

## Careers England Policy Commentary 14

*This is the fourteenth in an occasional series of briefing notes on key policy documents related to the future of career guidance services in England. The note has been prepared for Careers England by Professor Tony Watts.*

### Fuelling Potential

1. *Fuelling Potential* is the title of the blueprint document for the new adult advancement and careers service and for the associated concept of skills accounts.<sup>1</sup> It provides an update to the prospectus for the new service published in October 2009<sup>2</sup> (covered in Policy Commentary 12) and adds some further significant flesh to the bones outlined in this and previous documents.

2. *Key aspects.* A number of key aspects of the new service are spelt out in more detail than before.

3. The first is the *vision* for the service. The document includes the important statement that:

‘We want to create a culture where career development and acquiring new skills is the norm. This will improve individuals’ lives, society as a whole and in turn increase productivity and boost the economy’ (para.11).

From a policy perspective, a significant part of the rationale is to fuel a demand-driven approach to learning:

‘We want adults of working age to be more informed and empowered consumers in the market for learning and skills, by giving them the information they need. We want them to make the best choices about their future, informed by the latest labour market data’ (para.13).

4. Second, there is a strong emphasis on an *integrated service*. Although there are to be separate contracts for face-to-face, telephone and online content delivery, with the face-to-face element being delivered through up to 12 contracts (as opposed to the current 10 for NextStep – future delivery in both the North West and the South West is to be split) (paras.44, 46), all are based on operating as a single service from a customer perspective. Critical in this respect are:

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2010). *Fuelling Potential: a blueprint for skills accounts and the adult advancement and careers service for England*. London: DBIS.

<sup>2</sup> Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2008). *Shaping the Future – a new adult advancement and careers service for England*. London: DIUS.

- A common brand. The details of this are to be announced to contractors when contracts are finalised, and launched to the public in August 2010 when the service becomes operational. The only relevant information provided in the document is that the brand will ‘communicate a motivational public message’ (para.19) and, more specifically, will represent ‘the concept of “advancement – moving forward in work and life regardless of personal situation and skills level’ (para.43). Whether it will include specific reference to ‘career’ (cf. para.3 above) remains unclear, though it is noted that it will provide a ‘visible identity’ for the careers profession (para.20).
- Common tools and IT infrastructure, including a single customer relationship management system. This will ‘track individuals’ interaction with the service; record key contacts with advisers within the service; hold customer details and data; record outcomes including any referrals or signposting; and collect feedback on the service from customers’ (para.54).
- Providing ‘continuity and support for any transition between services in the case of referral’, through such means as ‘warm handovers’ (para.18).

5. Third, there is more detail on the balance and relationship between the *universal and targeted aspects* of the service. The overall ‘target market’ is defined as being ‘all adults, with a particular focus on the 30 million of working age in England’ (para.23), including those with high skills as well as the low skilled (para.17). The services available to everyone will include a range of provision: particularly significant is the statement that this will extend to ‘the ability to book telephone or face-to-face advice sessions’ (para.27). In addition, a number of ‘national priority groups’ are identified, including the low-skilled, those facing redundancy or newly unemployed, those at a distance from the labour market, people from ethnic-minority communities, older people, and others. These will be able to access ‘an intensive, ongoing offer comprising additional sessions with face-to-face advisers, free of charge’<sup>3</sup> (para.28). It is expected that contractors will ‘develop strategies to encourage people from the identified priority groups to use the service’ (para.61).

6. Fourth, there are some strong statements about the *expansion* of the service, to handle ‘increasing volumes of business’ (para.22). The aim is ‘to maintain capacity in the face-to-face channel in 2010-11 at broadly its current target level, helping around 700,000 individuals by delivering over 1 million advice sessions’; but to increase the capacity of the telephone channel to ‘handle 1 million calls per annum and 250,000 emails seeking advice’. In addition, the online channel should have ‘the capacity to handle up to 20 million online sessions per annum’ (para.45). These represent huge volumes, and sit alongside an upbeat comment about the enhanced need for the service in the current economic climate. The document acknowledges that ‘there is an even stronger premium on efficiency in public services’, but asserts that ‘the case for skills accounts and the adult advancement and careers service is, if anything, now even stronger’ (para.8).

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<sup>3</sup> On the charging issue, see para.18 below.

7. Fifth, there is a strong affirmation of the *professionalism* of the service in general and of careers advisers in particular. The document states unequivocally that ‘we want everyone that needs it to have access to professional advice and guidance on careers, particularly those farthest from the labour market’ (para.13). It notes that ‘the profession of careers advice will have a visible identity through the new brand for the service; and information, advice and guidance professionals will feel more confident and empowered as part of this expert community’ (para.20).<sup>4</sup> The quality of the service is to be assured in significant part by ‘ensuring that advisers in the service are highly qualified professionals, operating to and striving to exceed industry benchmarks’ (para.63). There are strong references to the work of Lifelong Learning UK on a sector qualifications strategy and on continuous professional development (paras.64-67).<sup>5</sup> These professional standards will sit alongside other quality-assurance arrangements directly addressing organisational quality, including the revised Matrix standard and OFSTED inspections (paras.69-72). The hope is expressed that the investment in the new service will encourage professional standards (for the deliverers of the service and their various employing organisations) not only within the new service itself but in other sectors too, including embedded services within further and higher education (para.75).

