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Raising Aspirations and Impartiality: A paradoxical position for career guidance practitioners?

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of career guidance practitioners in relation to their responsibility to provide impartial advice and guidance and how this might be challenged in view of recent debates regarding the aspirations of young people. It questions whether practitioners can encourage the 'raising of aspirations' whilst remaining impartial? These potential contradictions are explored drawing upon themes of social and cultural capital, equality and power. The concepts of aspirations and impartiality are explored within the context of current career education and guidance policy and how this impacts on practice.

KEY WORDS

Aspirations/ impartiality/ values/ hierarchy of careers/ social capital/ power/ influence

Introduction

At the core of career guidance practitioners' moral and ethical professional practice is the explicit claim to the provision of advice and guidance that is impartial (DfES 2009, 2011, DfE 2019, ICG 2005, CDI 2019) i.e. advice and guidance that is free from personal and institutional bias. Yet in recent

years these same *"impartial"* professionals have, in the main, accepted the challenge set by government and others (and for some, a personally self-imposed moral challenge) to attempt to raise young people's aspirations in an attempt to help them meet their full potential. Whether this is realistic, possible or even desirable deserves consideration. Indeed, recent evidence suggests that contrary to what many writers and professionals think, many young people have high aspirations and the real issue is the opportunity to achieve them (Kintrea, St Clair, Houston 2011). Given this more recent evidence, this paper does not question the laudable aim of helping young people fulfil their potential but asks whether the aim of *"raising aspirations"* is compatible with impartiality. And if we accept that the two actions are incompatible then, it could be argued, should we also revisit the role of the guidance practitioner and their attempt to help young people fulfil their potential? This paper also raises broader issues in relation to the role of the guidance practitioner as an agent for change in the career decision making process of young people and how this potentially compromises their impartiality. Can guidance practitioners claim to influence young people yet remain impartial?

There is another issue to consider. Raising aspirations, by definition, implies that there is a hierarchy of aspirations with low aspirations at the bottom and high aspirations at the top. Who defines what are *"lower"* and *"higher"* aspirations and the criteria used in relation to career choices is significant for why and how young people make these choices? Tony Blair reportedly suggested that he would be disappointed should his children achieve the types of jobs undertaken by Harold Wilson's children – Head Teacher and Open University Professor – *"I rather hope my sons would do better than that"* (Cook 2003 cited in Dorling 2005:357). Aspirations are laden with value judgements and we are tempted to ask, *"whose aspirations are they anyway?"* (Slack 2003:1).

Finally, these issues are being raised against a backdrop of significant changes to the nature of career guidance provision in the UK, especially in

England in recent years and continuing mutterings of discontent (Halfon 2018; Hooley 2019; 2021). This was initiated with new statutory responsibilities imposed on schools which came into effect in September 2012 and correspondingly similar changes affecting FE colleges in 2013; the establishment of a national Careers Service – although for young people personified as a website and telephone service; new qualifications for advisers and a newly established professional body, the Career Development Institute, for those involved in supporting the career development of young people and adults, in April 2013. And whilst current Statutory guidance to schools has arguably been strengthened with the inclusion of the Gatsby Benchmarks they remain guidelines, not a requirement. It is also a time of increasing levels of youth unemployment (House of Commons Research Briefing 2021; Francis-Devine 2021), costlier consequences of choosing higher education as a result of increasing tuition fees, a rapidly changing economic base requiring new and different skills, a government constantly looking to reform the qualifications structure for 14-19 year olds and finally, but especially significant to those involved in career guidance, reduced public expenditure on provision. Whilst debate and discussion particularly around aspirations have been prevalent for several years, if not decades, these changes provide a greater urgency for further discussion. Fundamental to any individual making career related choices, be it a course of study, appropriate apprenticeship, job application etc. is the assumption that these choices are 'informed'. A failure of practitioners specifically and the profession as a whole to fully engage in a debate about the nature of aspirations and the partial or impartial role they play risks jeopardising the legitimacy of that support.

