



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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Creating Evidence: Building the Case for Career Development

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The main theme often heard from career practitioners, managers and researchers (e.g. Oliver & Spokane, 1988; Swanson, 1995; Whiston, Sexton & Lasoff, 1998) is that career interventions *are* effective. However, further work is required on how and why career interventions work, and for whom they are most (and least) effective. Sampson et al. (2004) report that career counselors have failed to specify in precise terms how career development services effectively change the hearts and minds of clients. They argue that in spite of continuing public demands for accountability, there has been little progress toward the development of “accountability models” that would enable careers professionals to collect and aggregate data linking costs with results.

In 2001, the Centre for Guidance Studies (CeGS), University of Derby, England, produced an analysis of current evidence on the economic benefits of guidance¹. It reported that the current evidence-base could be summarized within studies that focus on:

- attitudinal change;
- learning outcomes;
- participation in learning;
- student retention and achievement;
- job search;
- employment; and
- economy studies (particularly factors related to the wider social benefits for individuals, employers and organisations).

The research findings highlighted that measuring the economic benefits of guidance is problematic, mainly because guidance effectiveness research in the United Kingdom is usually short-term and focused on immediate effects. Other more recent findings from the UK OECD report (2003) indicate that, compared to many other countries, the UK has a strong knowledge base for its career guidance services. However, much of the research that is conducted has been one-of and fragmented, rather than strategic, and not disseminated widely or effectively.

Assessing the overall impact of career guidance presents real challenges for practitioners, managers, trainers, policy makers and researchers. *Firstly*, there is a wide range of factors that influence individual choice. Career decision-making seldom occurs in a vacuum i.e. others may also be actively involved in the “helping process” such as partner, parent teacher, trainer, sibling and/or friends. *Secondly*, comparing evidence available in different studies is difficult because the client groups, nature and depth of careers work often vary considerably. *Thirdly*, there is not an agreed set of outcome measures for careers work, or even common methods used to collect data. The latter should cause concern to

¹ *Guidance was defined as a helping process operating in three domains i.e. personal, vocational and educational. The process is informed by five main principles: user-friendliness, confidentiality, impartiality, equality of opportunity, and accessibility. It is provided in a variety of different contexts and delivered through a range of methods.*



practitioners and managers who face increased public scrutiny and demand from policy makers for concrete evidence to show that careers work is making a difference.

In the UK, a new National Guidance Research Forum (NGRF), supported by the Department for Education & Skills (DfES) has recently been created to help raise the profile, application and development of career research. In essence, it aims to support the creation of a much stronger evidence-base for careers work. Within the NGRF there are two separately funded initiatives that involve leading career research institutions, guidance practitioner representative groups and the Guidance Council².

A website forum is being created to facilitate and support collaboration, knowledge combination and the creation of a dynamic “community of interest” for career guidance research and practice. This is led by the Institute of Employment Research (IER), University of Warwick, in partnership with CeGS, the Institute of Career Guidance (ICG)³, the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling (NICEC) and the Guidance Council. Key features include the construction of a *shared knowledge base* and new forms of evidence developed from *contextualized problems* faced by policy makers, managers, practitioners, researchers and trainers. The NGRF website forum contains three main strands.

- **Future trends**, consisting of labour market information focusing on labour market changes and skill needs that have been synthesized by research experts for practitioner use.
- **Research Database**, linked to the National Library Resource for Guidance, housed within the University of Derby, which acts as a repository for storing and retrieving research findings.
- **Effective Guidance**, creating dialogue between researchers, policy makers, practitioners, trainers and managers, and producing gathered evidence to inform policy and practice. Thematic areas include:
 - Equal Opportunities;
 - Improving Practice;
 - Using Research in Practice;
 - Impact Analysis;
 - International Perspectives;
 - Lifelong Learning.

The *process* involves the formation of groups with relevant expertise and *tasks* include the identification of gaps, key areas or presenting problems in their field of work. The website will be launched in early summer 2004.

A strategic forum is being established, led by the Guidance Council and NICEC, which has an inter-dependency and collaborative relationship with the NGRF website. The overall aim of the strategic forum is to attract high profile ambassadors for careers work drawn from a wide range of educational and occupational sectors. Members will set critical questions to help extend the thinking of policy makers, practitioners, managers, researchers and

² The Guidance Council represents organizations that are committed to the development of high quality careers work across the UK.

³ ICG is the main professional body that represents career guidance practitioners in the UK.



trainers. The main outcome from this process will be stimulus for building a critical mass of evidence to support and extend careers work now and in the future⁴.

The overall idea is to make use of collective wisdom to help improve the quality of services and ultimately, to improve individuals' lives. We all suffer from information overload, and the main challenge is how can we best gather "sound" evidence to inform policies and practices particularly in relation to what works, what does not work, and why. The Centre for Guidance Studies (CeGS) is seeking to find easier ways for people to locate knowledge and evidence; reduce it to relevant and manageable proportions; and make it readily accessible. The way forward is to create, develop and market the evidence-base using more rigorous protocols for the creation of reliable and expansive data.

⁴ *This is currently at a very early stage of development with the appointment of a Chairperson and Project Manager.*

