professionalism therefore needs a location outside sectional interests, where thinking is authoritatively examined, and defensible principles are prioritised. As Julia Evetts shows, professionalism equips a person to say 'no' to an employer. An individual professional needs an institutional authority in order to take that stand. It calls for a brave, informed and multi-lateral alliance that can extend a collective professional memory into an on-going basis for action, and to which all partners and stakeholders can appeal.

There are policy proposals along these lines. Talk of the 'big society' signals that there are some areas of life where government cannot – or will not – go. This is not a new idea; a more useful accounts calls it 'civil society' (Edwards, 2004). It refers to action supported neither by government nor by commerce, but by a fabric of cultural-, faith-, social-, and work-related affiliations. And it needs more than the personal voluntarism driving the 'big society', it is a group-based institution working on how we live together (Simon, 1982).

Careers-work professionalism is a natural part of that social movement: big-thinking enough to negotiate what is contested, self-critical enough to work with changing conditions, independent enough to be credible, organised enough to support its people. The evidence (Law, 2005) is that a deep-enough training enables professionals to develop working orientations with an independence of the systems in which they are employed. Recently that work has been developed into an ethical framing of careers-work priorities (Law, 2011a).

Contemporary change is shaking the ground on which our credibility, expertise, connectedness and independence rests. It is a crisis, and needs a careful examination of what is going on. Trying to work our way back into the dependencies that have repeatedly failed us is not careful enough. We need reform for personal professionalism, but – most of all – for positioning an institutional framework which supports the breadth and depth of what we know to be our capabilities. It will change the public face of our professions, the partnerships we make, the

stakeholders we consult, the research we undertake, the methods and materials we develop. It will also re-orient us to the resourcing we negotiate. But, most importantly, it will influence the people we attract and retain as members of our professions. We do not need another postponement of fear, we need a sustainable hope.

**Note:** This is an abridged version of Law, 2011b.

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