Guidance workers do not work in a vacuum and most young people develop aspirations and make career related decisions within a complex social, institutional and personal environment. Guidance, whether formal or informal, is thus often pluralistic and is subject to the everyday influences of educational institutions, parents, peers, the media, professionals,

employers and others. Each arguably have a significantly greater or lesser impact but with overwhelming evidence supporting the key importance of parents (Bandura, 2001; Gutman Morrison and Akerman, 2008; Kintrea, St Clair, Houston 2011). And as Hodkinson, Colley, and Bowman (2006) claim, effective guidance practice must be in tune with the lived experiences of students. The role that professional guidance workers play however has had a mixed response over recent years in terms of their effectiveness, appropriateness of training and particularly their ability to make effective use of labour market information etc. This was recently evidenced in a 2015 Commons Select Committee report (Long and Hubble 2015). Yet despite recent cutbacks in funding this provision continues to be supported by governments of all political persuasions, all of whom publicly proclaim the value of independent and impartial advice and guidance. To what extent however do practitioners engage with, influence, and respond to the aspirations of those young people they seek to help? Before addressing this, we need first to define the impartial role.

Defining Impartiality

'Impartiality', despite being widely and consistently used by successive governments in relation to the provision of careers advice and guidance (DCSF 2009, DfE 2011 and 2018) has not been defined clearly or consistently. It is almost as if it is assumed that both recipients and providers of advice and guidance know exactly what this entails although many practitioners will preface their guidance interviews by seeking clarification with the client that they understand what this means through the contracting process. Weller, albeit in reference to the law (1997) sees it as *"the moral imperative requiring that conflicting claims be evaluated without prejudice"* (Weller 1997:405). At face value this appears reasonable enough. This can however be confused with neutrality and in the realm of international conflict *"paradoxically, the attempt to act in strict compliance with these perceived principles has also been invoked to explain the failure of international action"* (Weller 1997: 441). In other words,

keeping out of the debate altogether can be harmful. In career guidance terms advising a young person for example on whether to stay on in the 6th form or to leave and look for a job/apprenticeship is not as neutral or innocent an activity as it might appear in relation to impartiality. Clearly if the young person wants to become a vet the latter course of action is to be recommended. But what if there is strong evidence that the young person is unlikely to be able to cope with 'A' levels. Are they to be advised against 'A' levels, to consider a different course, re-think their occupational area or encouraged to take longer to gain the academic requirements for 'A' levels? The Career Development Institute, in its code of ethics for practitioners, says *"members must ensure that professional judgement is objective and takes precedence over any external pressures or factors that may compromise the impartiality of career development activities and services. In doing so, members must ensure that advice is based solely on the best interests of and potential benefits to the client"* (CDI 2019). These 'external pressures' are not made explicit but implicitly include those that emanate from both individuals and organisations that might have their own vested interest in the outcomes of decisions made by young people e.g. those institutions offering opportunities in further and higher education, training, and employment. There is further pressure on those working specifically to work with the young unemployed (or NEET - Not in Employment Education or Training) to meet targets set by their funders including government (Colley 2011)

Aspirations and Value Judgements

Impartiality, in keeping with our definition, requires us to explore options *"without prejudice"* and therefore requires the practitioner to share with the young person the possibility of all possible options which might entail pursuing 'any goal' and not one that necessarily fits with the objectives of others; e.g. parents, teachers, employers, politicians. Thus, within the contemporary dialogue and consequent policy of 'raising aspirations' (DCSF 2007, DoE 2015) the young person with higher education potential is

expected to be encouraged to pursue this objective irrespective of the benefits or burdens that this might bring to them individually. Yet it is conceivable, for example that higher education as well as not being appropriate for all, is equally unsuitable even for those with the potential. Some career options require a higher education many of which lead to financially rewarding and intrinsically satisfying outcomes for many that pursue them. That higher education equals a *better* career path, is in part a value judgement and a partial view to hold. In reality the biggest argument often put forward in favour of higher education is that it leads to financially more rewarding careers. The Office for National Statistics for example has Law, Finance and Medicine in the top ten of the most paid professions (ONS 2016). Irrespective of whether this is true or not, part of the dilemma, it can be argued, is that the discussions held between both young person and practitioner are trapped in a value laden hierarchical occupational and educational structure where 'A' levels are seen as the 'gold standard' with medicine, law, architecture etc. seen as the *"top professions".* Society, especially through the media, still places a value on jobs which arguably young people - and parents - in particular buy into (TES 2014,Telegraph 2013, NFER 2015) Even at the supposedly lower end of the occupational ladder an electrician is seen as a step above the other building trades. In 2009 this issue was explicitly focused upon by the then Labour government in its report, *Fair Access to the Professions* (DCSF 2009) which expressed concern that the so called better jobs in the professions were not equally open to all and that working class young people have a disproportionately lower chance of entering them than those from the middle and upper classes. The argument here is not that this is not true, nor indeed that access does need to be made fairer – it clearly does according to more recent evidence from the Sutton Trust (Hooley, Matheson, Watts 2014) – but that the rationale for encouraging young people into further and higher education and so called 'higher' occupational areas needs to be justified. There is a value judgement being placed upon these options and the rationality of this judgement is central to this debate.

