

# Fog in the Channel – Continent cut off: the implications of Brexit for career guidance in the UK<sup>1</sup>

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**The** decision taken by the British people to leave the European Union (EU) took many people by surprise. The macro economic, political and social implications are still unclear, but as the negotiations begin the post-Brexit world is beginning to take shape. In this article I will argue that Brexit has a number of implications for those involved in career education and guidance. It will explore how the development of the EU since Maastricht has resulted in substantial shifts in the opportunity structure. Out of these changes there have been both winners and losers. Within this context Brexit can be seen as a consequence of the failure of the neoliberal approach taken by the EU to guarantee career development for all. The paper goes on to explore what the implications of Brexit are for individuals' careers and for the field of career guidance.



## Introduction

As an A level student, I studied the entry of Britain to the Common Market in 1973. One of the stories that our teacher told us to encapsulate Britain's troubled relationship with Europe was of a newspaper headline supposedly from the 1950s which read 'fog in the channel – continent cut off'. Although by the time that I was studying my A levels, Britain had been 'in Europe' for almost 20 years I still didn't get the joke. The idea that Britain was a relatively small part of a much larger political entity, culture and labour market was difficult for me to comprehend. Historian Niall Ferguson (2016) says that this headline was actually a

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product of wartime Nazi propaganda and was designed to show that the English were insufferably arrogant. But, apocryphal or not, following the 2016 referendum a large proportion of the British population seem to view cutting off the continent as their clearest route to a better future (or at least as the best way to punish the political class for failing them).

Through my involvement in career guidance I have had the opportunity to work within Europe, often on projects funded by the European Union (EU). I have been privileged to work with fantastic colleagues and makes friends across the continent. I have also been convinced through my work with the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network<sup>2</sup> that it is possible to have a common European conversation about career guidance.

When I was a careers practitioner I mainly worked with university researchers. Amongst this group European mobility was a lived reality. Many of my clients had moved to England to study a PhD and went on to pursue their careers in a range of countries. I learnt about the programme funding and EU instruments that existed to support this international mobility such as: the Euroguidance network<sup>3</sup> which provides career guidance to support European mobility; Europass<sup>4</sup> which has attempted to standardise the formats of C.V.s across Europe; and a host of funding opportunities for researchers which

<sup>2</sup> Between 2007-2015 the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (<http://www.elgpn.eu>) worked with member-countries and the European Commission to develop European co-operation on lifelong guidance in both the education and the employment sectors.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on Euroguidance visit <http://euroguidance.eu/>

<sup>4</sup> For more information on Europass visit <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/>

are designed to encourage mobility and knowledge exchange.

A willingness to consider living and working in other countries opens up huge opportunities for individuals and requires careers professionals to both understand the process of mobility and to help individuals to think through the consequences of becoming internationally mobile. However, while I have found European mobility to be liberating the Brexit vote revealed that inward mobility is perceived by some as a threat to their careers and livelihood.

## The shifting role of the EU

My experiences with the EU, with European mobility and in close working relationships with other Europeans have made me take pride in my identity as a European. Yet, while I was studying my A levels it had not occurred to me that I could pursue my education or career within Europe. This was not simply a failure of my career imagination but was also because the UK's relationship with Europe was fundamentally different at that time. Between the year when I took my A levels (1992) and the Brexit vote (2016) the size, responsibilities of, and vision for, the EU developed considerably (Watts, Sultana & McCarthy, 2010).

The Maastricht Treaty (1992) established the monetary union that would ultimately lead to the foundation of the Euro and supporting institutions like the European Central Bank. Maastricht also brought education into the purview of the EU and established the concept of common European citizenship thereby enshrining European mobility and the free movement of labour. Vocational education, and with it some aspects of career guidance, had been in scope since the Treaty of Rome in 1961 (Watts, Sultana & McCarthy, 2010), but Maastricht broadened this across the rest of the education system. The development of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 then placed lifelong learning at the centre of the EU's political and economic strategy (Dehmel, 2006).

The memorandum on Lifelong Learning (European Commission, 2000) argues that the EU's interest in lifelong learning is driven by 'two objectives of equal importance', firstly 'the promotion of active citizenship' and secondly 'the promotion of vocational skills in order to adapt to the demands of the new knowledge-

based society and to allow full participation in social and economic life.' Policy has often articulated both a broad humanistic understanding of the value of education as well as a narrower economic vision. Gravani and Zarifis (2014) argue that in practice the economic understanding of education has often predominated and has viewed education as a mechanism through which individuals can be transformed into whatever capital and the state need.

