

Careers England · Personalisation: an
Opportunity and Challenge for
Career Guidance Services

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‘Personalisation’ of public services has been hailed as the new ‘big idea’ in politics. It is claimed that it could reshape public services as fundamentally as privatisation did in the 1980s and 1990s. It is viewed as New Labour’s ‘big idea’ for a third term of office.

This paper aims to:

- Outline what the concept means.
- Indicate how it provides support for the development of career guidance services.
- Explores its implications for the organisation and delivery of such services.

The concept of personalisation

The concept of personalisation has been most extensively explained in a Demos pamphlet by Charles Leadbeater.¹ Its implications for education policy have been explored in a further pamphlet by the same author.²

The essence of the challenge is outlined by David Miliband (Minister of State for School Standards) in his foreword to the first of these pamphlets: ‘whether we can build a model of public service delivery that overcomes the limitations of both paternalism and consumerism’.³ Personalisation is thus contrasted to two previous delivery models:

- Traditional public sector management, based on bureaucratic approaches.
- New public management (as introduced in the 1980s), with its emphasis on contracted services and quasi-market approaches.⁴

The contention is that these models, with the regimes of targets, league tables and inspections to which they have led, have resulted in public services seeming ‘more machine-like, more like a production line producing standardised goods’.⁵

Personalisation seeks to move away from such models in some or all of five respects:⁶

- Providing people with a more customer-friendly interface with existing services (24/7 call centres, booked appointments, guaranteed fast response times, better basic customer service).
- Giving users more say in navigating their way through services once they have got access to them.
- Giving users more direct say over how money is spent.
- Enabling users to participate actively in the design and provision of services.
- Encouraging public goods to emerge, in part, through public policy helping to shape millions of individual self-organising decisions.

Accordingly, users need to be allowed ‘a more direct, informed and creative say in rewriting the script by which the service they use is designed, planned, delivered and evaluated’. This involves seven steps:⁷

- *Intimate consultation*: ‘professionals working with clients to help unlock their needs, preferences and aspirations, though an extended dialogue’.
- *Expanded choice*: giving users greater choice over the mix of ways in which their needs might be met, and assembling solutions around the needs of the user.

¹ Leadbeater, C. (2004a). *Personalisation through Participation*. London: Demos.

² Leadbeater, C. (2004b). *Learning about Personalisation*. London: Demos.

³ In Leadbeater (2004a), p.11.

⁴ For an analysis of the application of such quasi-market approaches to career guidance services, see Watts, A.G. (1995). Applying market principles to the delivery of career guidance services: a critical review. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 23(1), 69-81.

⁵ Leadbeater (2004a), p.81.

⁶ Ibid, pp.21-24.

⁷ Leadbeater (2004a), pp.57-60.

- *Enhanced voice*: using expanded choice to unlock the user's voice.
- *Partnership provision*: encouraging services and institutions to work in partnership so that each is a gateway to networks of public provision.
- *Advocacy*: encouraging professionals to act as advocates for users, helping them to navigate their way through the system.
- *Co-production*: involving users in shaping the service they receive.
- *Funding*: enabling funding to follow the choices that users make, and in some cases putting the funding in the hands of users themselves, to buy services with the advice of professionals.

Career guidance services as an agent of personalisation.

The notion of encouraging public goods to emerge, in part, through public policy helping to shape millions of individual self-organising decisions provides a powerful rationale for the role of career guidance services. The aim of such services is to respect the right of individuals to make their own decisions in relation to their choices of learning and work, but to ensure that these decisions are well-informed and well-thought-through. In this respect, they represent a 'soft' policy instrument, in the sense that they work *through* people rather than *on* them.⁸

Leadbeater states that 'the chief challenge facing government in a liberal, open society is how to help create public goods – such as a well educated population, with an appetite to learn – in a society with a democratic ethos, which prizes individual freedom and wants to be self-organising and "bottom-up"⁹ (to the learning 'good' here could be added the working 'good' of creating a well-motivated and therefore

productive working population). The role of the state in this context is a subtle one: 'committed to protecting, even expanding, the sphere of private freedom it also is necessarily committed to shaping, continuously, how people use their freedom in the name of the public good'.¹⁰ Career guidance services represent an instrument through which such shaping can be achieved while fully respecting – and indeed reinforcing – individual freedoms.

