

# A Careers Adviser? So what do you do exactly?

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**This** paper aims to explore and examine how professional identity is defined within career guidance in England in the wake of ongoing change. It considers the components and the factors that contribute to the formation of professional identity, and the relationship with postgraduate continuing professional development (CPD). The study draws on the perceptions of a group of England-based practitioners broadly representing the sector, but bounded by one common factor; they have all undertaken a postgraduate qualification focusing on CPD within a guidance related discipline.

## Introduction: careers work in transition

The extent to which career guidance is recognised as a profession is debatable (Watts, 1999; McMahon, 2004; Furbish, 2004). It has been defined within the UK as 'weakly professionalised' (Watts, 1999), most recently the terminology has transformed into 'a profession that is not yet strong'; as per the recent report presented by the Careers Profession Taskforce (2010); although it refers repeatedly throughout the report to the 'Careers Profession'.

A number of research reports (Hibbert, 2010; McCrone et al, 2010; Future First, 2011) express a lack of confidence in current information advice and guidance (IAG) delivery and, specifically, cited individuals' preference for seeking support from a range of 'non-career professionals', including family, teachers, mentors, alumni and individuals working in their areas of interest. Hibbert (2010) argues many young people prefer to talk to people nearer their own age with some experience of the world of work, or a trusted adult rather than an expert. Practitioners face many challenges to their status as

career professionals. The Careers Profession Taskforce (2010) identifies lack of resources, appropriateness and currency of qualifications as contributing to this. John Hayes (2011) in his recent speech on the Education Bill proposed that turning high quality careers advisers in to 'jack of all trades' with an expectation of excelling was unrealistic.

The broadening remit of the workforce, together with the differentiation between specialist and generic roles, must have impacted on users' understanding of service provision and may explain some of the comments on young people's services presented earlier. It is easy to understand users' likely confusion when faced with over 40 different job titles used by practitioners (TBR, 2009) instead of the single, traditional 'careers adviser' title. Although the TBR report refers specifically to the adult sector, practitioners working with young people have had the experience of being re-designated as Personal Adviser without the acknowledgement of their professional histories as practitioners (Colley et al, 2009).

## So where does professional identity come in to it?

The literature on professional identity (Brown 2002, Beijgaard et al, 2004) contends that professional identity is an important facet in times of change and transition. It is safe to say that the careers profession has been in a state of flux for the best part of the last two decades. With so many challenges how do careers professionals view themselves within all of this? Have they retained a professional identity, or have the changes been too many that they no longer feel they have one, or did they even have one to begin with? The following research study explores the extent

to which practitioners have retained a professional identity throughout the changes impacting on them over recent years.

There has been limited research focusing on the concept of professional identity within careers work, until recently. Dubrow and Higgins (2005) contend that the challenging context of career demands a better understanding of professional identity and what contributes to its development. It is therefore appropriate that career professionals invest in research that addresses this. Most recently Colley et al, (2009, 2010), Douglas (2009, 2010) and Cedfop (2009) have addressed this by exploring the impact of change on roles and identities. It would appear both timely and imperative therefore, to explore professional identity when much of the career guidance sector is experiencing a radical realignment in conjunction with systemic cuts in public services.

## Defining professional identity

Attempting to define professional identity is complex. Beijaard et al (2004) consider that professional identity can be defined in different ways but they regard it as having three component parts; self concept and image of self; the occupational role; and expectations of others and accepted images within society as to what the occupation should know and do. There are, however, a number of definitions. Ibarra considers professional identity as the combination of 'attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which individuals define themselves within their professional role' (1999:765). Alternatively Smitina considers professional identity within the context of the professional role, i.e.; 'who I am as a professional, what would I like to be and how did I become the professional I am?' (2010:1141). Souhami (2007) and Mellin et al (2011) suggest that a primary difficulty for practitioners, particularly within helping roles, is the ability to differentiate between their role and that of others: what is it that they do, specifically, that others do not and how can this be articulated effectively?

## Methodology

The policy driven nature of careers work often leaves the practitioner voice absent from research (Reid, 2007) and dominated by other discourses, usually

that of managers and policy makers. This study hoped to offer a space for the practitioner's voice to be heard and to present discourse drawing on how they perceive their professional identity. To support a constructivist methodology, a case study approach was adopted, which was bounded specifically on a group of practitioners in England undertaking a postgraduate award; focusing on professional development within a guidance related discipline. The study was limited to students working in England, to retain consistency and explore broadly common experiences.

The students included in this study reflect most areas of the career guidance sector see fig 1. (NB: some respondents listed more than one sector). Although all work within the guidance sector, some students' roles focused more on educational guidance activities.

**Figure 1: Research Participants**

Sector	Survey	Interview	Narrative
HE	2	2	
FE	6	2	3
School	1		
Connexions/ LA	5	1	
Adult Guidance	4	2	1
Voluntary Comm	1		
Other	1		1

All students past and present who have been on the programme between 2006-2010 were invited to contribute at different stages; both communication and survey responses were through the web. Those who were invited to contribute to the in-depth telephone interviews were selected as a result of their participation in the survey stage.

