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Agents for change: Reimagining emancipatory career guidance practices in Scotland

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This article explores how individual and group work models of career development practice could be adapted and redesigned to be more effective at empowering people to overcome barriers and inequalities. It is set in the context of the ongoing major review of career services in Scotland and examines the possible benefits and challenges if such emancipatory practices are embedded into future service delivery.

Introduction

Helping people overcome barriers, escape poverty, achieve educational success and lifelong career fulfilment were some of the emancipatory, social justice inspired aims of the career development field at the beginning of the profession (Irving and Malik, 2004). Pioneers over a hundred years ago, including Frank Parsons, called for practitioners to 'change social ills and work for social reform' (O'Brien, 2001, p. 73) by becoming agents for change.

Social justice has no overarching meaning but in the context of career development it can be justified by considering a few underpinning assumptions. Firstly, careers are built around the experiences, networks and opportunities available and open to individuals and groups; secondly the experiences, networks and opportunities available to different individuals and groups are not equal; and thirdly career guidance has the potential to intervene and to help individuals and groups change the lives of themselves and others (Hooley et al., 2021).

However, over the past thirty years or so, the career development field has been more focused on approaches geared towards career management and employability skills enhancement which are increasingly understood to be limited in terms of tackling social and structural inequalities (Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen, 2017). The narrative around economic globalisation and a complex and precarious working environment has fuelled the need for lifelong learning and a self-managed career (Irving, 2017). However, in this competitive environment, opportunities are not equal, and many individuals face disadvantage or oppression. Those who fail to thrive are helped to move back on the path towards skills acquisition, but this unintentionally perpetuates the inequalities rather than seeking to address the underlying causes (Watts, 1996/2005).

In recent years, a backdrop of international research has offered a convincing push for revisiting emancipatory practices and considerable progress has been made towards building a solid theoretical base (Blustein, McWhirter, and Perry, 2005; Hooley et al., 2017; 2018; Irving and Malik, 2004; McCrory, 2022; Olle, 2018; Sultana, 2020). However, this has not transferred, to the same extent, to practice level. Policy, whether at a national government level or at organisational level, needs to be created first and this does not happen overnight. In addition, as Hooley et al. (2021, p.57) argue, 'it is more challenging to create socially just practices than to build critiques'. In other words, it is easier to debate theory than to suggest changes to day to day working processes and practices.

Hooley et al. (2021; 2018) have attempted to address this gap by suggesting 'five signposts' which practitioners could work towards to embed emancipatory principles into everyday practice. These are - building critical consciousness; naming oppression; questioning what is normal; working with both individuals and groups; and working at a range of levels.

Building critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/2005) is the underpinning signpost and the term relates to an individual's ability to 'read the world'. It involves asking people to look at the 'big picture' through a critical lens and consider the wider social and political factors, or in other words, beyond the personal factors, which could affect life chances and the ability to move forward.

Secondly, helping people name or put a label on the barriers or oppression that they face is seen as important to address change as is the third, helping people question what is normal. This involves critiquing the legitimacy of embedded practices, ways of working and ideologies in their everyday life.

The first three signposts could be challenging to embed if practitioners focus the majority of their practice on individuals or work in isolation. The last two address this by calling for practitioners to firstly seek opportunities to work with groups as well as individuals, and secondly to work at a range of levels through networking, referral and advocacy. This, in turn, could lead to the more effective sharing of common experiences and to empowerment through collective group action.

This article draws on the five signposts of socially just practice and reimagines how service delivery could be adapted and redesigned to be more effective at empowering people to overcome barriers and inequalities. It examines models at the individual and group work level and illustrates how practitioners could incorporate the five signposts into everyday practice. It is set in the context of the career service in Scotland, which is in the process of undergoing a major review at present. This offers the opportunity to consider the challenges services in Scotland and elsewhere could face when attempting to incorporate socially just practices over the coming years.

The landscape in Scotland

In Scotland, although there are a wide range of third sector and private providers of career guidance and university career services, a substantial proportion of career services available to young people and adults are offered by the national skills body, Skills Development Scotland (SDS). SDS is an executive non-departmental public body of the Scottish Government which was set up in 2008 and offers an all-age career guidance service in their public centres across the country, in every local authority school, many colleges and via a national telephone helpline and a web-based service.

