The Strengths and Limitations of Career Guidance

Phil Hodkinson

Current upheavals in guidance provision, taking different forms in the different parts of the UK, provide the opportunity to rethink the role of guidance in contemporary society. This is necessary because the current climate, in England at any rate, presents a dual attack on professional career guidance provision. On the one hand, it is routinely expected to achieve things that it cannot in ways that risk undermining good guidance practice. On the other hand, there are serious threats to large tranches of provision with a rapid increase in the numbers of amateur or under-trained counsellors/guiders under labels such as mentor or personal adviser.

In facing up to the challenges and opportunities of this brave new world, it is important to identify clearly what the strengths and limitations of career guidance are. Realistic strategies can then be adopted to protect and enhance appropriate provision. This can help avoid the trap of the 1980s and 1990s where unrealistic expectations were set and tacitly accepted, for example, that guidance could somehow ensure 'right' career decisions, improve retention and achievement rates, or reduce unemployment. This sort of over-expectation then opened the door to attacks claiming that guidance had failed, for example, in the Social Exclusion Unit report *Bridging the Gap* (1999).

The limitations of guidance

I begin with the limitations, for in the past, the guidance community may have been guilty of exaggerating what can be achieved. I will identify five key limitations. Of course, there are others.

1. Guidance cannot produce technically rational decision making or linear careers

Research upon the ways career decisions are made shows that they are pragmatically rational (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996; Ball *et al.*, 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000). They are based upon partial information, they are partly emotional and partly tacit, they are influenced by serendipity, they are sometimes whimsical, and they change over time, sometimes quite rapidly. Guidance can help refine and improve this pragmatic process but it is extremely unlikely to fundamentally change its nature. Guidance based upon pure or technical rationality, ideas which implicitly or explicitly underpin much policy and some of the traditional theories used in guidance practice, is more likely to fail. This is because the assumptions and practices of the guidance providers are at odds with the realities of the decision making processes adopted by the people they are trying to help.

Also, the view of career as a straightforwardly linear or developmental process is untenable for many people. For example, we know that many women's careers take different shapes and forms from those of men with different patterns, sequences, problems, opportunities and interests (Bimrose, 2001a,b). Many adults of both genders have followed career paths that are partly erratic and unpredictable, and where it is impossible to separate out education and employment from many other aspects of life (Arthur, *et al.*,1999; Collin & Young, 2000). Guidance which is conceived of as a once and for all intervention to get clients on the right track will be inadequate for many people.

2. Professional guidance is marginal in people's lives

Even the best professional guidance is marginal in most people's careers and career decision making. Other influences on decisions are often stronger – their deeply held belief systems about themselves and about what careers are desirable or acceptable; the situations they find themselves in; serendipity; relations with family, peers, teachers and employers; messages from the media, etc. Also, it is very difficult to time guidance interventions - the decision making process is often lengthy; changes in interests appear to render previous guidance irrelevant; the amount of time spent with a professional is very limited; clients often do not know when guidance would be helpful; and providers have to balance erratic, uneven and potentially unlimited individual needs/demands against the planned allocation of scarce resources.

3. Guidance cannot step outside social and economic inequalities

Guidance practice currently emphasises individual activity. But social life remains strongly influenced by deep, some would say deepening, structural inequalities (Ball *et al.*, 2000). Both what Ken Roberts (1975) termed the opportunity structures of individuals and the ways in which people see the world are strongly influenced by these structural inequalities, combining in what I have previously termed their 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996). Often, their careers are influenced by other players with more power than they have such as employers and admissions tutors or movements and climates outside their control. Examples of the latter might be institutional racism and gender prejudice or high local unemployment and a changing labour market.

4. Good guidance does not ensure good outcomes

For a combination of these and other reasons, even the best guidance cannot ensure good or desirable outcomes. Additionally, what is 'desirable' is a value judgement. Who decides? The client? The employer? The education provider? The DfES? The Employment Service? For example, my own research suggests that dropping out of an FE or HE course is not always inappropriate and that completing such a course does not ensure that an earlier career plan stays on track (Hodkinson & Bloomer, in press). Yet completion is currently an almost unquestioned criterion of educational and guidance success. The research also shows that, even for an individual, what counts as a desirable outcome changes over time, as their interests and circumstances alter, in partly unpredictable ways.