A key benefit of adopting a case study approach is the opportunity to utilize multiple sources of evidence (Robson, 1993), ensuring that data can be triangulated and explored from many angles. In addition, for this project, data were collected at different times throughout students' academic career; this allowed an exploration of policy change and

## *A Careers Adviser? So what do you do exactly?*

potential relationships between this and student self-perceptions. The tools used included; documentary evidence in the form of programme applications and supporting statements (n=66); survey questionnaire (n=18); in-depth interviews (n=7) and personal narratives (n=5). Within this article, elements of the survey questionnaire, in-depth interviews and the personal narratives are considered.

Much of the debate concerning case study as a method focuses on what constitutes the case (Burton 2000, Denscombe 2007). This case is bounded within a group of students undertaking the same course within a defined time frame. When adopting a case study approach the purpose is not to provide generalisations per se but to offer 'principles that may be more general' (Reid, 2007: 64). The length of this article prohibits an extensive discussion of findings. Thus three areas will be addressed reflecting Beijaard et al's (2004) trio of concepts relating to professional identity: self concept and image of self; the occupational role and expectations of others and accepted images in society.

### **The occupational role of the careers practitioner**

Many practitioners when asked to define their role found this a challenging activity; often responding with 'that's a difficult one'. Why is it difficult for careers practitioners to define what they do? The responses tended to fall into three categories:

- i. emphatic – I am a Careers Adviser/ Education Adviser
- ii. that would depend on who I am talking to
- iii. difficult to describe because I have lots of roles.

The first group felt strongly that they knew who they were and what they did. This description was often aligned with a qualifier; 'I work with young people/ adults'. For some respondents they made a point of distancing themselves from other areas of the sector such as Connexions; 'I don't work for Connexions': it appeared important to define what they were not and to express their specialism almost as a sub-identity. Beijaard et al, (2004) state that individuals often

locate their identity in relation to the status of their discipline, so if they perceive low status they locate their professional identity within their generic role.

The second group often struggled to define themselves as they felt clients or peers did not understand what they did and how they did it. 'You say to people I am a Personal Adviser and they say what is that? What do you do?' (PA, Connexions). This lack of clarity puts pressure on practitioners to try and describe their roles in a way that might be meaningful to others. Colley et al, (2010) present in their research a lack of clarity as to the role of the PA, specifically, around delivery or brokering services to young people. Souhami (2007) and Mellin et al (2011) all suggest an inability to articulate roles, especially with professional peers. Practitioners within the study, reported in this article, often felt defined by clients' previous experiences of using careers services: this was often perceived to be poor. 'They understand the term careers advice don't they, which is user friendly, but then that is what they will have been told they have had at school by the maths teacher' (College Careers Adviser).

The third group, which was composed predominantly of practitioners who worked in educational institutions, identified themselves as having multiple roles. Their primary role was as a career adviser, but they often had additional responsibilities around safeguarding, staff development or special educational needs. They presented careers work in institutions as not a 'pure' role. It is one which can often have many additional activities and responsibilities added. Thus, the converse of the more familiar embedded role, where careers activities are integrated within existing job roles (Harrison et al, 2001; Neary and Jackson, 2010). It could be argued that the nature of the individuals' identity is strongly influenced by their area of specialism i.e. adult, young person, graduates (Mellin, et al, 2011) and this not only defines who they are, but also their role and how confident they feel articulating this to others.

### **Practitioner self-image**

The various large scale policy realignments, from education and employment to social inclusion and progression, have changed the self-concept of the

careers workforce and how they view themselves (Artaraz, 2006; Colley et al, 2009, 2010). Many practitioners feel there is a perception that anyone can do guidance (Douglas 2009); this was also articulated a number of times here. Hence the impact of policy drivers over this timeframe has also been equally significant; policy has sought to replace the careers profession with a more generic role: the Personal Adviser in the Connexions service for young people. This has had a significant impact on how practitioners view themselves and their profession (Artaraz, 2006, Colley et al, 2009). According to Beijgaard et al (2004), the concept of self has an impact on how individuals develop and the nature of their practice. This element, within their definition, focuses on the personal and individual internalization of the professional role and how it relates to self.

The practitioners in this study reflect the broad range of training and experience including those with no formal training and qualifications in careers work, with the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) 4 and finally the Diploma in Career Guidance /Qualification in Career Guidance. Practitioners with the NVQ 4 can be divided into two groups, those whose qualification was supported with theoretical input, usually through a university, and those who had limited or no theory. All see themselves as providing a professional service, but not necessarily seeing themselves in the sense of the traditional professional. When asked how they define 'professional' they invariably refer to traditional examples of doctors and lawyers. This view very much reflected how they suspect others perceive them and is considered in more depth in the next section.

Often those studying at masters' level feel their interest in developing themselves and their practice is not understood by their colleagues, and they are often concerned by the lack of commitment and value demonstrated by colleagues in relation to their own CPD, 'and they almost look at me as if to say why? You are quite sad you have nothing else to do' (Personal Adviser, Connexions).