There is much to be applauded about the career services provided by SDS. Career guidance offered in centres and schools is delivered by teams of professionally qualified Careers Advisers who have gained a post graduate qualification in career development and the Qualification in Career Development (or equivalent) from the Career Development Institute. Staff undertake ongoing training and follow a coaching model of delivery (Hambly and Bomford, 2019) and utilise the career management skills (CMS) framework (SDS, 2012). CMS is a competency-based career learning model, built around the themes of self, strengths, horizons and networks and underpins all individual, group and web-based services. In short, the combination of the consistent nationwide service offer, the professional training and development of staff and the delivery of practice using an embedded and universal approach has helped SDS become a flagship careers service with international recognition.

Nevertheless, the present service framework is not without its flaws, and it could be argued that the competency-based nature of the CMS model promotes more of a focus on the skills needed for the status quo and therefore does little to address the inequalities that that disadvantaged groups face. The service framework has been in place since 2012 and a major career service review, Careers by Design (SDS, 2022) has recently taken place, following on from an initial review of careers services by the Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2020). The review hopes to contribute to making 'Scotland a better and fairer place to live and work' (SDS, 2022, p. 2.) and outlines

a 'reimagining of the service' with a greater focus on individuals discovering their values and purpose rather than simply acquiring skills. It promises the delivery of more equitable services which are designed from the outset to 'truly support social mobility rather than be bolt on' (p. 36).

There are five design principles which underpin ten recommendations, a number of which have bearings on social justice and fair work. There is insufficient space to discuss each here but of particular relevance is the new career development model (p. 14) which looks set to replace the CMS model. The new model, which is a prototype, is still to be completed as part of the re-design of services but promisingly was developed in consultation with young people and SDS are keen to ensure that it is easy to understand and be used by all. It mirrors CMS in considering career development as a lifelong and continuous process, but places more emphasis on reflecting on barriers, empowerment and change.

The following individual and group work models offer an insight into how the reimagined services could look if practitioners are able to embed emancipatory practices into future service delivery.

Adapting practice with individuals

It could be argued that models of practice used by career practitioners at present are effective at empowering people to overcome barriers and inequalities and there is, therefore, little need to adapt practice. Indeed, in the U.K., the person-centred approach (Rogers, 1951; 1961; 1980) with its focus on building up a trusting, helping relationship to move towards personal growth underpins individual practice. This is coupled with the integration of a goal orientated 'stage' model, for instance, Ali and Graham (1996), Egan (1980; 2014), GROW (Yates, 2014) or Hambly and Bomford (2019) which follow the broad stages of 1 - establishing needs; 2 - exploring story/ options and; 3- agreeing and committing to a plan of action. Such models have more similarities than differences and serve to strengthen the focus and outcomes of interventions, as well as challenge perceptions and limited horizons. In addition, the Career Thinking Sessions model (Kline, 1999), which has been adapted for career guidance purposes by Bassot and Reid (2013) and has many similarities to the above stage models but places a greater emphasis on deep reflection to challenge limited assumptions more effectively.

Most of the above models are taught to students during initial training and career practitioners become highly proficient in their use through daily practice. Additionally, practitioners based in SDS are trained in the use of the SDS Coaching Approach (based on the Hambly and Bomford model) and the Career Management Skills (CMS) framework is weaved through the process.

However, according to Hooley (2015) the non-directive stance of the individual models, explored above, fall short of meeting emancipatory aims. The approaches are able to offer practitioners ample opportunity to challenge and convey empathy towards the barriers and inequality faced by individuals, but they do not sufficiently confront the wider issues which could lead to social change. There is arguably a need for adapted models which take a critical rather than non-directive stance and therefore offer a greater opportunity to challenge the structural influences that influence or limit progression.

Hooley (2022) has attempted to progress this in a recent article which restructures Ali and Graham's (1996) career counselling model to bring it closer to an emancipatory form of career guidance. The adapted model (which incorporates concepts taken from the ideas of the political economists Laclau and Mouffee and Hardt and Neri) is able to build up a strong theory base to support the development of emancipatory models. The approach involves building critical consciousness levels by helping people understand and critique the opportunity structure and then develop strategies to challenge it. Without further guidance, it not easy to imagine how the model could be applied to everyday practice but, as Hooley states, this is not the article's intent. It instead serves an important starting point to open up a debate and discussion for the future development of such emancipatory models of practice.