8. *Distinctive features.* The new service has two distinctive features which have been variously viewed as diversions from, or as extensions and enrichments of, its core purpose:

- The concept of ‘advancement’, promoted initially by John Denham, then Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, in the early stages of the development of the service (see Policy Commentary 8).
- The concept of Skills Accounts, introduced in the Leitch Implementation Plan (see Policy Commentary 7) to replace the Leitch Report’s concept of Learner Accounts (see Policy Commentary 6).

9. The concept of *advancement networks* (which replaced John Denham’s original concept of ‘advancement agencies’) is described in the document as a means of encouraging ‘professionals at local level who deliver advice to individuals to help them tackle specific barriers (housing, health, finance, disability, and others) to:

- widen their field of vision, so that the full range of needs an individual has can be identified, in the context of helping them move forwards in work by improving their skills;

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<sup>4</sup> The reference here to ‘the profession of career advice’ has recently been mirrored in the establishment by the Department of Children, Schools and Families of a Task Force on the Careers Profession. This is due to report in the summer of 2010. Because the Task Force was established by DCSF, it will naturally focus particularly on services related to young people in England, but its remit includes setting its discussions in the wider context of an all-age strategy and of the situation elsewhere in the UK. It is important, therefore, that it addresses its core brief within the context of the UK careers profession as a whole.

<sup>5</sup> This work applies to the whole careers sector across the UK, but has been significantly driven by the needs of the new service for adults in England. Most of the working papers produced to date as part of the review have been addressed primarily to the latter.

- proactively make and receive referrals to other professionals to help that individual remove the barriers they face to moving forwards; and
- see “advancement” as a call to action behind which they, and other professionals, can unite’ (para.37).

Building upon the ten prototypes established to test and develop this concept<sup>6</sup>, the intention is ‘to enable as many areas as possible to establish networks by August 2011, twelve months after the core service becomes operational’ (para.21).<sup>7</sup> Funding support for this is not, however, assured<sup>8</sup>:

‘If possible, the Skills Funding Agency will also provide some pump priming funding, allocated in each region of England, to allow partners establishing networks to make initial investment in staffing and support. The availability of this funding will depend on future government spending plans, so cannot yet be confirmed. However, in line with the vision set out in *Shaping the Future* in October 2008, our clear expectation is that networks quickly become self-sustaining’ (para.41).

10. The concept of *Skills Accounts* has moved a long way from Individual Learning Accounts, with which the Leitch concept of Learner Accounts was closely associated.<sup>9</sup> Instead, it is now viewed as the individual’s personal space within the online tools developed for the service.<sup>10</sup> This will include ‘access to:

- a personalised, verified record of the qualifications an individual has gained (the Managing Information Across Partners learner record);
- a learner statement, providing a verified record of the funding the Government has invested in their training;

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<sup>6</sup> For an interim evaluation of these prototypes, see Learning and Skills Council (2010). *Evaluation of the Advancement Network Prototypes: First Interim Report*. Coventry: LSC.

([http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/National/ANP\\_First\\_Interim\\_report\\_pub.pdf](http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/National/ANP_First_Interim_report_pub.pdf)). The evaluation notes that the focus of the prototypes has been largely on groups that are considered the hardest-to-help.

<sup>7</sup> The fact that the networks are being established after the core service is in place should make it easier to avoid to avoid some of the problems experienced in the case of Connexions (which was based on some broadly similar principles), where the sequence followed was the reverse: the targeted ‘Connexions’ elements were designed first, and efforts were then made to extrapolate some elements to the core service for all young people. See Watts, A.G. (2009). *The New Adult Advancement and Careers Service: Lessons from Connexions and Elsewhere*. Stourbridge: Institute of Career Guidance.

<sup>8</sup> The statement quoted here contrasts with the generally upbeat tone of the report on funding – cf. para.6 above.

<sup>9</sup> The Leitch Report recommended that ‘all adult skills vocational funding in England, excepting that for adult community learning and services for those with learning difficulties and disabilities, be channelled through Train to Gain and Learner Accounts in England by 2010’. Leitch Review of Skills (2006). *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy – World Class Skills*, p.111. London: The Stationery Office.

