

DEBATE AND DISCUSSION

Opening the door to opportunity: adult guidance holds the key

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a keynote talk given at the Conference of the Adult Educational Guidance Association of Ireland in October 2003. The title of the conference at Waterford – Opening the Door to Opportunity: Adult Guidance in Ireland – came as a happy coincidence in that I had just completed editing a version of a 1986 report on adult guidance The Challenge of Change (Brown, 2003; UDACE, 1986). The 1986 report had been published with a newly designed logo which represented an opening door, so the task so recently completed resonated with the theme of the conference. The current paper retains the original image and reflects on the role of adult guidance in the arena of widening participation. The 2003 version of The Challenge of Change was published in the same month (December) as the English Department for Education and Skills released a policy paper on Information, Advice and Guidance for Adults (DfES, 2003). This coincidence in publication explains the postscript to allow comment on this development. In preparing this paper much of the flavour of the spoken original has been retained.

The paper considers three questions:

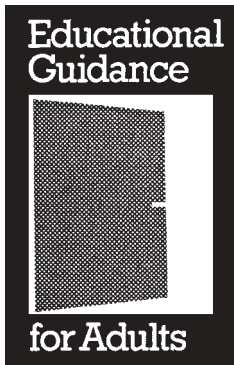
- *What is the distinctive nature of work with adults in the arena of education, training and work?*
- *What are the barriers to participation for adults in transition?*
- *What is the nature of guidance?*

This is followed by a postscript on the English Policy Framework and Action Plan for Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG).

KEYWORDS Access, adult guidance, educational guidance, guidance, information advice and guidance, lifelong learning, widening participation

Introduction

In the middle 1980s, when I was still very young, I was involved in the work of a quango in England called the Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education. UDACE, as we called it, was created by the Secretary of State for Education and Science in 1984. (For the work of UDACE see McNair, 2002.) UDACE examined areas of possible development in education for adults, and recommended strategies for development. The first and most significant work it undertook was that on adult guidance. For the major report on adult guidance in 1986 UDACE commissioned a logo which, it argued, would give the public an immediate way of identifying a service or an institution which offered guidance. Our chief officer (Stephen McNair) worked hard on this logo, and when it was unveiled it looked like this:



It was, of course, we all agreed, the opening door which would give access to adults who wished to return to education, training and work. Adult guidance, we were certain, was the key to all the doors, which would then open to allow adults to overcome the many barriers that had previously stood in their way. The opening door logo would become as well known as other such logos which indicated information points, CABs or legal aid. It was the answer. We hoped that it would be adopted by all services, institutions and adorn our publications and guides.

Well, I have to report that the strategy failed. The logo was not universally adopted, though it did appear on most UDACE publications on guidance up to the early 1990s. Why did it fail? Well it is a case of the half empty/half-full glass. It's all a matter of perception – what do you really see when you look at the logo? Although the designers and commissioning group saw it as the opening door, other equally perceptive colleagues saw it as *the closing door*. So there it is on the page – is the door opening or is it closing?

I must admit that I always saw it as opening (but then I always see the glass as half full!) and still feel that our collective failure in 1986 to establish a logo for guidance for adults was a noble failure. Moreover those involved in this work today still lack an accepted logo or branding. Also I do like the opening-door metaphor for our work, so I am entirely comfortable with the title I have been given today.

The report that launched the opening door logo was *The Challenge of Change: Developing Educational Guidance for Adults* (UDACE, 1986). It proved to be a significant, almost seminal, document. It made a lasting impact on the development and practice of adult guidance not only in England but also far beyond. It has also been used to analyse guidance in settings other than for adults. It is still widely cited by colleagues writing and speaking about guidance. In particular the seven activities of guidance are in current usage in

most services providing guidance for adults. Even in those services where only some of the seven activities are currently available, the terminology and concepts are used as a way of understanding and evaluating practice. *The Challenge of Change* has long been out of print, but, as it happens, an edited version of the central chapters of the report was published in December 2003 by NAEGA, the National Association for Educational Guidance for Adults (Brown, 2003). As I edited this new edition I will specifically draw on *The Challenge of Change* in part of my talk today. In particular I will use it when looking at the nature of guidance for adults. I do so because I think that the message from 1986 is still, with minor modification, relevant to the task of 'Opening the Door to Opportunity' and the further development of educational guidance for adults.