Leadbeater argues that personalisation makes most sense in services which are face-to-face, based on long-term relationships between users and producers, and dependent on a direct engagement between professionals and users where the user can play a significant role in shaping the service.¹¹ Education is a major example of such a service. It is therefore not surprising that education is the example which Leadbeater elaborates at length in his second Demos pamphlet.

The key to 'personalised learning' is 'to encourage children, from an early age and across all backgrounds, to become more involved in making decisions about what they would like to learn and how'.¹² This requires more flexible learning pathways, with learners exercising more choice about what they learn and how they learn it. To enable this to happen, a crucial element is 'intimate consultation', as defined above ('professionals working with clients to help unlock their needs, preferences and aspirations, though an extended dialogue'). Such consultation is, in essence, guidance. Some of it can be carried out by tutors and teachers. But what career guidance adds is attention to longer-term as well as immediate goals.

Linked to such consultation, Leadbeater contends that teachers 'will need to help students make the best possible choices – and that will involve new skill such as brokering, advocacy and

advice'¹³. Again, career guidance professionals could have an important role to play here, ensuring that the choices attend to longer-term implications and longer-term goals. Also, they are familiar with acting as advocates for learners ('helping them to navigate their way through the system')¹⁴ and in the context of adult learning are increasingly acting as brokers too.¹⁵

Personalised learning 'allows individual interpretation of the goals and value of education'. Learners 'should be able to tell their own story of what they have learned, how and why, as well as being able to reel off their qualifications, the formal hurdles they have overcome'.¹⁶ Constructivist approaches to career guidance are based on such an approach, helping individual to be authors of their career narratives: to tell the story so far; to shape the themes and tensions in the story line; to start drafting the next chapter.¹⁷ The Progress File is a well-developed support to such approaches: its implementation and effective utilisation need to be more strongly supported by public policy.

Leadbeater's analysis of personalised learning would have benefited by being extended from schooling (on which it almost exclusively focuses) to lifelong learning. It would also have benefited from focusing more strongly on the links between learning and work. Both of these would bring into clearer relief the contribution which career guidance can make to personalised learning, at all levels.

In this broader context, Leadbeater does however refer to welfare to work and active labour market programmes as being 'premised on the user as an active participant, who takes responsibility for building up his or her skills and contacts'.¹⁸ The contribution of information, advice and guidance to such strategies has been recognised by the National Employment Panel¹⁹. More broadly, OECD has recently affirmed the contribution which career guidance services can make to active labour market policies and to labour market flexibility.²⁰

A further aspect of personalisation which Leadbeater addresses in the context of learning is the possibility of giving users more say over how money is spent. This could include giving them more power to make decisions about how to spend money allocated to their education. In this context, reference is made to the 'schools passports' recently proposed by the Conservative Party, though it is noted that this puts decisions in the hands of families rather than of learners themselves. In the context of lifelong learning, reference could have been made to Individual Learning Accounts, which are currently shelved in England but are still operating in Wales. Leadbeater notes that in such schemes, the role of public service professionals changes from one of determining resource allocation to that of informing users about available choices.²¹ If ILAs are revived in England, the crucial role of career guidance in supporting them²² needs to be addressed.

⁸ See www.matrix-quality-standard.com

⁹ See OECD (2004).

¹⁰ Leadbeater (2004a), p.77.

¹¹ See Watts, A.G. (2001). Career guidance and social exclusion: a cautionary tale. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 29(2), 157-176.

¹² Department for Education and Skills (2003). *Information, Advice and Guidance for Adults: the National Policy Framework and Action Plan*. London: DfES.

¹³ Leadbeater (2004a), p.54.

¹⁴ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2002). *Career Guidance Policy Review: United Kingdom Country Note*, para.82. Paris: OECD.

¹⁵ OECD (2004), p.119.

¹⁶ Leadbeater (2004a), pp.49, 34-35.

¹⁷ See Savickas, M. (1993). Career counseling in the postmodern era. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 7, 205-215.

¹⁸ Leadbeater (2004a), p.84.

¹⁹ National Employment Panel Skills Advisory Board (2004). *Welfare to Workforce Development*. London: NEP.

²⁰ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004). *Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap*, chapters 1-2. Paris: OECD.

²¹ Leadbeater (2004b), p.9.

²² See Bosley, S., El-Sawad, A., Hughes, D., Jackson, C & Watts, A.G. (2001). *Guidance and Individual Learning Accounts*. Derby: Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby.