Building on Hooley's approach, the model illustrated in figure 1 adapts the SDS Coaching Approach (Hambly

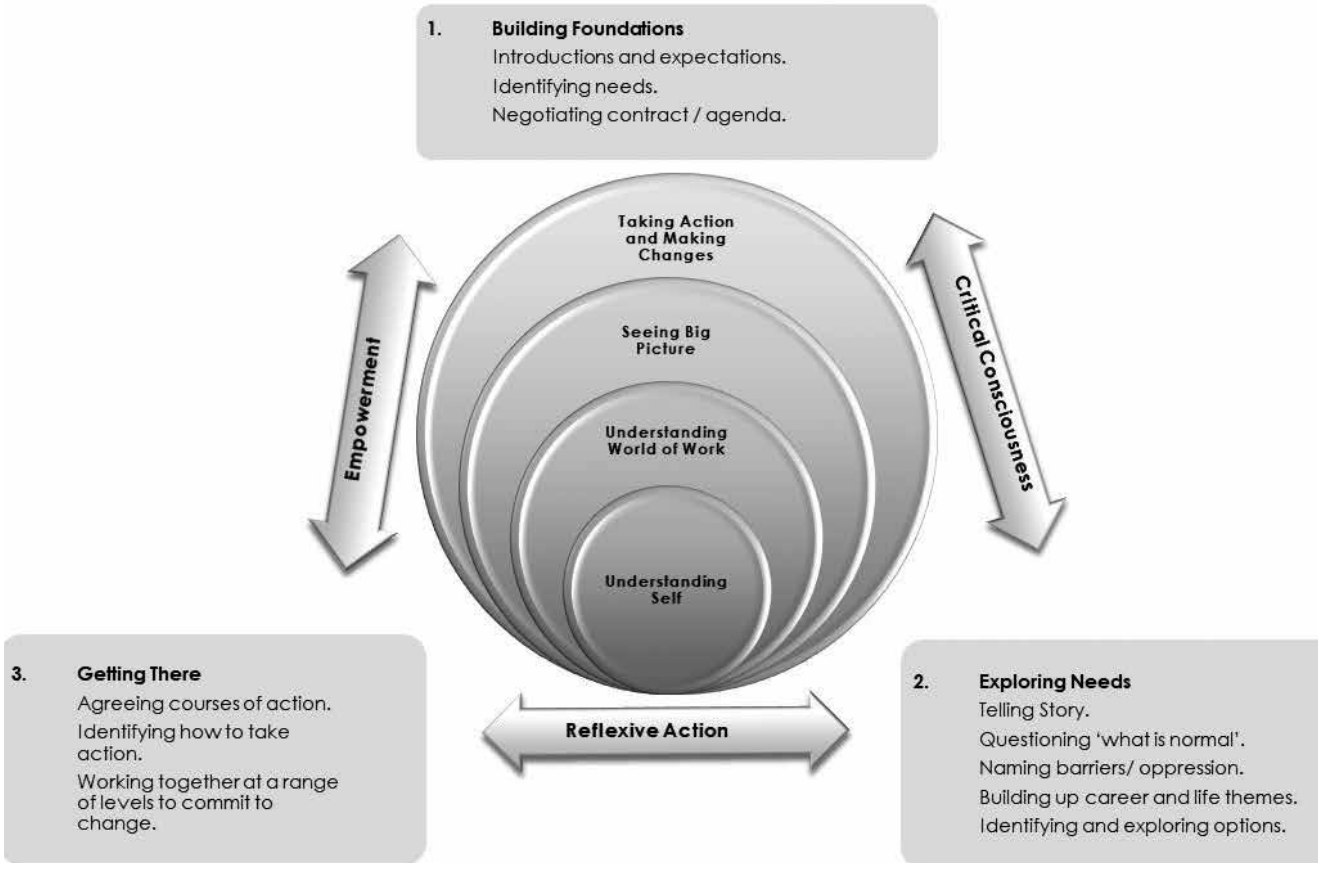
and Bomford, 2019) as the three-stage process rather than the Ali and Graham model. This has been chosen as it is able to mirror the model currently utilised by SDS more effectively. It should again be noted that the approach should not be used prescriptively or to the exclusion of all others. Rather it could act as an initial illustration of what could be developed further.