The justification for encouraging young people into any option must surely be based upon a transparent, open and honest discussion with each individual. The reality, however, in the current financial climate of reduced resources (Colley, 2011, Careers England 2019) is that the opportunity to discuss these issues on an individual basis is becoming increasing rarer and young people are being exposed to generic sound-bites such as *"doing a degree increases your career earnings'*, or 'why go to college/university when you can get paid apprenticeships' (e.g. The Guardian 2013). More recently this has been complicated by the debate on Degree Apprenticeships (e.g. Guardian 2021) In truth, the situation is that every option is potentially the right one for someone and what young people quite often need is individualised help to explore what makes sense for them. The potential danger here however is that it is possible that these same resource-influenced constraints are partly responsible for unduly influencing the practitioners themselves into accepting uncritically these sound bites. Thus a reduction in the length and quality of training of advisers, increased caseloads, increased prevalence of advisers acting out a dual role (e.g. recruitment officer/student adviser) with a corresponding challenge to neutrality and impartiality and reduced opportunities to engage in continuing professional development and ever present target outcomes, can all contribute to a lack of critical evaluation by the practitioner of opportunities available to young people. The concept of practitioner bias however is not new but its relationship with the value structure of the organisation within which it operates, the current political and policy agenda that impacts on that organisation, itself part influenced by current societal values, and the value structure of the client group with which it is working to support, is a central aspect of this debate and is further explored below.

Values are conceptualised as socially constructed notions and changeable (Patton 2000). They are *"a function of context as they are rarely settled upon introspectively. Individuals construct reality through interactions with*

a changing society, culture and economy" (Patton 2000:71). Fifteen or twenty years ago not staying on in education beyond 16 for many was not an admission of failure or an inability to achieve one's goals (or a lack of aspiration) but for some merely a reflection of expected norms. Theincrease over this period in the numbers of young people staying on in education – e.g. increase of 49% in the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds applying full time for a first degree between 2008 and 2018 (Universities UK 2018) - , is arguably not the result of theirincreased appreciation of the intrinsic value of education but because society, encouraged by successive governments, views staying on ineducation as desirable to meet the economic needs of the economy as defined by government and powerful employers. It has also been a measureof social mobility by both Labour and Conservative (including Coalition) governments. This then questions the role of guidance practitioners in this process and their value system. It could be argued that practitioners, as Roberts (1981, 2003) suggests have played a part in a system that has merely contributed to young people's prolonged transitions to employment without any real increase in the achievement of their aspirations or social mobility which might have been expected as a result in increased participation in further and higher education. Evidence of increased numbers of graduates in non- graduate jobs (AGCAS, 2013 ONS 2013, 2018) supports this argument although this is partly dependent on subject studied and occupational sector. More recently however the Office for National Statistics also reports that one in eight young people without degree level qualifications work in graduate jobs (ONS 2018). Acknowledging that this picture fluctuates over time, this mismatch between educational attainment and employment in a free market economy has been an historical issue for policy makers, service providers and practitioners. If the market requires more graduate engineers and fewer graphic designers, this has implications for practice and the role of the practitioner. Respecting both the wishes and desires of individuals to choose what they want to do and the needs of employers/the

economy/state are perhaps ultimately irreconcilable yet will continue to be problematic.

Implications for Practitioners

This questioning of the role and impact that practitioners have on the decisions of young people is based on the view that their expectations, aspirations and thus their choices are in reality a product of the socialising process that takes place in the home and educational institution (Roberts 1977). Thus, it is argued, some young people are content to accept unskilled, low paid jobs with little progression. However, more recent research suggests that there is little evidence to suggest young people do not have high aspirations as defined in terms as those requiring a university education leading to professional and managerial jobs (Kintrea, St Clair, Houston 2011). This same evidence also warns us against making generalisations about attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that surround aspirations especially in disadvantaged communities (Kintrea, St Clair, Houston 2011). This highlights significantly the role of the practitioner in addressing and responding to young people's aspirations. This is especially poignant now that practitioners are working for and representing a substantially wider range of organisations providing advice and guidance to young people (CDI 2017). With the 2011 Education Act placing the statutory responsibility upon schools for securing for its pupils, access to independent impartial career guidance this has led to a plethora of organisations providing this service. Putting aside the issue of what constitutes *"independent"* (and in this context *"independent"* defined in the Education Act 2011 as 'external to the school') Payne and Edwards (1997), in their study of impartiality in pre-entry guidance for adults in further education, question whether impartiality, in the sense of unprejudiced or fair treatment necessarily requires an independent service at all. It is argued that within the process of establishing organisational codes of practice, quality frameworks, etc. *"impartiality as an ethos for practitioners to work within has been incorporated within a managerial discourse of*