The personalisation of career guidance services

Personalisation not only enhances the importance of career guidance services but also has a number of important implications for how such services should be provided. Many of these are already being addressed.

One is the importance of a more customer-friendly interface. Call centres with close to 24/7 availability have already been developed in the form of, in particular, Learndirect and Connexions Direct. The Matrix quality standards²³ are also helping to ensure that career guidance services provide high-quality standards of service to their customers.

Other implications include:

- Offering more flexible pathways through services. Many services now operate as open-access resource centres, which users can use with varying levels of support, ranging from signposted self-service to intensive support. There are also moves to establish stronger links between helplines, websites and face-to-face services, so that each can be viewed as alternative portals into an integrated but flexible network of services.
- Offering more continuity of support. The role of Personal Advisers within both Jobcentre Plus and Connexions has been designed to address this issue (though their work within Jobcentre Plus is still strongly constrained by placement targets and policing roles in relation to benefit entitlement: personalisation would seem to imply significant softening of these pressures).
- Involving users in the design of services. Connexions has strongly encouraged such

involvement, and been very innovative in exploring the varied forms it can take; there is scope for similar initiatives in relation to information, advice and guidance services for adults.

- Promoting greater capacity for self-management and self-organisation. The development of individuals' career management skills increasingly lies at the heart of career guidance practice.²⁴

A further implication noted by Leadbeater which is relevant to career guidance services is that 'the more that services become personalised, the more public resources will have to be skewed towards the least well off to equalise opportunities'. He contends that 'well educated and informed consumers are already well prepared to take advantage of choice' (a questionable generalisation), but that 'the least well educated, informed and ambitious will need additional help to exploit the opportunities personalisation makes available to them'.²⁵

This could be interpreted as an argument for strong targeting of career guidance services to disadvantaged and at-risk groups – already a feature of current government policy in relation to both young people²⁶ and adults.²⁷ However, Leadbeater also argues that 'each engagement with a public service should deepen a sense of civic attachment and underpin a sense of citizenship'. He notes that 'research has shown that about 77 per cent of people see the NHS as a universal service, that should not just be for the poor'. He also notes that support for universal public services did not fall even among those who had opted to pay for private provision: 'by and large they still agreed with the *ideal* of universal public services'.²⁸

²³ See www.matrix-quality-standard.com

²⁴ See OECD (2004).

²⁵ Leadbeater (2004a), p.77.

²⁶ See Watts, A.G. (2001). Career guidance and social exclusion: a cautionary tale. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 29(2), 157-176.

²⁷ Department for Education and Skills (2003). *Information, Advice and Guidance for Adults: the National Policy Framework and Action Plan*. London: DfES.

This raises the question of whether a market could be developed in career guidance services, complemented by government funding addressed primarily to those who need it most and/or are the least able to pay for it. This issue has been explored recently by OECD. It argued that in the UK 'the present arrangement is an uneasy compromise between a fully government-funded system on the one hand and a more fully market-based system that contains special provision for the disadvantaged on the other'. It pointed out that 'in order to meet adult demand for career guidance throughout the lifespan, governments need either to accept that career guidance is a matter for the public purse to fund, or to take the creation of a private market and private financing mechanisms more seriously'.²⁹

OECD noted that in no country has a substantial market based on user payments yet been developed, except in certain niche areas. It indicated that it was unclear whether this was a *transitional* problem, based on the fact that users have been accustomed to free services and that it takes time to adapt to market-based provision, or a *systemic* problem, based on the difficulties in treating career guidance as a commodity in the way a market would require.³⁰

In the context of personalisation, Leadbeater's arguments would seem to lean towards the 'systemic' view. He points out that 'consumerism works where goods and services can be packaged and priced'. But 'services that generate personal satisfaction or solve personal problems – whether public or private – are far more difficult to define in quantitative terms'. He adds: 'It is difficult to shop around for something that cannot be defined easily and to be effective has to be

designed with you in mind'.³¹ Career guidance would seem to fall into this category. So while (as noted earlier) personalisation favours expanded choice, it does not favour marketisation.

²⁸ Leadbeater (2004a), p.54.

²⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2002). *Career Guidance Policy Review: United Kingdom Country Note*, para.82. Paris: OECD.

³⁰ OECD (2004), p.119.

³¹ Leadbeater (2004a), pp.49, 34-35.

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