<sup>10</sup> Comparable in some respects, for example, with the role of the e-portfolio within Careers Wales On-Line. See Watts, A.G. (2009). *Careers Wales: a Review in an International Perspective*, pp.25-27. Cardiff: Welsh Assembly Government. Though extended through the verified records identified in the first two bullet-points that follow in this paragraph, the second of which retains a tenuous link with the original Leitch concept.

- the ability to store personal action plans generated after using the skills diagnostic tool; store careers advice provided online; save data searches (courses information, labour market information); and store CVs; and
- a facility to book a session with an adult advancement and careers service adviser’ (para.30).

The document suggests that opening such an account has a symbolic value as representing the assumption of self-responsibility for one’s career management:

‘Customers of the adult advancement and careers service will, at the appropriate point in their journey, be encouraged to open skills accounts as an important tool in helping them take control of their journey towards better skills’ (para.31).

11. *Other noteworthy developments.* Three other developments stated in the document are worthy of note.

12. First, there is to be a significant expansion of *information* provision, with enhanced labour market information (paras.58-60), a new course directory, and a funding entitlement checker, as well as ‘text, video and audio information on careers and jobs’ (para.29). From 2011, this is to be extended further to include course-level information on the quality and labour-market value of different courses (para.57).<sup>11</sup>

13. Second, there is to be an expansion of *other online services*. The online channel will be designed to ‘operate as a virtual careers adviser, so that the individual customer journey will aim to replicate the offer available through the telephone and face to face channels’ (para.33). This will include direct personal access to an adviser, on a synchronous or asynchronous basis, ‘via email, web chat and forum facilities’ (para.29).

14. Third, more information is now available on the new *Skills Health Check diagnostic tool*. This is to include not only basic, vocational and generic employability skills, but also career management skills (para.55).

15. *Issues.* There are four outstanding issues which remain unresolved in the document.

16. The first of these is the implications of the *relationship with Jobcentre Plus*. The document emphasises the importance of close partnership working between the two services (paras.23, 80-82). This will include the sharing of customer data (para.81). It will be based on ‘a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities’ across the two services (para.81). The statement in earlier policy statements that this will include mandatory attendance at the new service<sup>12</sup> is neither confirmed nor negated. If attendance is mandated, there is a risk that the new service will lose some of its client focus and come to be perceived as part of the apparatus for the management of state benefits.

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<sup>11</sup> As announced in Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2009). *Skills for Growth: the national skills strategy*, pp.61-62. Cm 7621. London: Stationery Office.

<sup>12</sup> See Policy Commentary 8, para.6.

17. Second, there are some concerns about the *targets* set for the new service. It is stated that the benchmark for the service as a whole will be that ‘50% of all customers who create an action plan with an adviser or through the on-line channel should enter training, get sustainable employment or progress in work’, and that a set of related but more detailed outcome targets will be applied to the contracts for the face-to-face channel (paras.48-49). If such targets unduly influence adviser behaviour at the point of interaction with customers, there could be a danger that they will drive clients towards premature action or towards outcomes that may not be congruent with their values or long-term interests. The document does not comment on this tension, or on ways of resolving it.

18. Third, the document opens up, but does not resolve, the *role of the market* in relation to career guidance provision.<sup>13</sup> It indicates that individuals outside the priority groups who ‘require and want to receive further support’ beyond the core provision (cf. para.5 above) may pay for it, with the fee charged by the contracted provider being ‘no more than the equivalent to the funding provided by Skills Funding Agency for each additional session for those in priority groups’ (the Government’s right to stipulate this may be open to challenge). It recognises, however, that such individuals will still have access to ‘further fully funded support via the telephone channel of the service’. At the same time, it acknowledges that they will be able to use another provider ‘with charges agreed between the individual and the provider’ (para.51). It is unclear whether or not the latter will include proactive promotion (e.g. within the service’s web-based information provision) of charged services provided by quality-assured providers.<sup>14</sup>

19. Finally, the document repeats, but does not elaborate, the statements already made about Government’s *all-age strategy* for careers guidance. It reiterates the Government’s view that young people and adults ‘have different needs which require different solutions’ (para.77), but that there should be ‘a seamless transition’ between the two sets of services (p.21). It does not, however, add any detail to how this might be achieved in practice. This issue is of particular interest in the light of the imminent General Election, and the commitment of both of the two main Opposition parties to replacing the all-age strategy with an integrated all-age career guidance service.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Watts, A.G., Hughes, D. & Wood, M. (2005). *A Market in Career? Evidence and Issues*. CeGS Occasional Paper. Derby: Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby.

<sup>14</sup> Such promotion could be seen as a response to the OECD’s statement that if career guidance is a public good, the role of government might not be to fund all provision but might also include quality-assuring and stimulating a market in career guidance provision. See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004). *Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap*, p.121. Paris: OECD.

<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of the arguments and evidence on this, see Watts, A.G. (2010). National all-age career guidance services: evidence and issues. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 38(1), 31-44.