quality assurance and contract compliance" (Edwards 2001:362). Practitioners therefore might have a functional notion of impartiality (honest broker, fair treatment, inform all options... etc.) but in doing so overlook their fundamental role in providing a client centred service which some would argue necessitates a partial intervention. Challenging client goals is therefore lost as a legitimate and central part of the guidance process (Payne and Edwards 1997:371) In this scenario the practitioner might be justified in pointing out to the young person not merely that the school's 6th Form is not the only option for 'A' levels but that they might find the school will actively encourage them to apply there. This is a partial intervention but in keeping with a client centred approach. Without this *response "guidance becomes a response to and satisfaction of consumer requirement rather than a challenging and educative encounter"* (Payne and Edwards 1997:371).

Cultural and Social Capital

This last point, i.e. that the practitioner will have knowledge and opinions formed from their own experiences that may be valuable in the decision-making process, helps to illustrate the contribution the practitioner can make to the social capital of the young person**.** However, the concept of social capital can be viewed as both a helpful and potentially confusing tool to use in this context. Helpful, because it can help to understand how, why, and the mechanisms by which, young people might be influenced by the community, environment, institutions, family etc. But confusing because there are different versions of social capital which have been developed over the past few decades. It has, for example sociological, political and economic applications (Portes 1998). Career guidance can also be viewed in sociological, political and economic terms, in relation to both aims and outcomes. Bourdieu, for example, defines social capital as *"the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more of less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition....which provides each of its members with*

the backing of collectively owned capital" (Bourdieu 1997:51). For Bourdieu, social capital is about the inequality in the distribution of resources to individuals and groups and thus continuation and enhancement of privilege. Social capital theory, despite some misgivings as to its appropriateness to all social phenomena (Portes 1998; Fevre 2000), is particularly relevant to our occupation with both aspirations and the concept of impartiality. It is relevant not only because it provides a potential framework to evaluate the experiences and aspirations of young people but also because it can do the same for practitioners. Practitioners themselves are also subject to the same socialisation processes as those they work with and this will impact on their understanding and attitude towards aspirations and the consequences this has on their ability to act impartially.

Putnam's model of social capital whilst different to Bourdieu's version is also relevant to our discussion here. His themes of networks, norms, and trust help to explain how individuals act together to pursue shared objectives (as cited in Schuller et al 2000). This presents a more positive concept social capital with its emphasis on voluntary participation, social cohesion and working for the wider public good. And even when, for example, *"schools and employers may not actually share objectives, even in their understanding of employability. they can acknowledge the validity of each other's class systems and values, this may be enough to allow social capital to develop"* (Schuller and Field 1999: 10). Traditional theories of career choice (Parsons 1909, Holland, 1953, Super 1981) in their analysis of the development of aspirations give primacy to the psychological make-up of individuals. But as Schuller et al (2000) point out, the key merit of social capital is the way it *"shifts the focus of analysis from the individual agent to the pattern of relations between agents, social units and institutions"* (Schuller et al 2000:35). Law's community interaction theory (1981) goes some way to explain the mechanics of this process through expectations, feedback, support, modelling and information (Law 1981).

His work is interesting as it suggests that a particular community can modify the impact of structural factors such as social class and ethnic origin. His conclusion that being a member of a particular group does not in itself predict aspirations, is also borne out by more recent research (St. Clair and Benjamin 2011). This should then open the door for the role of the practitioner as the honest broker and Roberts' argument is that it does in the sense that the practitioner's role should be to help young people interpret or judge the validity of the information they have and to challenge this where appropriate (Roberts 1977). He goes further and suggests that *"practitioners need to become innovators, intervening in the system of which they are a part"* (Gothard et al 2001). Our difficulty however may be in understanding and explaining to which system practitioners feel a part of, given that they work within the current fractured provision of guidance. This arguably mitigates against the notion of voluntary participation and the positive aspects of Putnam's model of social cohesion. The difference between Putnam and Bourdieu concepts suggests that in this context both are only partly applicable to explaining a shared interest between practitioner and young person. It is argued, for example, that the attempt at impartiality goes against the notion of shared group interests and arguably the traditional notion of the individualistic nature of 'independent' guidance and hence good practice.