At each of the three stages in the model - 1- building foundations; 2- exploring needs; 3-getting there, - it incorporates additional dialogue, reflection and action to enable the five signposts of emancipatory practice to be embedded into the process. This is enabled by the approach being underpinned by a critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2005) theory base. Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education and praxis which focuses on helping individuals (or learners) understand and critique the structural influences, power relations, political drivers, and the players that influence or limit progression and to take action to make changes possible. In this context it involves engaging individuals in cycles of dialogue, reflection and action, illustrated by the arrows in figure 1 (critical consciousness, reflection and empowerment) and explored in the case study below.

An adapted version of the career development prototype model (SDS, 2022) is in the centre of the model. The new career development framework moves away from a focus on the building up of skills and competencies towards a focus on values, purpose and change and therefore has the potential to be more effective than the current CMS model at enhancing emancipatory practices. However, a shift in focus from skills development has the drawback of, for example, limiting opportunities for people to meaningfully engage with the labour market, so a balance should be sought when applying the approach.

Although not in the original prototype, helping individuals see the 'big picture', as illustrated, could be a worthwhile addition to the final model developed by SDS. This would enable individuals to work towards some of the signposts and in particular, building up critical consciousness in a straightforward and accessible way. What follows is an illustration of how the model could be applied to practice:

Figure 1: Adapted Hambly and Bomford model, 2019, p.63



L works as a Careers Adviser in a secondary school in the east of Scotland and sees J, age 15, for career coaching. L spends time building up a relationship and establishing needs. J discloses that he has recently been diagnosed with dyslexia but is keen to work on gaining two or three Scottish Highers grade qualifications. L establishes that J has a passion for drawing and painting and after working together to draw on his options, J reflects that he would like to work in the field of art and design, possibly as an art teacher. L also spends time building up J's awareness of critical consciousness to reflect on the barriers which stop him moving forward. J communicates that he has little support from his family, most of his friends outperform him at school, he labels himself 'lazy and stupid' and blames himself for falling behind. He has a support plan but feels singled out when offered individualised support such as broken-down steps or extra time for assessments. He needs to constantly ask for support in certain classes and he feels that the support is an afterthought or a burden for some teachers.

L helps him put this into the wider perspective of issues faced by other neurodiverse young people and schools, agencies and employers lack of awareness or lack of flexibility to accommodate or modify their provision or services to these needs, without a struggle. L works with J to help him move towards his goals by reviewing the existing support on offer. She gains J's consent to speak to his guidance teacher about him improving his support plan and help offered by individual teachers. On speaking to J's guidance teacher, she also learns that the school are improving a range of existing inclusive classroom practices, such as ensuring clearer written instructions being given to all students, rather than a few. The school is also interested in bringing a group of neurodiverse learners together to gain a clearer picture of their needs in the classroom and J intends to take part in this group.

It is clear that emancipatory models could be effective at helping practitioners work with individuals to overcome equalities and barriers, particularly if practitioners are able to advocate on behalf of individuals to help take steps towards actioning any changes. However, practitioners could face a number of challenges when applying such models.

Staff resourcing could present an issue if practitioners are required to spend a greater amount of time both working with individuals and later advocating on their behalf. Most practitioners are bound by organisational targets which often creates a need for practitioners to move individuals into a positive destination as quickly as possible. It could also be difficult for a practitioner to empathise with certain instances of oppression, for example racism in the workplace, if the practitioner has not faced this issue themself. Similarly, asking an individual to rally to promote, for example, gender equality in school or question unfair working practices at their place of work, could be ineffectual or harmful on their own.

Robertson (2021) also argues that practitioners could been seen to be unduly influencing an individual's views and this could present an ethical issue. This limitation can, to some extent, be mitigated if practitioners ground the model in a non-directive person centred approach to ensure that any ideas and actions come from the individual. Nevertheless, this could lead to the approach being diluted and therefore working in a group context where any ideas generated are by the group and participants are able to pull together towards common aims and actions, should be considered to complement practice.

Adapting group work practice

As explored above, there is a range of individual models of practice which career practitioners can draw on to develop their practice and the models can be adapted to incorporate emancipatory practices. In contrast, there has been a lack of models to support career development group work practice and, despite group work being a regular part of the role of most career practitioners, group work in the field has been neglected and its effectiveness is often inconsistent (McMahon and Watson, 2021; Meldrum, 2021; 2022; Westergaard, 2009; 2013). In Scotland, inspection reports from various local authority areas undertaken by Education Scotland, including Edinburgh, have recommended group work should be developed due to inconsistent quality levels (Education Scotland, 2018).

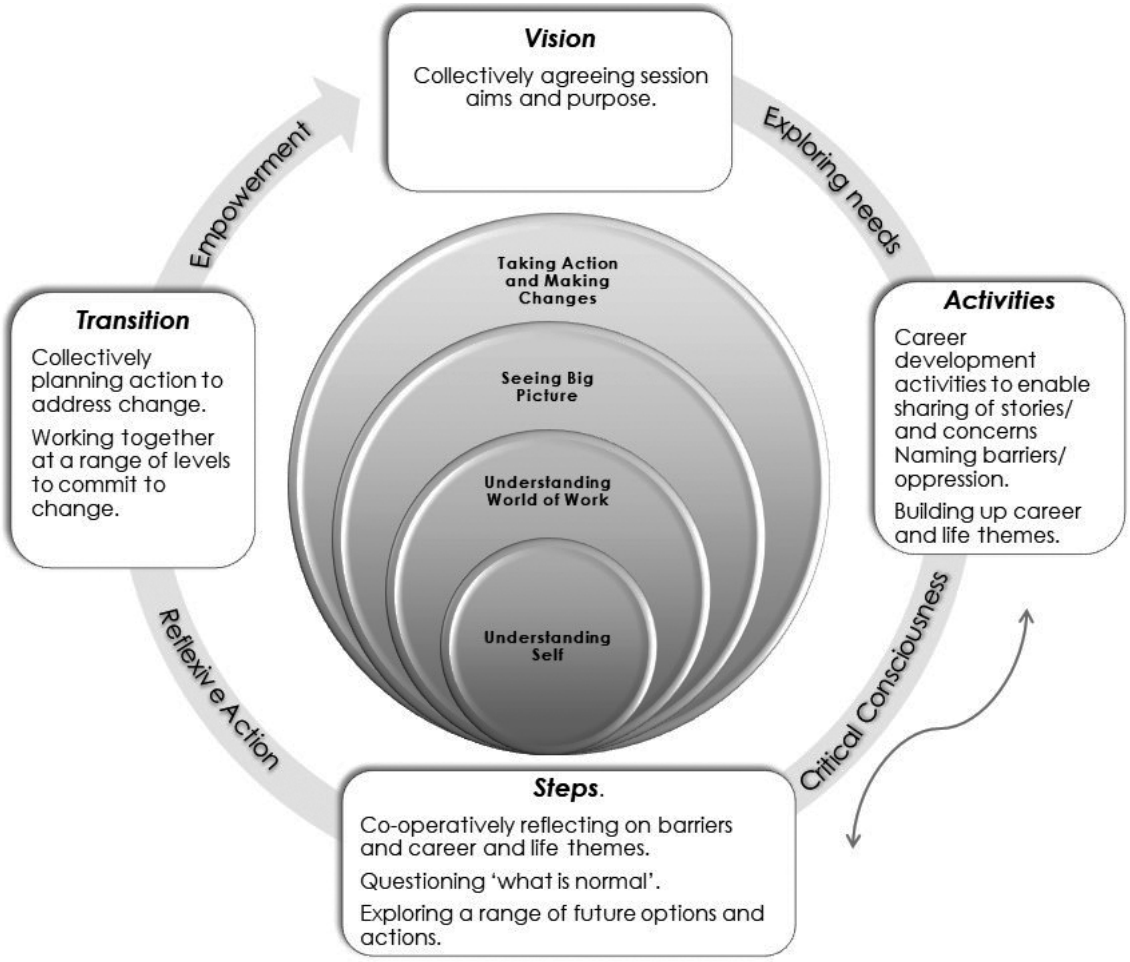


Figure 2: Adapted from the Collective Career Coaching Approach (Meldrum, 2021, p.217)

However, pockets of literature have resulted in an emergent theory base, including the FAAST model developed by Westergaard (2013) which sets out a process for the entire planning, design, delivery and evaluation of group work. Approaches such as the FAAST model are being taught during initial education, including in QCD centres in Scotland and elsewhere. In addition, SDS have invested in new and existing members of staff undertaking bespoke group work training to improve the effectiveness of group work.

The collective career coaching approach (Meldrum, 2021) illustrated in figure 2, is an emancipatory model of group work which has been developed in recent years and is being taught to students in some of the QCD centres in the UK. It has similarities to the emancipatory model in figure 1, in that it made up of the same three main parts: firstly, critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) is the underpinning theoretical approach and involves practitioners engaging groups in cycles of dialogue, reflection and action; secondly, the structure, follows a four-stage process and brings in additional dialogue, reflection and action to enable the five signposts of emancipatory practice to be implemented; and thirdly, an adapted version of the career development prototype model (SDS, 2022) is at the heart of the model.

The model differs from the individual approach in that it involves a greater amount of planning. This would usually take the form of a session plan which sets out learning objectives and one or more activity for the group to work on to move towards meeting the objectives. There is some learning content in the form of activities to develop career learning and critical consciousness, but the focus is on building up peer interaction and empowerment rather than direct instructional direction from the practitioner. The example below outlines how the model could be applied to practice:

> H has been working in the same secondary school for four years and she has observed a

reoccurring theme affecting senior students, particularly girls, who are interested in a career in science or engineering. A substantial number of such students are unable access university or apprenticeships easily as they are missing key subjects, particularly physics, maths or technology subjects at Scottish Higher level. Research leads H to find out that in 2020, despite 47% taking maths, only 27% of females took physics, 17% took computer science and only 11% took engineering science (Scottish Qualification Authority, 2021). H approaches guidance staff in school with the aim of offering group workshops to S2 students choosing subjects to promote gender equality in STEM subjects.

H prepares a session plan and offers a group session to fifteen S2 students. The group agree that they would like to discuss how to access STEM careers and reflect on the barriers relating to STEM subjects. They explore factors such as lack of interest in the subjects, lack of girls in classes, not knowing enough about the subjects or where they could lead, too 'hands on', too difficult etc. H moves on to a quiz which asks the group to match a range of subjects as 'blue' or 'pink' according to how many boys/ girls take the subjects at Higher level. This is followed by revealing the percentage uptake from the Scottish Qualification Authority and a group discussion and reflection discussing firstly, how they feel about the statistics and secondly, what could be done about it. H and the group reflect on next steps and the group agree to promote STEM subjects by social media to other S2 students. H later raises awareness of the benefits of the sessions during her team reflective practice session and her manager asks her to speak to national staff to develop the group work further.

Group work has many benefits, including the potential for collective group learning, the sharing of common experiences and concerns and utilising each other as a resource (Meldrum, 2017; Thomsen, 2012; Westergaard, 2013), all of which would be challenging in an individual context. An emancipatory group work approach additionally has the potential to empower the group to deal with challenges as a collective and work towards transformative group action (Meldrum, 2021). The ethical challenge of practitioners unduly influencing the actions of people, discussed with the individual approach, is lessened as any ideas and actions are generated by the group.

However, there could be a number of limitations to group work, for instance some group participants may feel uncomfortable working in a group environment, and some could gain less from a group experience than others (Westergaard, 2013). There are usually a few dominant members in any group, and this could lessen the experience for those who do not feel able to speak. It could also be difficult to address some group participants individual needs, and some may feel that they are being persuaded or overly influenced by other group participants. This could embed some attitudes and misconceptions as individuals may not want to challenge the perceived 'truths' at the risk of ridicule. These limitations can be mitigated, to an extent, through the careful planning and facilitation of group sessions.

Career organisations should continue to offer group work training to practitioners so that they feel confident to deliver group work and improve group work outcomes. Nevertheless, group work should always complement rather than replace individual career interventions. It is also important to note that group work and individual guidance should both play an important role in the delivery of career services, and one should not be pitted against the other as more important.

Conclusion

The redesign of services as part of the career review in Scotland offers the prospect of future service delivery involving a wider range of collaborative opportunities for practitioners to engage with individuals and groups in different contexts such as schools, workplaces, in the community and digitally. This article has examined how individual and group work models could be adapted, as part of this redesign to be more effective at empowering people to overcome barriers and inequalities. It has argued that such approaches could play an important role in contributing towards the service, and in turn other career services, being fairer and more equitable for all. This needs to be balanced against some of the

challenges that such approaches could bring such as resourcing issues, training gaps and ethical breaches.

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