But before moving to the nature of guidance, I wish to look at the distinctive nature of working with adults, and at the barriers that still exist for the adult in transition in terms of education, training and work. So my talk will address three questions:

- What is the distinctive nature of work with adults in the arena of education, training and work?
- What are the barriers to participation for adults in transition?
- What is the nature of guidance?

Discussion of these three questions is followed by a short postscript on the policy framework and action plan for IAG in England.

What is the distinctive nature of work with adults in the arena of education, training and work?

Those working with adults in terms of guidance or education or training know that the position of their clients is very different from that of young people. Young people at some stage between 16 and 19 leave the world of schooling in a transition to FE, HE, training, work and indeed the rest of life. Their transition is expected, planned and shared with their peers. It is a transition anticipated by their families and their teachers. The routes are well known and anticipated. In contrast, adults in transition are already well into the 'rest of their life', which is littered with experiences and responsibilities to which the young could not aspire. Put simply, the adult client is not just a chronologically older version of a young person. We adults face responsibilities both in the personal and financial domains which tend to grow as we age. We acquire responsibilities at work, within the family (partners, children and parents) and in the wider community. Some of these responsibilities are financial. Thus the relatively easy transition of the young person moving from school to work or training, from school to HE is in stark contrast to the

serial (and often overlapping) transitions of the adult client/student/worker. An adult who is moving between education, training, non-working (including retirement), voluntary activities and leisure does so amidst the messy reality of a life cluttered with responsibilities to and for people, homes, benefits and taxation. The transitions faced by our adult clients are complicated with multi-faceted challenges. Moreover, our work in adult guidance encompasses work with all adults of almost every age, economic status and aspiration, and involves the clarification of options at all educational levels and modes of study.

What are the barriers to adult participation for adults in transition?

Access to learning, training and to work has been a central issue for adult guidance workers for a very long time (I almost said from the start of time!). However, in the UK until relatively recently access was conceived as being about access to HE. (This was particularly noticeable in the development of *access courses* during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s.) But I believe that this notion is unhelpful: access is about entry to all levels of learning and training. Where the client is identifying (in whatever words) difficulties with basic skills, the concept of *access* as only being about HE entry is singularly unhelpful: *access* must be about overcoming barriers to learning and participation at all levels.

In looking at access for adults it is helpful to identify the barriers to participation in learning. These barriers are complex, and I have found the approach taken by Liz Thomas in her recent book (2001) to be useful in dealing with this complexity. (This despite the fact that she is talking about widening participation to HE!) Thomas views the triggers for and barriers to participation as being in four categories:

- the impact of the education system;
- the impact of the labour market;
- social and cultural norms;
- individual issues.

Each of these categories contains both triggers and barriers.

The impact of the education system includes factors such as:

- Gaining/failing to gain qualifications from compulsory schooling.
- 'Good' qualifications being a 'passport' to further study (the concept here is of qualifications being a sort of 'ladder' or high jump competition where you go on till you knock off the bar! To continue the sporting analogy, it

would be much better if we moved to the concept of the marathon, where every participant is deserving of applause).

- Disposition towards learning – ‘negative attitudes are difficult to challenge and reverse’ (Thomas, 2001, p 82).
- Reinforcement of social and economic advantage/disadvantage at school.
- Costs in FE and HE often borne by student and/or family.
- Competition for places in HE (with the wondrous exception of the OU).
- Inappropriate support services for adult returners.
- Distance.
- Inflexibility in delivery.
- The culture of institutions (some institutions are just not adult environments).