The European project is no longer simply a way of managing trade and international relations. It has become a new form of supra-state complete with a range of social and cultural programmes, labour laws and a labour market and economic strategy which emphasises skills acquisition, the economic importance of education, mobility and labour market flexibility. The referendum vote of 2016 suggests that many in the UK populace did not feel that they had assented to these changes and that they longed for the fog to once more come down in the channel. Indeed, the British Social Attitudes survey shows a steady rise in Euroscepticism as these changes have taken place over the last twenty years (Swales, 2016).

Streeck (2014:103) argues that as the EU grew it increasingly functioned as a 'liberalisation machine' which primarily served the interests of the capitalist market often at the expense of local democracies. From this perspective the EU's increasing focus on education, skills acquisition and geographical and labour market mobility serves to place responsibility onto the individual. Streeck views this as part of a broader adoption by the EU of neoliberal ideology as the fundamental basis of policy. Harvey (2005:2) defines neoliberalism as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.' He goes on to argue that neoliberalism has been the dominant global ideology since the late 1970s and notes that despite its often destructive consequences it has 'become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world' (p.3).

Both the EU and the UK have been strongly influenced by neoliberal political ideas with UK governments

often driving EU policy in this direction. This means that rather than focusing on the creation, reform or development of structures like public services or on the regulation of oppressive institutions or employment relations the answer to social problems has been held to lie in developing the skills and capabilities of individuals. Such individuals are encouraged to forge protean careers (Hall, 1996) building their human capital to transact to their best advantage in the boundaryless global marketplace. The consequence of such neoliberal individualism is that while some people will make advantageous educational choices and strategic geographical and labour market moves, others will not. Dreger et al. (2015) provide evidence of this noting that income inequality across the EU has increased markedly since the mid-1980s exacerbated by the hollowing out of the labour market which has meant that skilled and educated workers have been able to outperform their unskilled colleagues. A neoliberal Europe is therefore one in which there will be winners and losers and without policies to guarantee social mobility the division between the winners and losers will open up over the generations.

One analysis of why substantial numbers of people decided to vote for Brexit is that they felt themselves to be the losers in this kind of 'knowledge society'. Warhurst (2016) highlights the poor job quality that characterises much of the lower end of the British labour market. Since the crash British workers have been more likely to find themselves in low-skill, low-pay jobs with little or no opportunity for advancement. In such a situation it is unsurprising if people seek to change one of the key institutions that they perceive to be accelerating their disenfranchisement (Fevre, 2016). It was exactly this group of poorer, less educated, less mobile and less flexible workers who voted for Brexit (Swales, 2016). Such an analysis puts the concept of 'career' at the heart of an understanding of the Brexit vote. If career describes the individual's passage through life, learning and work and is concerned with the relationship between individuals and social institutions the decision to pull down such institutions is a likely consequence of people seeing no viable career pathway and perceiving that such institutions typically work against them. In such an analysis Brexit becomes a consequence of society's failure to guarantee meaningful careers for all.

The EU cannot reasonably shoulder the full blame for neoliberalism. The Brexit vote took place in a period after a major economic crash and during a range of global economic disruptions and wars that resulted in rising global mobility and stagnant incomes (Watkins, 2016). The fact that there was no viable progressive alternative opened up the space for populist movements such as UKIP in the UK, Trumpism in the US and the Front National in France to make political advances based on a critique of key elements of the neoliberal consensus. Within Europe the EU has become strongly identified with this consensus. It is important to note that the UK under Conservative, Labour and Coalition governments has also pursued the kinds of policies that are associated with neoliberalism. In fact, the UK has consistently exerted pressure to drive the EU in a more neoliberal direction. Nonetheless the existence of the EU has long served as a convenient scapegoat for UK governments seeking to explain the negative consequences of neoliberalism.

It is important to recognise that the scapegoating of the EU is only part of the story. The EU has always had a range of political traditions within it. It is not a straightforward standard bearer for neoliberalism. It has also sought to increase the spaces for democratic citizenship and for a cultural European identity (Seddon & Mellors, 2006). At times, most notably through the idea of 'a social Europe' (Rinaldi, 2016), the EU, or actors within it, notably social democratic political parties and the trade union movement (Watkins, 2016) have sought to use the EU as a bulwark against the excesses of unregulated neoliberal capitalism.