One consequence of this pro-active intervention is that for some this 'partial' or interventionist role that is being urged might be seen as an attempt to challenge young people's social identity and thus question the validity of this as an acceptable activity of a career guidance practitioner. Fevre suggests that social identity helps to explain transition to work*: "because an identity tells you what behaviour is right for you, identities are able to carry norms into the hearts of those that aspire to them"* (Fevre 2000:99). This centrality of the concept of identity is for Fevre an *"alternative to the apparently oversocialised willingness of individuals to give way to the direction of others or simply ape the behaviour of others,*

that lies at the heart of the sociological conception of the transition to work" (Fevre 2000: 98). But if we accept this interpretation and that the role of the guidance practitioner is to challenge the commonly accepted norms of many of the young people they work with then it could be argued that this is indeed keeping within our defined notion of impartiality and that they are simply helping young people make informed choices. In other words, the consequence of not challenging can lead to a less than informed choice – the very antithesis of all that is at the heart of good career guidance.

The argument presented here therefore suggests that practitioners need to be more critical of both their own and other's influences on the decisions that young people make. These influences inevitably involve the role of values which are important, both in relation to views of education and employment but also to life choices generally. The practitioner thus needs to be aware of a potential conflict in the values they hold themselves, or at least those they might seem to represent as a professional guidance worker and the values that the young person may hold. Training in both reflective and reflexive practice should be a key feature practitioners training and development e.g. drawing upon the work of Schon (1991) and others. Thus, this requires an investment in the breadth and depth of *guidance* provided and not just an increase in the quantity and range of *information* supplied. An open and honest conversation is needed with young people so that whatever their aspirations and the processes by which they are formed and shaped, they are addressed in a manner that is genuinely impartial. It is also worth noting that these discussions, be they about occupational, educational, or life-style choices are normally taking place within an educational environment that is itself widely accepted as contributing to social inequality (Becker 2016). It is not the aim here to discuss in detail the many manifestations of different values and how they might impact on the career decision making process but merely to highlight the significance that they can have. Rather than being expected to raise aspirations

practitioners might be encouraged to see how they might best focus on helping young people achieve aspirations compatible with their values.

The CDI's new Career Development framework (CDI 2021) does attempt to address the critical awareness role of the practitioner and is welcome. However**,** if it is accepted that practitioners need to be intellectually and culturally aware of their interaction with young people's career aspirations in order to help reflect on and potentially challenge them there is also a more pragmatic issue to acknowledge if we are serious about addressing the influence of guidance practitioners on the aspirations of young people. This is the gap between managing aspirations on a macro level, a strategic response and a micro level, a delivery response. Guidance practitioners work at a micro level. The day to day reality is that even in the best-case scenarios contact between practitioners and those seeking guidance is minimal and often acknowledged in surveys of young people (OFSTED 2013, CDI 2015). The opportunity to engage in any meaningful dialogue with young people about the influences on their aspirations, the implications of these and more significantly what can be done to address them is limited. Evidence suggests for example (Barnes 2010) that evaluating values in the career decision process is rarely addressed at all in career education programmes in schools although there are a number of teaching tools available (Colozzi's Dove technique (2004) and Amundson and Poehnell's 'wheel' (2003)). Clearly, challenging values in a one-off career guidance interview is unrealistic or at least too late. And with the further splintering of the provision of career guidance in schools there is little evidence to suggest that opportunities to discuss with young people in any meaningful way their aspirations with a professional who might challenge their assumptions, beliefs and interests will improve. Practitioners who recognise the significance of this can and do attempt to address this by spreading the range of their activities to include other significant groups acknowledged as influencing young people's aspirations such as teachers, parents, employers and other professionals working with

young people such as youth workers. Indeed, the establishment of the Connexions Service in 2000 was partly in response to the compartmentalised way in which various organisations delivered their services to young people. It could also be argued that one of the explicit aims of the Connexions strategy, that of increasing the role of advocacy in the support for young people (DfES 2000), was a recognition of the lack of social and cultural capital that young people have. Currently, with arguably a more fragmented network of providers within which guidancepractitioners operate it is even more difficult for them to feel part of a wider,cohesive community in support of young people. Bourdieu's emphasis on social justice and inequality may still be more relevant to the debate here.

Conclusion:

This is a complex subject which has attracted considerable attention in recent times. The attention has rightly focused on how aspirations are formed, shaped and the barriers to their achievement. The role of parents, educational institutions, employers, and government policy is clearly recognised as a significant factor in this. What this paper has attempted to do is to recognise the potentially contradictory role that guidance professionals have in this process and specifically to question practitioners' genuine independence and impartiality. That guidance practitioners are as much a product of the influence of cultural capital themselves as the young people they seek to support challenges the extent to which practitioners are significantly detached from the guiding process and able to critically reflect on the aspirations of young people. It is not enough to understand how aspirations are formed, influenced and realised or indeed to understand the significance of cultural capital in this context; it is the response to these factors by practitioners and how they use this knowledge in their practice with young people that is important even if for some commentators, "*later interventions, however impartial, cannot undo early disadvantage"* (Milburn 2009:5).

A consequence of this re-assessment of what it means to be aspirational and the consequent revised role of the practitioner is that there will be those who argue that it is naïve and unrealistic to expect both young people and practitioners to engage in this dialogue because ultimately the development and achievement of aspirations, however defined and arrived at, are partially a product and consequence of the influence of cultural capital both from the perspective of the young person and *also* the practitioner. Occupational choice is thus restricted or tainted regardless of how 'suitable' that choice is for the young person – even for those who have all the advantages of a good education, the right social connections, qualifications and aptitude etc. (there may be some budding astronauts in the UK but there have only been seven British astronauts in space). It cannot be ignored that the availability is partly influenced by demand – a point often ignored by those who argue that the labour market should dictate what young people should be thinking of aiming for. It is argued here that practitioners are right to encourage aspirational thinking amongst young people yet to do so in a way that remains genuinely impartial they need to adopt a new approach. Practitioners who claim to be impartial must recognise, acknowledge, and importantly act upon the consequences of the influence of cultural capital both upon themselves and those they seek to support.

This new approach (new for some but not for all) should not therefore make it incumbent upon practitioners to blindly encourage *raising* aspirations without critical consideration of the circumstances which inform and influence that rationale. To ignore this consideration is to risk the accusation of avoiding their responsibility to provide guidance that is impartial. Rather they should encourage young people to consider all possible options in relation to their skills, abilities, potential, interests, desires and values and the opportunities that exist to enable them to achieve their potential. This should involve *broadening* aspirations and helping them to see what they can achieve. For some this is will indeed

result in '*raising* their aspirations' and for others perhaps a re-assessment of their aspirations and an alternative direction to pursue. At the heart of good guidance is an attempt to help the young person understand themselves in relation to the possible educational and career options. Practitioners cannot do this alone and whilst in part the new arrangements introduced in 2012 attempted to broaden out the range of support for young people the current arrangements for the delivery of careers education, information advice and guidance do not necessarily provide grounds for optimism (Hooley et al. 2015, 2021, Commons Report 2016) .

Finally, and significantly however, the acknowledgement of this issue comes at a time when doing something about it is arguably more problematic than at any other time in the professions' recent history. If it was ever an easy goal – and clearly it is not – the timing is not good. In particular, a fragmented delivery service (Commons Select Committee 2015, CDI 2016) with no longer a national unified provision of advice and guidance to young people, changes to the training and development of practitioners and a significant reduction of resources means that, in reality, this issue is unlikely to be tackled in a coherent and effective manner. Indeed, the very nature of these changes, some might argue, are designed deliberately to obstruct, and prevent a proper and ethically appropriate response to meeting the needs of young people in a genuinely impartial manner. There is almost a hint that the attempt over the past few years to raise aspirations has been a mistake with evidence suggesting that there is an unrealistic match between young people's aspirations and the labour market. This may or may not be true and it is not the purpose of this paper to support or deny this argument. Instead what is arguably a cause for concern is that just as we have begun to recognise and seriously debate the issue of aspirations and young people we are in danger of sabotaging the help and support available to them by withdrawing their opportunity to effectively discuss their aspirations in a critical and meaningful way.Inviting into school a few employers, college, and university

representatives to talk about these options, however well-meaning and supplemented by a national website is not an adequate response to meeting the complex aspirational needs of young people. Career guidance practitioners continue to have a role to play in the support of young people's aspirations. What has been questioned here is the extent to which this support involves an uncritical acceptance of the rationale for raising aspirations and invalidating their impartial role, rather than, accepting a role to help explore, understand and achieve aspirations within a young person centred approach thus retaining the true essence of impartiality.

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