For many practitioners, regardless of their initial training route, the lack of consistent training and qualifications for the sector has created ambiguity: challenging the professional status of those who had invested in postgraduate qualifications and professional

development. This personal, financial and resource investment contributes to their sense of ownership of their professionalism. When asked why they chose to start a masters' level course, 50% of the questionnaire respondents and the majority of the interviewees said they wanted to enhance their theoretical knowledge. Those who had undertaken the NVQ with little theoretical content felt that there was a gap in their knowledge and that theory allowed them to exercise agency over their professional practice. Some of the NVQ trained practitioners felt they had the skills, but lacked the theoretical knowledge that allowed them to fully apply them.

Knowledge is not necessarily a body of knowledge that we draw on and pull facts out of. But it is the knowledge that enables us to understand what to do at any given moment, what to think and how to put into practice (Adult Careers Adviser).

Those with a good grounding in theory had a genuine interest in pursuing this further. For many the engagement with the theoretical aspects represented an opportunity to intellectualize their work, from what has for many become a mechanistic approach to practice.

I am engaging in some of that critical thinking and self reflection now which adds value to what you do and gives you that confidence as a professional to your delivery (Adult Careers Adviser).

Questionnaire responses centered on practitioners' views of client focus. 67% of respondents identified it as their personal driver for professional development, reinforcing Reid's (2007) findings describing the meeting of client need as the focus of the careers practitioners' working life. A commitment to client focus was implicit at all levels of the data, for many it was synonymous with their rationale for professional development (Neary and Hutchinson, 2009). Client focus was inextricable from their practice and how they perceived themselves. When considering if a common set of values, attributes, beliefs, motives and experiences (Ibarra, 1999) could be defined for career practitioners, the answers aligned overwhelmingly with the ethical framework adhered to by practitioners:

## *A Careers Adviser? So what do you do exactly?*

focusing on CPD, client focus, impartiality, being values driven and so on. The importance of ethics was fundamental and defined practitioners' professionalism and sense of self.

I think you also need to demonstrate the ethics around working with individuals and the importance of being impartial, recognizing your own prejudices and potential for that (HE Careers Adviser).

### Perception of others

The third element identified by Beijaard et al (2004) focuses on perceptions of others and the accepted images in society of what the professional role involves. For many practitioners there was the fundamental belief that the public at large has little understanding of the careers adviser role. In addition, with the diversification of the workforce, practitioners often felt that there was a general belief that it was a role anyone can do, as noted by Douglas (2009) previously. 'I have quite a few clients at that level who say I can do your job, this is easy, it's just sitting here talking to people' (Adult Careers Adviser).

For some this was compounded by a belief that not only the general public and some clients lacked an understanding of the role, but that many peers within peripheral roles did as well. For many practitioners this enhances a sense of isolation and a lack of value in what they feel is a very important job.

### Formation of professional identity

As identified previously the concept of professional identity for many practitioners is both challenging and opaque. So what contributes to the formulation of professional identity? Felstead et al (2010) focus on employers promoting and creating a defined professional identity for their staff, this can be evidenced in the construction of the Personal Adviser role within Connexions. Professional identity is influenced by a range of variables including training, expertise, qualifications and being seen and seeing oneself as qualified (McCarthy 2004; Beijaards et al, 2004; Mellin et al, 2011). Cedefop (2009) identify the following as contributing to professional identity:

recognition in national systems of occupations, media coverage raising awareness of the occupational area, establishment of professional associations, academic training and specialist training.

For the group of practitioners within this study, their professional identity has developed over a period of time and for some it was well-established and always had been; for others it was in transition. Factors identified as contributing to this included networks, in particular, opportunities to interact and communicate with like-minded people. The commitment to CPD was paramount and, particularly, the desire to engage with practitioners from a wide professional milieu. Another contributing factor in professional identity was the engagement in postgraduate level study and the kudos of advanced level qualifications (particularly having a higher level qualification than their manager). Also considered important were ethical frameworks, recognition, being valued, professional associations that promote and protect the profession and defined minimum level qualifications.

### Conclusion

Professional identity is dynamic (Brown 1997; Beijaards et al, 2004) and therefore it is a fragile entity and one that needs nurture and investment. Felstead et al (2010) consider it as a social entity and involving a sense of belonging. The suggestions by practitioners of the importance of contacts with like-minded practitioners and informal professional association activities reinforce the individual ownership and definition of professional identity as a concept. Do careers practitioners have a professional identity? Professional identity exists on a continuum from those who claim not to, to those who emphatically claim they do. There are however, a number of constants that contribute and influence professional identity that all subscribe to. All practitioners have an ethical framework as the core to their practice; this does not deviate or change dependent on their work environment. Engagement with postgraduate professional development contributes to professional identity for the majority within the study: it reinforces their commitment to their professional identity; it reawakens their interest in theory and provides an intellectual engagement with practice. Those who felt it did not already have a strong professional identity



and professional self worth. For all it provides the opportunity for structured reflection, allowing an in-depth engagement with how they perceive themselves as a professional.

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## *A Careers Adviser? So what do you do exactly?*

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