## The impact of Brexit on individuals' careers

It is difficult to be clear on what the full implications of Brexit will be. In the immediate aftermath of Brexit I wrote a gloomy article about the prospects for graduates (Hooley, 2016). So far I have been proved wrong (although Brexit is yet to actually happen). While there has been a substantial drop in the value of the pound (BBC, 2016), the impact on jobs has so far been minimal (ONS, 2016).

The lack of catastrophic economic consequences in the immediate aftermath of Brexit vote is at least in part because Theresa May's government has approached negotiations with considerable caution. So far nothing has changed. However, there are now clear signals that Brexit will gather pace throughout 2017. Andrew Haldane, the Bank of England's chief economist acknowledges that economists have recently had a poor track record of predicting the future, but, when pushed, still concludes that the economic outlook for a post-Brexit Britain is bleak (Inman, 2016). It is also important to recognise that the way in which these macro-level changes in the economy filter down into individuals' careers will be complex and differentiated by socio-economic status, sector, region and nationality.

Critical to the negotiation of a Brexit will be the deal that is struck on the preservation of the 'four freedoms of movement': capital, goods, services and people. The free movement of people (mobility) is the most politically sensitive of these. Union leader Len McCluskey argues that 'workers have always done best when the labour supply is controlled' (Topping, 2016). But this is contestable with much of the evidence indicating that the net impact of immigration is positive (Wadsworth et al., 2016). Preston (2016) argues there will be economic consequences if Brexit does have a negative impact on migration as migrants are typically younger people with better skills and qualifications and a greater likelihood of working.

Individuals must negotiate these shifts as they unfold. Even if we make the improbable assumption that there will be no negative consequences for the overall economy when exiting the EU there will still be considerable labour market reorganisation. For example, the loss of EU labour law may result in many British workers' employment situations becoming more precarious. The loss of EU funding within higher education and the wider public sector is also likely to have a considerable impact on jobs. For those working directly in career guidance there are also likely to be consequences as many local careers initiatives are dependent on the European Social Fund<sup>5</sup> (Hooley, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> The European Social Fund (<http://ec.europa.eu/esf/home.jsp>) is a EU funding stream designed to support employment, mobility, education, opportunity and better public services.

## Improving things for the 'just about managing'

As well as its economic impacts the Brexit vote has also had major political consequences. New Prime Minister Theresa May has sought to reconnect with those who voted for Brexit and to convince them that Britain is 'a country that works for everyone' (May, 2016).

May's rhetoric recognises that opportunity is not equally available to all and has repeatedly promised the group which she describes as 'just about managing families' that she will do something to improve their circumstances. This term has echoes of Standing's (2016) 'precariat', a group which he defined as being those who do not have 'the anchor of stability' and who he warned are 'prone to listening to ugly voices, and to use their votes and money to give those voices a political platform'. For those people who are just managing, living precarious lives and who see few career opportunities for themselves or their children, Brexit seems to offer some hope. May's government has heard this message and is, in rhetoric at least, seeking to address the grievances of this group. Whether May's government will be able to deliver on these promises is unclear and there are plenty of critics like The Observer's Sonia Sodha (2016) who are arguing that the government is failing those who are 'just about managing'.

## The implications for career guidance

Brexit has three main implications for career guidance policy and practice: (1) the loss of the European policy context; (2) the change in the domestic political context; and (3) the change in the opportunity structure.

Many European states have long traditions of career guidance (Sultana, 2004). From long before Maastricht the EU has had an interest in career guidance and has sought to foster its development and support policy sharing (Watts et al., 2010). The focus on career guidance accelerated after Maastricht (1992), Lisbon (2000) and the adoption by the Council of Education Ministers of a Resolution on Lifelong Guidance

(2004). Throughout this period guidance became increasingly seen as an instrument of the policy of the EU particularly with respect to the development of lifelong learning, active labour market policy and European mobility in learning and work (Sultana, 2004; Watts et al., 2010).

The European Union has sought to support and foster the development of career guidance in three main ways.