The impact of the labour market includes factors such as:

- The view taken of the advantage of study in terms of future employment and wages. (In England and Wales there have been numerous wide-ranging political assertions about the benefits of a university education in terms of an increment to lifetime earnings. A figure of £400,000 for the average graduate has been mooted!)
[NB Ted Wragg on this assertion: ‘... the biggest confidence trick of all was the announcement that graduates must pay for their studies because they will earn £400,000 extra as a result of getting a degree. This is complete and utter cobblers. They will do nothing of the kind. This highly suspect figure of £400,000 was estimated on the beneficiaries of a system when only 4 or 5 per cent went to university... It is no basis for a system where half the population might graduate. (Wragg, 2003)]
- The attitude of employers to further education and training.
- Differential expenditure on work-based training by employment status.

Social and cultural norms factors:

- View that learning is not for ‘people like me’.
- View that learning has little or no value to me.
- An assumption of automatic progression to HE.

Individual issues

- Low aspirations or awareness.
- Complexities of life and existing responsibilities.
- You have to change to meet the norms/rules of the institution.
- I am the problem.
- How to meet my special needs.
- Age (‘I’m too old to learn’).

So I see access for adults as being ways of entry and re-entry to learning programmes for education, training and work (including formal and informal learning) which cross all such barriers. Ways and methods of access which treat learners as equal irrespective of background in terms of age, financial or benefit position, nationality, religion, politics, gender and special needs. A big agenda with guidance at its heart. At its heart not only when contemplating entry to learning (*pre-entry*) but also when joining a learning or training programme (*at entry*), during the learning experience (*on programme*) and when completing a particular course or module (and because of other responsibilities this should include the premature exit) (*at exit*). (UDACE, 1986; Sadler and Atkinson, 1998; Brown, 2003.)

What is the nature of adult guidance?

For practitioners and their managers the seven activities of guidance are the starting point. This formulation is what is best remembered from *The Challenge of Change*, the 1986 report which I mentioned earlier. There, the seven are given as:

- Informing
- Advising
- Counselling
- Assessing
- Enabling
- Advocating
- Feeding back

(UDACE, 1986, pp 24–5; Brown, 2003, pp 4–5)

I wish to say a little about each of these linked activities in turn, but before doing this let me draw attention to two important features in this formulation.

Guidance is an umbrella term covering a mixture of all seven activities. There is, however, increasing concern about official (DfES and LSC) use in England of ‘Information, Advice and Guidance’ (IAG) as if *guidance* were not an umbrella term. Indeed, Watts and Hawthorn see this in relation to the recently published IAG policy framework (DfES, 2003) as:

Serving to compound rather than resolve the previous conceptual confusion. The opportunity to confine the term ‘guidance’ to its generic usage has been lost by the retention of ‘IAG’. This leaves England out of line with other countries and international organisations, where ‘guidance’ (EC; Ireland), ‘career guidance’ (OECD; Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales) or ‘career development’ (World Bank; Australia,

Canada) are now used as the portmanteau terms. Adhering to 'IAG' – insider jargon which means nothing to outsiders – even after the 'G' has effectively been lopped off, seems particularly perverse (Watts and Hawthorn, 2004).

All activities are in the dynamic '-ing' format. This is particularly important in the case of information, which, I think, is a product or commodity with which we are awash. You can have information at the touch of a button and still not be informed. Informing is an activity or process of engaging with information: it does not necessarily take place (only) at the start of the guidance process as it underpins the other six activities. [This is particularly important in England where government seems addicted to what is now called *Information, Advice and Guidance*. (IAG) But this formulation of IAG does not describe what is involved. Information is a mere commodity and is, by itself, static. Further, I am not clear what guidance is when separated from the seven activities.] (See discussion of this in Brown, 1999.)

Turning to the seven activities:

Informing

Providing information is a step towards informing, and it underpins all the other six activities. Also, as the 1986 report reminds us, information may need interpretation as 'most published educational information is produced for promotional purposes, "pure" information is rare' (UDACE, 1986, p 24; Brown, 2003, p 4).