5. The effectiveness of guidance professionals is constrained by the policy and funding climate in which they work

This is obvious, but two aspects of the recent and current contexts for guidance provision in England are worth a brief exploration, in the light of what has been previously said. In the recent past, guidance provision was skewed by the need to produce reams of action plans, drawn up to a specified formula, in order to get funding. This approach made simplistic assumptions that decision making is/should be always geared towards a clearly identified objective despite the research evidence, already cited, that shows many decisions/careers do not work in that way. The current policy approaches to guidance have moved away from that bureaucratic naivety but have replaced it with a strengthened policing regime geared at getting everyone to complete education successfully and to be employed. The fact that this is backed up by training materials that stress client-centred activity does little to ameliorate the restrictive nature of the overall approach. This situation presents a serious challenge to guidance predicated on notions of empowerment or self-actualisation, and risks the identification of guidance professionals as 'part of the problem' by many of the very people they are trying to help. If this happens, the impact of guidance will be significantly undermined.

The strengths of guidance

It would be easy to end my analysis here, with doom, gloom and irrelevance. If we were to accept uncritically the official government version of guidance, its purpose and its outcomes, there would be little more to be said for it is largely unachievable. To counter such pessimism, we need a more realistic account of what professional guidance *can* achieve. The starting point is to recognise that nothing said thus far implies either that people are powerless in their own lives or that they cannot be helped. One way of analysing what guidance can do is to examine the mirror images of those five limitations. I do so from an explicit value position: that guidance can be most effective when it places the client's position, perceptions and interests at the centre rather than the achievement of government objectives. I am not personally interested in turning the guidance community into a better police force for full employment or the reduction of social welfare payments – partly, but only partly, because it would not work.

1. Pragmatically rational decision making can be enhanced, and support need not be restricted to actually making decisions

One way people make sense of their careers and career decision making is through discussion with others. This can help make tacit and emotional dimensions more apparent as well as facilitating clearer analysis and thinking. This is routinely done with various significant others. Professional guidance has a role to play where clients are receptive. It brings expertise about the nature of education and labour markets, knowledge of where information can be acquired and how to evaluate it and skill in improving decision-making. It is also potentially independent, though this independence is placed at risk by current emphases on government-determined outcomes. Such guidance can, at best, expand horizons and help change self-perceptions. It can also facilitate and support effective actions within those horizons. Interventions can be individualised, as in the classic guidance interview, or through group activities, be they seminars or workshops, including the use of approaches such as *The Real Game*. Guidance will be most effective if it is centred on the client's dispositions and interests, extending and carefully challenging them, and continues over time. This means that the focus will not always be a particular choice or decision.

What we know about the non-linear nature of many careers reinforces this point. Guidance practitioners need to be aware of complex, varied and partly unpredictable forms of career that clients live (Arthur *et al.*, 1999; Collins and Young, 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Ball *et al.*, 2000; Bimrose, 2001a) and be sufficiently familiar with a range of alternative ways of conceptualising and theorising career. This should help them sustain and/or develop the ability to respond to different assumptions, needs and interests of different clients, or of the same client at different times. The 'one career model fits all' need not and should not underpin guidance practice. For example, progression can be seen as the next move from here rather than the first step towards there and guidance need not necessarily be linked to any move at all.

2. Marginal interventions can make a difference

Professional guidance is marginal in many people's lives but that does not mean it cannot be beneficial. For example, what is marginal in the overall scheme of the life course could be significant at a particular moment in time. The significance will depend partly upon the calibre of the intervention and partly upon how the client perceives it. An often under-estimated part of professional guidance expertise is the ability to judge the type of intervention most likely to be of value to a particular client or group of clients at a particular time. Another key determinant of impact may be the extent to which an intervention supplements other influences on the client's life. This poses a problem in the current audit society for the most effective guidance is often effective because it becomes inseparable from such other factors and is thus largely invisible. In my own research, young people have much clearer memories of guidance that grated against their own perceptions and intended pathways or that became irrelevant because of subsequent changes in circumstance than of that which supported and helped. This tends only to be recalled if it was a dramatic decision-making moment, an epiphany, and this is rarely the case.