- Providing direction and frameworks for the integration of career guidance into the policies of nation states.
- Supporting collaboration between nation states and practitioners across the EU to enable the lending and borrowing of policy and practice.
- Providing funding for career guidance initiatives including research, development and delivery initiatives.

UK engagement with EU initiatives around career guidance has been sporadic, but the loss of this wider context is still a problem. The existence of frameworks and directives offered a point of reference for policy development and critique. A European community of practice also supported the development of the UK career guidance system through knowledge exchange at a range of levels and its loss risks creating a more inward looking less innovative sector. Finally, the loss of direct funding both through the European Social Fund (which has been used to support career guidance provision in local authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships) and through other funding channels such as Erasmus+<sup>6</sup> (which has funded career guidance projects across the life course) has the potential to have a major impact on a resource poor sector like career guidance.

With respect to the domestic political scene the position of career guidance has not changed much. Several promised developments, such as the publication of a new 'careers strategy' were put on hold following the change of government. However, at present there is little evidence that there will be a major shift of policy on career guidance between

<sup>6</sup> Erasmus+ (<https://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/>) is a European programme which is designed to support mobility, collaboration and knowledge exchange within the education system.

the pre- and post-Brexit governments. As, already discussed there are clearly major policy themes around which the government is acting ('a country that works for everyone' and 'just about managing families') that offer potentially fertile ground for career guidance. Although viewing career guidance primarily as a tool to address social exclusion has an inglorious history and clearly needs to be handled carefully (Watts, 2015a). More promisingly, Robert Halfon, the new minister for careers began 2017 by stating that he would be 'pushing ahead with plans to ensure that everyone, no matter what age or what background, can rely on excellent and consistent careers advice.' As 2017 develops we will be likely to find out more about what these plans involve and how far they do increase access to career guidance.

Beyond these policy shifts Brexit will change the nature of the conversations that careers professionals are having with their clients. The lack of clarity about what is going to happen highlights the importance of practitioners attending closely to both the policy environment and to labour market information. Depending on how Brexit plays out there could be both large and small changes that could make profound differences to the opportunity structures which people are attempting to navigate.

While it is not possible to predict the future, inequality of opportunity is likely to continue to be an issue. Brexit was one consequence of a country in which educational and career opportunities are hoarded by the wealthy and the privileged (Kirby, 2016). In such a situation career guidance is presented with a dilemma as to whether it should try and encourage people to accept inequality, to navigate inequality or to challenge inequality (Watts, 2015b). The Brexit vote suggests that there may be serious social, political and economic consequences if this issue is bypassed.

## Conclusions

Over the last 40 years the EU has exerted a growing influence on both the careers of individuals and the organisation of career guidance in the UK. For some people this has been a liberating experience which has opened up a continent of opportunities. However, the prevailing neoliberal orientations of both UK

government and the EU have resulted in education and employment policies which have not worked for everyone.

The Brexit vote highlighted the ways in which demographics, ideologies and politics intertwine. People were not voting on an abstract constitutional question but rather to try to create the circumstances within which they could best develop their careers and ensure their livelihood. As both Davies (2016) and Fevre (2016) have noted in desperate times people are likely to turn to desperate measures and react against the present even where it might bring about an uncertain future.

Following the Brexit vote the issue of social and economic inequality has risen to the top of the political agenda. How far Theresa May's government will make any inroads into this inequality and how willing they will be to tackle privilege remains to be seen. There is also an important question as to how far such rhetoric about addressing historic wrongs plays into populist nationalism in the way that Trump's administration in the USA has enthusiastically embraced. However, if we take May's concern about 'just about managing families' at face value there is good reason to argue that career guidance should be part of any strategy to address inequality and some reason to be optimistic that the current government might agree.

If career guidance is to play a more central role in moving people out of the 'just managing' category there is a need to continue to develop the theory and practice on which the field is based. Unfortunately, the withdrawal from the EU diminishes one source of new ideas and innovations. Finding ways to continue a European dialogue within the field through the fog of Brexit should be a key task.

Brexit has been enormously polarising. It is easy to fall into the habit of viewing it as either salvation or disaster. It will likely be neither, but it will present new challenges for individuals and British society. Career guidance offers a powerful set of practices which can help to address exactly these kinds of challenges but it will require ongoing support from policy and a willingness by practitioners to reimagine their practice for a new environment.

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