Advising is about helping clients to undertake that interpretation of information and to choose 'the most appropriate option' (UDACE, 1986, p 24; Brown, 2003, p 4).

Counselling. Since the *Challenge of Change* was published in 1986, there has been much discussion of the use of counselling as one of the seven activities of guidance. There are several problems here: some are over the meanings of the words we use, whilst others are about practice and training. Since 1986, counselling has become increasingly professionalised, with the advent of programmes of appropriate and professional training of the counsellor. There is no doubt, however, that the effective guidance worker has to use skills from counselling practice. The guidance worker requires defined capability in the areas of attending, responding, and understanding.

If the *Challenge of Change* were being drafted today it is likely that the counselling activity would be reformulated as '**Using Counselling Skills**'. In Ireland there may be other issues that arise, as the use of 'counselling' in schools and other environments for the guidance role (or what I would identify from English experience as the guidance role) may mean that counselling as originally formulated in 1986 is still appropriate.

Assessing was seen in 1986 as 'Helping clients, by formal or informal means, to obtain an adequate understanding of their personal, educational and vocational development' (UDACE, 1986, p 24; UDACE 2003, p 5). Helpfully, in later work by UDACE the assessing activity was further examined by Jennifer Kidd. She stresses that assessing is an inevitable informal process in guidance work (Kidd, 1988) and that in particular:

***Assessment is not labelling...** assessment is not some form of treatment,... mechanically applied. Rather it should provide a means of helping clients themselves gather and make use of information....*

***Assessment is not simply 'testing'...** We all form impressions of others by just being with them, though in everyday life we do not call these impressions assessments. Impressions arise out of our perceptions of appearance, behaviour and speech... [in our work we gather these impressions for two purposes]... to help people themselves make decisions about their lives, or... to help others make decisions about them. We are concerned here with assessment in guidance, not as part of any selection process.*

***The varied nature of practice** A notable feature of the work of many of the practitioners I talked to was the diversity of assessment techniques used... A mixture of techniques was often found most useful and the tools chosen vary according to the particular client, and his or her specific needs, and the resources available (Kidd, 1988, pp 3-4)*

Enabling was seen as helping clients to deal with third parties, and perhaps the gaining of study skills. Working at much the same time as the UDACE Development Group, Diane Bailey used a different term for the 'enabling' activity. She used 'coaching,' which was defined as 'Creating or structuring a learning experience so that the individual can practise and gain new knowledge, skills or perceptions' (Bailey, 1987, p 90)

Advocating was seen as advocacy on behalf of a client by 'negotiating directly with institutions or agencies on behalf of individuals or groups for whom there may be additional barriers to access or to learning' (Brown, 2003, p 5; UDACE, 1986, p 24).

Feeding back was seen as a critical activity in drawing attention to unmet or inappropriately met needs. It was informing the education and training system of what more was needed.

So there you have the seven activities which allow practitioners and their managers to define and understand their role. But what about the clients? What do they do? (I am very grateful to Richard Edwards for developing an analysis of guidance through an examination of the discourse used. See, in

particular, Edwards, 1998.) The position of the client in the guidance process is that they are:

- our focus,
- they make the decisions from among the options discovered, and
- they do the interpreting, self-exploration, planning and review.

I will go back yet again to *The Challenge of Change* which asserts that the 'central focus of any guidance process is the individual' (UDACE, 1986, p 19; Brown, 2003, p 2). Within this focus it is the individual who make the decisions. Here the later words of Stephen McNair are instructive: '[guidance] is a process of helping individuals to take control of their own decisions and to make decisions wisely' (McNair, 1996, p 12). So it is about autonomy for our clients. And the process used by the client is that of:

- evaluation,
- identification,
- planning, and
- review.

Or as the 1986 report puts it:

A comprehensive service of educational guidance for adults will be able to assist all adults to:

- **Evaluate** their own personal, educational, and vocational development, possibly assisted by a guidance worker and/or formal assessment techniques.
- **Identify** their learning needs and choose the most appropriate ways of meeting them, bearing in mind constraints of personal circumstances, costs, and availability of opportunities.
- **Pursue and complete** a programme of learning as effectively as possible (this might include learning through a formal course, an open learning programme, a self-help group or self-directed private study).
- **Review and assess** the learning achieved and identify future goals (Brown, 2003, p 4; UDACE, 1986, p 22).

The final contribution to our understanding of adult guidance is to relate to education and training. How does the guidance process link to learning? Here, the answer given by *The Challenge of Change* is authoritative: 'Guidance is that essential component of education and training which focuses on the individual's personal relationship with what is to be learned' (Brown, 2003, p 3; UDACE, 1986, p 20).

I find this passage beguilingly direct and apposite. For in emphasising this

relationship between learner and what is to be learned, there is the possibility that there will be a better match between the needs and aspirations of the adult client and the opportunities available to them.

So the message is that guidance for adults is a process which is:

- dynamic,
- helping,
- empowering,
- linking individuals to learning.

Postscript: a policy framework and action plan for IAG in England

The latest of several policy developments in England since 1986 is IAG with a national coverage of guidance partnerships. The DfES (2003) policy framework and action plan is the first major government document specifically related to adult guidance (Dent, 2004). The intention is that:

Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) services have a pivotal role to play in delivering the Skills Strategy. They promote the benefits of learning, help individuals to address and overcome the barriers to learning and support them in making realistic and well informed choices. (Ministerial Foreword by Ivan Lewis, DfES, 2003)

This sounds very similar to the language of the UDACE report. However, when you turn to the document itself (as opposed to the Foreword), there are, as Watts and Hawthorn (2004) point out, 'a number of significant ambiguities and limitations' (p 3). The policy framework promises integration between a range of guidance providers in the workplace, colleges and elsewhere in the networks which have been developed. There is also a firmer relationship between the telephone facilities offered by 'learndirect advice' and face-to-face services. The action plan also sets firm targets in terms of clients: a full service will give 'particular priority to those people without a first full Level 2 qualification' (DfES, 2003, p 12). This has created concern about how far such a service can be universal and equitable within such firm targets. Indeed, the Level 2 target 'avoids spelling out that rationing – of a rather crude sort – is what is proposed' (Bailey, 2004). However, such target setting is a part of the access and social inclusion agenda and as such is a further move forward to opening the door to learning.

Opening the door to opportunity: is adult guidance the key?

Having attempted answers to my three questions, and having given a short postscript, can I say where our doorway to opportunity stands? Is it half-open

or half-closed? I suggest that with a comprehensive service of guidance for adults it is more likely to be at least halfway open. I believe it is the key to developing a system of lifelong learning which is genuinely and equally accessible to all citizens at all stages of their journey through the serial transitions that are a part of life, learning, work and leisure. What is needed is a service which is an 'integral component' (Brown, 2003, p 9; UDACE, 1986, p 11) of our education and training provision. I hope that the development of service in very different formats in the four parts of the UK, and, indeed, in the Republic of Ireland, will move forward in line with such a vision. (For another view on development of guidance for adults since 1986 see Ravis, 2004.)

Perhaps that should be my last word. Indeed, I do not readily or usually exit from a paper (or a lecture) with a quotation. However in this case I do so willingly by recalling wise words from Professor Tony Watts. His words remind the reader of the difficulties encountered not from practice or theory but from placing the guidance agenda in the wider societal frame. [Such a framework is necessary to have a full appreciation of the English IAG document which is so briefly discussed in the postscript].

Guidance is a profoundly political process. It operates at the interface between the individual and society, between self and opportunity, between aspiration and realism. It facilitates the allocation of life chances. Within a society in which life chances are unequally distributed, it faces the issue of whether it serves to reinforce such inequalities or reduce them' (Watts, 1996, p 351).

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