3. Structural inequalities do not mean that individuals cannot be helped

No matter how limited are a person's opportunity structures, there are always, or almost always, things they can do individually or in mutually supportive groups to influence their own situation. Guidance can sometimes be valuable in supporting that process. However, it is only a slight over-simplification to claim that those who most need support often have least room for manoeuvre. Those 'gains' that can be achieved may be slight and quite different from the sorts of outcome demanded by the current system. One thing that the planning of the new Connexions Service got right was to recognise that support in these circumstances needs to be on-going over a long period of time and depends upon effective inter-personal relationships. However, it also requires realistic ambitions, and a willingness to continue support when things do not change, go wrong, or radically alter direction. More research and deeper professional thinking is needed to identify ways in which those things that individual or local community support does well in such circumstances can be maximised. This will include the ability to respond to varying individual and group needs, intentions and situations, rather focussing on limited outcomes. For example, how can we help young pregnant women to become good mothers or students to drop out of courses or career plans constructively if that is what they want/need to do? How can adults be supported in difficult career changes, either forced or self-initiated?

Ironically, it is in this context of structural constraint that guidance may well have most to offer. It is one of the few services which, at least in principle, can devote considerable attention to the idiosyncratic experiences, needs, wants and opportunities of particular individuals or local community groups on their own terms. Many teachers, for example, have always found this difficult because they normally see students or pupils predominantly as groups, and always with a tightly prescribed arena of interest, focussed upon the area/topic/subject being studied. Guidance can start with the actual person, but needs to do so in a way that is always mindful of the unequal structural contexts and broader social patterns within which those individuals live their lives.

4. Good guidance need not be directed at pre-determined career outcomes

Guidance practitioners do not have to be like insurance brokers helping clients to choose between rival career-options as if they were products. Nor do they have to be focussed upon helping clients achieve pre-ordained goals such as finishing a qualification or getting a job. It is arguable that a much more productive way of seeing the role relates to traditional objectives of increased self-esteem and self-actualisation – provided, once more, that structural inequalities are recognised and addressed rather than ignored. There are liberal and radical versions of this empowerment model and the latter should not be over-looked. What, for example, can guidance professionals do, in order to support disadvantaged groups in society, such as many women and/or members of ethnic minorities? This raises visions of a service with a fundamentally different remit to that currently assumed by policy makers, where group activity and community support is as significant as individual counselling, and where aspects of government policy can be legitimately seen as being sometimes part of the problem rather than always part of the solution. For

example, it is hard to see how many young Afro-Caribbean men can be helped without an explicit recognition of racial inequality and institutional racism, or young women without addressing issues such as gender stereo-typing and sexual harassment (Bimrose, 2001a). How can we help the unemployed in many sink estates and deprived inner-city communities without recognising with them that decent jobs are few and far between and that they may have good reasons to turn down some jobs, for example because conditions of employment are so poor? The current emphasis on networking and working with local communities is a step in the right direction but may well not go far enough.

5. Policies can be changed and much achieved in adverse circumstances

For guidance to become really effective, some significant policy changes are needed, at least in England. It is up to all of us to try to influence the policy making process to the best of our ability. A necessary if obviously not sufficient requirement for doing that is a clear understanding of what can be achieved. In relation to policy making, the position of guidance providers is very similar to that of some of the clients they work with in relation to the labour market. Like the clients, providers have little direct influence over the situation in which they find themselves, but they do have some. For reasons I understand, the guidance community, in the recent past has sometimes appeared to endorse some unrealistic policy expectations. This could happen again with Connexions and should be strongly, if subtly, resisted.

More importantly, no matter how unrealistic and unhelpful are the policy structures or how deep-seated and difficult are the social inequalities in society, it is still possible for good guidance practitioners to have an influence for the better on some of the people they work with. The problem is that guidance professionals cannot achieve most of what they wish to or are instructed to, and the differences they do make are often unrecognised. That is the real danger of the audit society in which we now live: there is an almost unchallenged assumption that if it cannot be measured against pre-determined objectives, then it doesn't exist. But that is reductionist nonsense. Good guidance helps some of the people, some of the time, in a wide variety of ways, in a world of fewer certainties than was often the case in the past. We have to think beyond the seductive but dangerous 'all or nothing' vision of hard-pressed politicians, policy makers and some managers, and recognise partial successes in guidance as valuable achievements.

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For correspondence

Phil Hodkinson, Professor of Lifelong Learning,
Lifelong Learning Institute,
Continuing Education Building,
University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT