Managing e-guidance interventions within HE careers services:

a new approach to providing guidance at a distance

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The UK’s Official Graduate Careers Support Service
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Preface

This is the report of a Graduate Prospects Ltd project commissioned by the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU). The aim of the action research project has been twofold:
1. to develop a web-based e-guidance system in which HE careers services can manage and administer a local careers advice via email service to their own students and graduates; and
2. to explore the whole issue of guidance at a distance and its implications for HE careers services and their clients.

The report starts by describing the background to the project and the rationale for developing the e-guidance management software. It acknowledges the growing trend amongst students and graduates to email their university careers services for careers advice and the ad-hoc procedures adopted by HE careers services in replying to email requests. The report describes how the e-guidance software currently used in the national web-based graduate careers advice service, Graduate Questiontime, has been adapted and modified to provide a web-enabled management system. This new system offers a streamlined process for not only encouraging students to submit their careers queries, but for careers services to respond to queries, access detailed monitoring routines and use integrated client feedback mechanisms.

The report introduces the five participating HE careers services and identifies their planned research objectives and targets. It also illustrates how each of the five services has used the e-guidance software and different approaches to managing their e-guidance services – including a comparison with how the national Graduate Questiontime service is managed.

This report provides detailed evaluations of the e-guidance software, as well as evaluations on the actual e-guidance service each careers service offers to its own students and graduates. Evaluations on the impact of marketing and promoting this type of guidance provision are provided, as is an analysis of the monitoring statistics and usage figures. The evaluations also analyse in detail the types of indicators of success each careers service works to, including customer satisfaction, integration with existing guidance provision, range of and reaching to new and existing client groups, quality of service, effectiveness and sustainability.

A key chapter in the report analyses the actual quality of advice provided by the e-guidance services and discusses whether this is actually guidance or not. As part of this evaluation, the report identifies a range of current thinking and argument regarding the issues of guidance at a distance and includes an analysis of the guidance process, what we mean by guidance outcomes, developing dialogue and interaction and also how counselling and therapy are using email and Internet.

The final chapter presents our key learning points and the issues which arose from the project. We believe that these issues will constitute the key questions that need to be answered by anyone setting up a similar email/web-based service, since they offer significant strategic and professional alternatives. These issues include whether to provide a team or personalised approach to your e-guidance service, whether to offer an embedded service or additional service, should it be offered as a stand-alone service or contextualised within your existing guidance services, what skills and training will be required for your staff and what ethical issues need to be considered.

Within the areas of advice, guidance, counselling and therapy, the UK continues to experiment with on-line and off-line delivery. The e-guidance debate continues to raise issues of how to deliver e-guidance, whether it should be integrated, can it deliver real human interactions and dialogue. We hope that this action research project and report make a significant contribution to this debate.
We would like to acknowledge the generous help given to us by all those who participated in the e-guidance action research project:

- Mike Williams and the staff at Graduate Prospects Ltd, especially the technical development staff;
- The HECSU Board of Directors who commissioned the action research project;
- The heads of service and staff of the five HE careers services contracted to pilot the e-guidance systems – with special thanks to Paul Redmond and Ginny Mair (Liverpool Hope); Ron Harle, Susan Wilson and Dominic Linley (University of Bradford); John Gough and Tara Pfeiffer-Christopher (De Montfort University); Elspeth Farrar and Kate Croucher (Middlesex University); and Barbara Graham and Audrey McGulloch (University of Strathclyde);
- The heads of service and staff of the six HE careers services who trialled, outside the official action research project, the e-guidance software and provided suggestions for improvement – Glasgow Caledonian University; University of Wales College, Newport; University of York; University of Salford; Queen’s University Belfast; and Napier University;
- Anne Lidster, Partnerships Manager at Connexions Direct, for her contribution at the January 2003 e-guidance workshop and the Connexions Direct monitoring data supplied for this report;
- University for Industry (UfI) for their Learn Direct monitoring data supplied for this report.
1. Executive summary

1.1 Graduate Prospects Ltd set up a 12-month e-guidance action research project, the aim of which was to test the possibility of extending a system used to deliver the national Graduate Questiontime e-guidance service to current students and graduates of a number of local HE careers services and to explore the whole issue of guidance at a distance. The pilot services were delivered initially by five careers services, who were able to completely customise and brand the web-based email system for their use, while the software continued to run in fact on Graduate Prospects servers.

1.2 The project began in June 2002 and ran until December 2003 with five HE careers services at the universities of Bradford, Middlesex, Strathclyde, De Montfort and Liverpool Hope. A further six have also piloted the e-guidance software but did not contribute formally to the research, despite providing feedback on the technology. All technical support and maintenance was provided by Graduate Prospects Ltd.

1.3 Access to the system for enquirers was from branded links on the individual careers services’ websites, and a range of other aspects of the system including feedback email requests to clients, monitoring statistics, automated thank-you replies and access permission levels could be configured by the local service. Brief details of the user and the topic of their enquiry are gathered before allowing them to submit a query.

1.4 Monitoring statistics are readily available in standard graph format and client feedback, in two stages, is collected automatically according to parameters decided by the local service.

1.5 Team versus personalised or specialist approach. In three out of four of the pilot services, the enquirer’s question was normally fielded anonymously by the next available adviser or staff member, so interaction was with the system rather than a person. At Liverpool Hope, one adviser had sole responsibility for the service and used her name in all communications, while Strathclyde negotiated a redesign of the registration form so that topic headings selected and the subject discipline of the enquirer triggered a response from the adviser or other staff member appropriate to that topic and faculty. Here, too, advisers used their own names in replying to emails. Advantages of a personalised approach are that it may tend to encourage the building of rapport with the user, ensuring continuity in case of any follow up, and could be more attractive to the users. In the specialist format used at Strathclyde, it can also avoid staff having to tackle questions outside their normal areas of expertise. The team approach, on the other hand, has the advantage of guaranteeing a swift response within a larger service, three days being the standard turnaround time generally maintained.

1.6 Access via Prospects Net. In the longer term, HE careers services will be able to access the software for this system only as a module that can be selected through Prospects Net. The software for the latter will be available for general use from May 2004. It is the aim of Graduate Prospects and the E-guidance team to undertake further work with IAG Partnerships during 2004, extending the use of the system to adult guidance organisations in general.

1.7 Marketing and Use. Wide-ranging and comprehensive marketing of the service in most of the pilot sites did not necessarily bear the anticipated fruit. Numbers of users appeared initially disappointingly low compared to the (with hindsight) rather ambitious target figures. Most places probably received queries from 1-3% of their eligible population, compared with a roughly estimated 10-12% for face-to-face services. Differences in marketing strategy do not seem to have impacted on these figures across the pilot sites. However, the figures, although smaller than expected, are actually in line with those achieved, albeit from a much larger eligible population, by Graduate Questiontime nationally. There are some signs that
returns on marketing investment may be observed only over a longer period than 12 months, and that many current users actually first heard of the service while online. Strathclyde, which only marketed the service as part of its normal publicity, does not appear to have lagged behind as a result.

1.8 **Types of query** were differently categorised from one service to another but a generally popular category across the board appears to have been Further Study. Also frequently asked about are: how to explore your options, career changes and identifying vacancies (Strathclyde), applications, job sources and occupational choice (Bradford), finding a job, career choice, and applying for teacher training (Middlesex), searching for jobs and application enquiries (De Montfort), and general guidance and information, and career change at Liverpool Hope.

1.9 **Time Management** raised various issues, including the length of time taken to answer – widely varying from a few minutes to a full hour and more depending on the familiarity of the adviser with the subject, the nature of the question itself, and the availability of templates or other resource from which to cut and paste. It neither saves, nor costs, time. Each pilot site took a different approach to allocating staff time, from regular diary slots for all advisers, to fitting the emails in as they come. Peak times for use occur in the autumn, with a lower demand later in the academic year. Some experienced a second smaller peak from July onwards. Local circumstances and arrangements affect this significantly. In Bradford 68% of use was during office hours on weekdays, though others felt that the freedom to submit queries 24/7 was genuinely appreciated.

1.10 **Characteristics of users.** There appears to be no particularly significant gender imbalance – it goes one way in some places, the other way elsewhere – though the national service has significantly more queries from women (60%) than from men. Other personal characteristics are hard to collect: email is relatively anonymous, unless users choose to reveal anything about themselves. Subject disciplines vary from one institution to another, with no discernible trend, while geographic location shows significant numbers may use the system while living within easy reach of the actual careers centre.

1.11 **Indicators of success**

- **customer satisfaction** – the feedback gathered automatically by the system shows the overwhelming majority in most places regard the email service as a useful and user-friendly facility. Those who have not used it have not done so, it would appear, because, despite heavy marketing, they simply did not know about it. The main problem is to make it known and keep it so.

- **integration** – the service is not seen as a stand-alone alternative, but as a complementary part of the existing service. In more than one case it has been used as a preparatory activity to the face-to-face interview, and, in one, linked to curriculum modules. The placing of the access point on the website is also important – most services chose to make it an alternative reception area by adding it to the front page, but Strathclyde, in particular, decided an approach more consistent with needs-based principles would be to add it at those points in the website where it offered a fall-back position for those with unanswered questions. Integration with other projects and activities is also important and favourable feedback was received from officers of other projects who linked from it, and from some academic staff.

- **range and reach** – the service reached some new groups, notably prospective students, and distance learners, but it is difficult to tell how far those who used it were the same people as use the off-line services too. Graduates are particularly important (45% of users in one case) and, to a lesser extent, international students.

- **quality** – while Graduate Questiontime has already achieved Matrix standards,
the pilot email services have not yet taken this test. It is assumed this will be only a matter of time.

- **effectiveness** – the email service is judged by staff as an effective way of using their time, and many are relieved they have not been swamped by it in the first year. Overall evaluation is extremely positive, for slightly different reasons at each service. Recently qualified staff have found it a useful form of professional development. Figures for users themselves are harder to obtain as yet, but such data as there is suggests that feedback is highly positive there too.

### 1.12 Content of the emails: is it guidance or “only” information and advice?

A random but representative and anonymous sample of about 5% of the questions and answers handled by the five pilot services suggests that the most common outcomes of guidance required and delivered are to do with the tactics of getting work and learning, as well as specific information. However, other types of need – for a sharper focus or wider apprehension of the scope of opportunities, as well as greater realism about the labour market and oneself, and support for specific decision making – appear to be tackled. Advisers have taken a professional but slightly conservative approach to the delivery of “guidance” by email. Several believe that it is not, in fact, possible to deliver guidance as such by this medium. However, evidence also shows that guidance outcomes appear to be delivered this way, and the main concerns are about the process which is perceived as one-way and lacking interaction and dialogue, as well as not achieving the kind of warmth or relationship felt to be present in face-to-face interventions. Nevertheless, examination of the actual emails shows the sparks are there and can be fanned into flame if necessary. Although most emails are one question and one answer, this may lie as much with the perception of the system by client and adviser, especially where the less personalised team approach is used, rather than with the nature of email itself as a medium. Evidence from Graduate Questiontime shows that an effective, interactive dialogue with a client is possible, even within the anonymous system used at national level. The remaining doubts seem to be about the feasibility of developing on-line rapport or empathy without the use of non-verbal communication. Since this has apparently been tested in personal counselling and therapy, which are increasingly on-line, it is suggested that email services should be treated as a form of intervention in their own right, not as a pale reflection of face-to-face interactions. This may make future technical and professional development more rewarding for the guidance practitioner.

### 1.13 Key issues and learning points

- **team or personalised approaches** – which of these is likely to be better at achieving good responses from users, and more effective management of the system? There are arguments on both sides which must be decided in the light of local policy and circumstances.

- **embedded or additional services** - there are also some arguments about where such a service is best located – locally, or regionally or nationally. Some of these concern the duplication of resources, versus the face validity of local knowledge. This dilemma is essentially removed by the Graduate Prospects software system which removes the need for local duplication of resources while fully enabling local knowledge to come into play via a customised branded service.

- **stand-alone or contextualised** – there is a question of where the access point should be on the local website – embedded within relevant pages, in a needs-based format, and/or on the front page as an alternative reception point for those whose “learning style” draws them to it.

- **training** – **skills, demands, and opportunities** – there are requirements for technical fluency, ability to analyse a text, and to use a non-directive, informal writing style
effectively. At the same time, email offers less experienced advisers an opportunity to build up professional knowledge. Peer review is a useful activity that many of the pilot services have used. Given the availability of the full text of all interactions with clients in the system to other advisers, exchange of ideas and experiences can be easy to achieve. Possibilities for supervision are also enhanced. Email guidance as described in section 10 also requires experience and specific writing techniques that may not be available naturally, so continuous professional development and exploration is recommended. A checklist for advisers is at appendix one.

- **ethical issues** – all staff should be aware of the issues of security and confidentiality and revisit existing professional codes and standards on this. In the absence of a specific UK set of standards for on-line counselling, it may be worth examining those produced in the USA.

- **attachments** – because of the danger of viruses, CVs cannot be attached to these emails and this causes practical problems and irritation, though the reasons are understood.

### 1.14 Conclusion

The project has been a signal success in bringing together disparate previous email services and providing a streamlined, monitored system with automatic feedback and data collection. This is widely appreciated. The end-users of the service also appear very happy with the services they have received, and the main impediment to its wider application is the apparent difficulty of ensuring that all eligible users know of it and remain aware of it.

The system can be applied in a variety of ways locally, and integrated with a range of other services on- and off-line. Doubts about its ability to deliver real human interactions and dialogue may have clouded the vision of its potential so far, but these should not be allowed to inhibit robust testing and experimental development in the future. Other areas of advice and guidance in the UK are experimenting with on-line one-to-one delivery, and higher education careers services can make a significant contribution to the debate.
2. Project rationale and background

Email has, of course, been available and used by careers advisers in a variety of services for all sorts of reasons. All of the HE careers services in the present project had used personal email addresses to field queries from students, check CVs, arrange appointments or offer information and advice. Other services also run their own specific email response systems. The novelty of the current project has more to do with the systematic framework provided by the Graduate Prospects software, backed by the experience of the national Graduate Questiontime programme, to produce a branded and timetabled service, than with the simple fact of using email to give information or advice.

2.1 Graduate Questiontime

Since February 2001, Graduate Prospects has offered graduates a national careers advice via email/Internet service entitled “Graduate Questiontime” (Madahar, 2003). Over 22,000 graduates have now made use of this web-based e-guidance service. A wide range of career queries has been received covering all aspects of information, advice and guidance. Graduates access the service via the Internet and submit their careers question. A team of HE careers advisers respond to the query within three working days and email their response to the graduate.

2.2 The E-guidance project

2.2.1 As a direct result of the success of this service, plus a growing number of enquiries from HE careers services about the “Graduate Questiontime” software, Graduate Prospects Ltd set up a 12-month e-guidance action research project. Another key reason for setting up the e-guidance project was to address the growing issue of how HE careers services deal with the increase in student/graduate email communication and to explore the whole issue of guidance at a distance.

2.2.2 Issues to be addressed. Initial discussions with a handful of HE careers services indicated that there had been a significant growth in the number of email requests for careers information and advice from their own students and graduates. However, the key issue for most of these HE careers services was that requests for careers advice by email operated on an ad-hoc basis, with no set procedures or policies for dealing with this growth in the use of communication technology. HE careers services cited the following issues as barriers to developing a structured careers-advice-via-email provision:

- Emailed careers requests were either emailed directly to an individual careers adviser or emailed to the careers service’s general email address. There was, therefore, little opportunity to interrogate the user and obtain a user profile.
- Even if students/graduates were emailing one general careers address, standard email software, such as Microsoft Outlook, was not able to systematically analyse user data including type of email query, adviser response time; number of emails per day/week/month/year.
- Several HE careers services cited the lack of time in the careers adviser’s working day to respond to incoming emails; e-guidance was not considered a formal part of the official job description.
- Many careers advisers felt uncomfortable responding to email queries due to the lack of e-guidance guidelines, policies and procedures for the careers adviser to follow.

2.2.3 Objectives. In order to address these issues and concerns, the e-guidance action research had several objectives:

- To develop customised web-based email advice management software of HE careers services to deliver, manage and monitor their own careers advice via email service for students and graduates.

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1 Graduates must be nationals of states within the European Economic Area, have graduated from university within the last five years and be seeking help identifying jobs and further study in the UK.
• To understand how to make e-guidance work effectively.
• To identify what are the strategic implications for the careers service and its impact on the organisation and staff dynamics.
• To evaluate the guidance outcomes for the client, the usability of the e-guidance service and client satisfaction levels.
• To establish and identify indicators of success.
• To identify and disseminate learning points, which inform other careers services who may decide to use the e-guidance software and/or undertake similar work in the future.

2.2.4 The e-guidance action research project began in June 2002 and ran until December 2003, with five HE careers services: University of Bradford; Liverpool Hope; De Montfort University; Middlesex University; and University of Strathclyde. Six additional HE careers services also piloted the e-guidance software: Glasgow Caledonian University; University of Wales College, Newport; University of Salford; University of York; Queen’s University, Belfast; and Napier University. Although these additional six HE careers services did not contribute formally to the research project, they did provide informal feedback on the software functionality and usability.
3. E-Guidance software design and functionality

3.1 What is it?

3.1.1 As part of the e-guidance research project, Graduate Prospects Ltd developed a piece of e-guidance management, routing and monitoring software, which runs on the Internet. The aim of the software is to enable an organisation to plan and manage a service-wide approach to careers advice at a distance.

3.1.2 The e-guidance software runs on Graduate Prospects Ltd servers and it utilises the same approach and programming that has been used for the national graduate careers advice via email service, Graduate Questiontime. The e-guidance software not only enables a user to submit their careers query, and a careers service to respond to it, in a structured way, it also includes integrated monitoring routines and client feedback functionality.

3.1.3 The e-guidance software runs as a back-office system, from Graduate Prospects' servers, and plugs into the careers service's own website. The careers service is only required to insert an external link from its own website to the e-guidance website. The e-guidance software, therefore, does not require access to space on the careers service’s own server and neither does the software require maintenance from the respective university IT staff – all IT support and maintenance is provided by Graduate Prospects Ltd.

3.2 How does it work for the careers service?

3.2.1 Configurability. There is quite a lot of configurability built into the software so that a careers service can decide to ask their students particular sets of customised questions or ask for clarification information, as well as allowing students to send in their careers question. A careers service can also customise their own.
- automated thank-you replies.
- legal disclaimer (which is automatically placed at the bottom of all advice that is sent to their students).
- client feedback emails.

Careers services can also set up their own access permission levels for their own staff:
- **Master account access** - access to all aspects of the software including customisation and monitoring statistics.
- **Adviser access** - access to the query database and ability to respond to emails; can have access to monitoring statistics if permission is given by master account.
- **Observer access** - can observe the database of queries but cannot respond to queries, and can have access to monitoring statistics if permission is given by master account.

3.2.2 Storage and management. As careers queries are sent in, they are stored in a database (see Appendix 2, Figure 5: Database of career queries awaiting reply). To access the database, each careers service has its own password-controlled system, which is kept separate from the national graduate system and separate from the other careers services using the software. The e-guidance software provides careers services with a means of storing, managing and monitoring careers queries. How these careers services respond to the queries is up to the careers services themselves – see chapter 4 for examples of how the national graduate e-guidance service and the five research e-guidance services responded to the incoming careers queries. The key issue, though, for careers services, when using the e-guidance software, is that procedures and policies for responding to clients become a matter of management at careers service level, rather than lots of separate sets of plans and decisions by individual careers staff managing their own email inboxes (as is the case in many HE careers services at present).

3.2.3 Staff access. The careers staff who respond to careers queries do so through a password-controlled web-based adviser interface, which they can use from any computer, anywhere, as long as it is connected to the Internet. More than one

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2 Graduate Questiontime is accessible from www.prospects.ac.uk/links/GradEmail
member of staff can access the system at the same time - it is impossible for the same careers query to be opened by two people simultaneously. The software will also archive all incoming queries and outgoing feedback. It also provides a detailed search function of the archive.

3.2.4 **Staff interface.** When a member of staff opens a careers query, they are able not only to view the student’s query, but also a range of biographical information, which was completed by the student when they submitted their careers question (see Appendix 2, Figure 6: Example of an opened query awaiting a reply). If the student has used the e-guidance service previously, the system can display the complete history of that student and the correspondence that he/she has had with the adviser(s).

3.2.5 **Adviser response.** The member of careers staff responds to the query by typing in their careers advice, including any web addresses. Before they submit their response, they can undertake a spellcheck. Their careers advice is then sent out to the student as a standard email message, with a return link in case the student wants to submit a follow-up question. Once the query has been dealt with, it is automatically moved to the archive section and the member of careers staff moves on to the next question in the queue.

3.3 **How does it work for the student/graduate?**

3.3.1 **Access points.** The e-guidance software, as previously stated, plugs into the careers service’s own website. A careers service can choose to have one single link to the e-guidance software, or several links throughout their website or even choose both options. The careers service can choose to have their e-guidance link(s) on their top level pages (linked to a resource-based approach) and/or deeper in their site (linked to a needs-based approach). This will depend on whether they want simply to encourage large numbers of students to use their e-guidance service or whether they want to encourage them to undertake an element of career decision-making before using the service.

3.3.2 **Customisation.** Graduate Prospects Ltd customises all of the student pages. When students access the software, therefore, it takes the look of the careers service’s own website; and is simply part of that site as far as the students are concerned. Thus, when the student clicks on the e-guidance link, they will not know they have moved to another server, as the page designs do not change. When the user has submitted their careers query, they are returned to the careers service’s website.

3.3.3 **Interaction with the system.** A key issue when using the e-guidance software is to realise that the students do not interact by using the individual mailboxes of careers advisers or whoever is giving the advice (as is the current case in many careers services). Instead, the students interact with the system – they submit their careers query to an e-guidance system as opposed to an individual careers adviser.

3.3.4 **For the student,** the process of submitting a careers query is kept very simple. The student clicks on the e-guidance link and completes the customised careers query form (see Appendix 2, Figure 7: Careers query form - University of Bradford). In order to submit their query, they agree to the terms and conditions of the e-guidance service, as set by the individual careers service. When they accept these terms, their query is submitted to the e-guidance database. They receive an immediate acknowledgement that their query has been received and will be responded to within a set number of days. The student then returns to the careers service’s website. If the student decides not to accept the terms, their query is not submitted, none of the student’s information is stored and they are taken to an alternative information page, which offers them additional means of receiving information, advice and guidance. All of the text that appears to the student during this submission process is written by, and customised for, the individual careers service.
3.4 Additional functionality of the e-guidance software

3.4.1 Monitoring. The e-guidance software also contains a full range of monitoring routines, statistics collection and reporting and automated emailing facilities, which can collect evaluation feedback from samples of users. In fact, the e-guidance software provides everything a careers service is likely to need as part of gaining or maintaining Matrix quality standards approval - which the national e-guidance graduate service received in March 2003.

3.4.2 Monitoring statistics. The e-guidance software provides careers services with their own automated monitoring statistics in the form of standard graphs, as well as providing downloadable data for use with Excel spreadsheets, Access databases and SPSS software.

3.4.3 Feedback. Graduate Prospects Ltd has also developed an integrated client feedback system using web-based questionnaires, with downloadable data for use with Excel spreadsheets, Access databases and SPSS software. The client feedback is divided into two stages and each careers service can decide when to send out a client feedback form (e.g. five days after the student receives their careers advice) and which students should receive a client feedback form (e.g. all clients, every tenth client and so on). Each careers service can decide to turn on or turn off their client feedback forms.

3.4.4 Stage 1 client feedback occurs as soon as the student has submitted their careers query. The student is asked to complete a few questions on the ease of use, accessibility of the e-guidance service and where they heard about the email service.

3.4.5 Stage 2 client feedback occurs some time after the student has received their careers advice. The student is asked to complete a few questions on the quality of the advice they have received and whether they have acted on this advice.
4. National and local use of the e-guidance software

During the course of the research project, it has become apparent that each HE careers service has developed a slightly different approach to the management and staffing of their e-guidance services.

4.1 National e-guidance graduate service

When Graduate Questiontime was launched in February 2001, the option chosen for managing the service was to have an anonymous “Careers Team” who would respond to queries as they come in. Thus, each careers adviser in the team has to be a generalist, dealing with a wide range of careers queries. Each member of staff is scheduled into a weekly rota and undertakes so many hours per week. They respond to each graduate, as a member of the “Careers Team” rather than sign off as a named careers adviser. In effect, the graduate using this e-guidance service develops a relationship with the system, as opposed to developing a relationship with the careers adviser.

4.1.1 Liverpool Hope

Liverpool Hope employed a specific e-guidance adviser to manage and deliver their e-guidance service. There is sporadic assistance from other members of the careers service, but generally, the designated e-guidance adviser delivers their e-guidance service. As a result of this approach, the e-guidance adviser is able to name herself in her careers responses and also when she markets the e-guidance service and at the access point to the service on the website. Students and graduates, in effect, are able to develop a one-to-one relationship with the adviser.

4.1.2 Middlesex University

Middlesex University staffs its e-guidance service using a team of careers advisers. Other staff are not directly involved. It operates along similar lines to the national Graduate Questiontime service – a team of advisers, acting as generalists, responds to queries as they enter the database. The e-guidance project officer manages the weekly rota, so that staff can set aside time in their diaries to staff the e-guidance service. The students/graduates using the MEG (Middlesex E-Guidance) service thus develop a relationship with the team rather than the individual advisers, whose own names are not added to the responses they provide.

4.1.3 University of Bradford

The University of Bradford also staffs its e-guidance service using a team of careers advisers. The database of careers queries is managed and administered by the careers information officer and senior careers information assistant. They also prepare the weekly rota for the team of advisers to work from. As at Middlesex, the students/graduates using CAVE (“Careers Advice Via Email”) at Bradford relate to the system and not the individual adviser.

4.1.4 De Montfort University

De Montfort University operates its e-guidance service along similar lines to the University of Bradford, with the careers information manager and employment and information assistant managing and administering the e-guidance system and staff rota. Again, students/graduates using De Montfort University’s e-guidance service thus develop a relationship with the system and not the individual adviser.

4.1.5 University of Strathclyde

The University of Strathclyde opted to use its team of careers advisers, information and reception staff and SES co-ordinator, who only respond to queries which belong to set subject categories, each of which, it was agreed, should be dealt with by a particular grade of staff whether receptionist, information assistant, SES co-ordinator or careers adviser. The receptionist maintains an overview of the database, collates the e-guidance statistics and responds to general enquiries about the careers service. Information staff respond to information-related enquiries, leaving individual careers advisers to respond to specialist subject queries. As a result of this approach to managing an e-
guidance service, students and graduates at the University of Strathclyde are able to develop one-to-one relationships with individual named members of the careers staff who will use their own names to sign off their responses. The service is further personalised by the secondary allocation of queries on the basis of subjects studied by the enquirers. Thus, a social studies student asking about issues to do with “exploring career options” would be picked up by one of two careers advisers who normally deal with such students.
5. Contracting with the five HE careers services

At the start of the e-guidance action research, each of the five HE careers services agreed a contract with Graduate Prospects Ltd identifying their stated aims and objectives and agreed targets.

5.1 Liverpool Hope
The aims of the project were to:
- design and implement appropriate Internet-based web links.
- promote e-careers guidance to students, graduates and staff at Liverpool Hope.
- achieve a minimum target of ten e-guidance transactions per day.
- integrate e-careers guidance within academic-based curricula.
- develop the skills and professional knowledge of those involved in the project.
- disseminate the findings (and key learning outcomes) of the project via written report to the Rectorate Team at Liverpool Hope, the Management Board of HECSU and other careers services and HEI's in the sector.

5.2 Middlesex University
The aims of the project were to:
- deliver an integrated email guidance service to undergraduates across six campuses of the university, in conjunction with other activities of the careers advisory service and involving all the careers staff.
- embed the e-guidance service into the newly designed CAS website.
- deliver a minimum of 2000 e-guidance interactions over the course of the project year.

5.3 University of Bradford
The aims of the project were to:
- conduct and manage an action-based project on the delivery of a ‘Careers Advice via Email’ service using software provided by Graduate Prospects to students and graduates of the University of Bradford during the academic year 2002/3.
- market the service extensively to achieve a target delivery of 2,000 units of e-guidance.
- involve all careers advisers in the delivery of the service, using a structured workload plan.
- concurrently redesign and re-launch the University of Bradford careers website as a ‘needs-based’ site incorporating e-guidance principles.
- monitor the use of electronically mediated guidance delivered through the email service and the website and to actively seek feedback from both users and non-users.
- seek from careers advisers appropriate feedback relating to models of guidance and appropriateness of the mode of delivery.
- develop expertise during the project to fully integrate e-guidance services into our overall service delivery and to develop a continuation strategy post 2003.

5.4 De Montfort University
The aims of the project were to:
- establish e-guidance as part of an integrated ICT strategy within the service.
- explore the potential and limits of providing careers information, advice and guidance through email.
- establish a resources methodology for meeting client need through ICT.
- establish an email guidance system for students and graduates as part of an integrated ICT strategy consistent with the aims of the project.
- answer a minimum of ten e-guidance queries per day.

5.5 University of Strathclyde
The aims of the project were to:
- integrate email into the range of methods by which our students and graduates receive advice, guidance and information.
- develop a system by which most email traffic from students and graduates can be recorded, managed and analysed.
- eliminate the need for our receptionist to act as postmaster.
- ensure that queries are dealt with by the member of staff whose area of specialism most closely matches the need.
• evaluate the effectiveness – for both staff and clients - of providing careers support via email.
• identify ways in which the current system might further develop to allow for an effective integration between the e-guidance software and Prospects Net.

"….. students and graduates were increasingly contacting us by using their adviser’s personal email address or advisers were giving out their address. We recognised that this was not an ideal scenario and felt that it was leading to ‘queue jumping’ and a build-up of pressure on advisers who faced these emails in their in-boxes daily. It was also difficult to obtain adequate statistical records. It was time to commit to email as part of our provision and we wanted to do it to our usual high standards."
6. What next after the research is over?

6.1 The key aim of the e-guidance action research project is to develop customised web-based email advice management software for HE careers services to deliver, manage and monitor their own careers-advice-via-email service for students and graduates. Even after the research project has ended, plans are in place to further develop and extend the e-guidance software.

6.2 Further development. Based on feedback from the HE careers services, who have been piloting their e-guidance provision, further development work is currently taking place to enhance the software, including:

- Simplifying the careers query submission process for students and graduates to make it even easier for clients to use.
- Improving the email archives to record when archive emails are accessed and email responses are resent.
- Developing an integrated resource centre within the software, which will enable advisers to store, edit and paste web addresses and other referral information into their careers advice responses.

6.3 Prospects Net. Plans are also in place to fully integrate the e-guidance software into Prospects Net. Prospects Net has been developed by Graduate Prospects Ltd and Sardin Solutions to provide HE careers services with customised web-based employer vacancy database and events management software. Any HE careers services wanting to use the e-guidance software will only be able to access it via Prospects Net. HE careers services will be able to choose which modules to use within Prospects Net – employer vacancy database, events management system and/or e-guidance software – and these will be customised to meet the needs of individual careers services. In order to use the Prospects Net software, HE careers services will agree an annual individually based licence fee, which can be significantly reduced via set discounts. HE careers services who are interested in using the e-guidance software within Prospects Net will be encouraged to contact Graduate Prospects. It is envisaged that the Prospects Net e-guidance software will be available for general use from May 2004.

6.4 General Adult Guidance. An important development during the research project has been to investigate how the e-guidance software can be developed to meet the needs of general adult guidance organisations. In June 2003, Graduate Prospects Ltd contracted with Connect2Learning (Bournemouth, Poole and Dorset IAG Partnership) to develop an e-guidance system that would meet the employment and learning needs queries of its adult clients and IAG practitioners. This project is still in the developmental stages as Graduate Prospects undertakes work to adapt and customise the e-guidance systems in order to address the needs of an IAG Partnership organisation. It is the aim of Graduate Prospects and the E-Guidance Team to undertake further work with IAG Partnerships during 2004, to ensure that the e-guidance software can serve the needs of adult guidance organisations in general, who are looking to develop their web-based guidance interventions.
7. Evaluation of the project

7.1 Methods and evidence

The project was evaluated using a variety of evidence and methods.

• Visits to the five pilot sites were made by the external project evaluator (Marcus Offer) at the start and end of the project, and discussions held with heads of service and other staff involved in the project. These elicited a number of key issues and learning points.

• A one-day workshop was held in Manchester in January 2003, attended by representatives of all but one of the five pilot projects. This was used to agree the key issues and to elicit the most important indicators of success and to discuss various methods of evaluation. There was also an input on a parallel service for younger people, Connexions Direct, from the head of that service, Anne Lidster, who was also deputy chair of NAEGA and a manager of the LearnDirect service for adults.

• A review of the literature on email and related on-line services used for guidance, counselling or therapeutic purposes was undertaken by the external project evaluator.

• The content of an (anonymous) sample of 75 email queries received, and responses made, across the five pilot services, was analysed, to try to answer the question: to what extent does the level of activity involved represent “guidance” as opposed to “merely” information or advice?

• Each service also conducted its own customer feedback and evaluation using the software provided by Graduate Prospects and wrote up their findings in an individual report. Each also provided statistics of their usage.
8. Marketing, publicity, and statistics of use

8.1 A target for the number of users?

“One of the most difficult aspects of managing the Graduate Questiontime service...was, and still is, anticipating the levels of graduate demand. Graduate Questiontime was the first online graduate careers advice service operating on a national basis. There was, therefore, no previous history of this type of activity and as such, an element of estimation and guessing of potential numbers took place.”

(Madahar, 2003, p.20)

A common element in most of the pilot project contracts was the stated target of around 2000 email enquiries per project, (the University of Strathclyde took a different line – see below). This was at least in part because the project was intended to be a research project so the achievement of enough traffic on which to base reliable conclusions for the future was clearly important. It has also been the experience of the national service that regular and significant marketing is needed to keep up awareness of the service among the population of potential graduate enquirers. While all the pilot sites had used email as a means of communication with students, mostly on an ad hoc basis, none had systematically developed and marketed it before, so expectations were quite high. All but Strathclyde made the achievement of the target an explicit objective in their initial contract with Graduate Prospects, and posted an invitation to use the email service either on the home page of their website or on the front page for students and graduates. In this position it could be seen as an alternative “reception” point to the website itself or to the physical reception area in the careers centre. Certainly it offers a choice to the user as to how guidance is provided – by email, by website or by face-to-face contact, (this could be seen as a “learning style” approach, leaving the choice of method to the user).

8.2 Marketing the service

8.2.1 To this end most services undertook very significant marketing of the e-guidance facility. All but Strathclyde posted an access point to the email service on, or close to, the home page of their website, and followed this up with a range of other publicity measures.

8.2.2 Bradford, for example, the first of the pilot projects to start, produced 3000 flyers, 500 posters and 1000 postcards advertising the email service and distributed them to departments and displayed them throughout the university, as well as handing them out at events such as graduation ceremonies, careers talks, careers fairs, etc. The service was also advertised in the on-line and printed versions of their graduate vacancy bulletin, and in regular email bulletins sent out weekly to all final year students and monthly to second years. The student newspaper and daily newsheet were targeted, and the service was also advertised to staff with suggestions to encourage their students to use it. Specific sub-groups of students were also targeted – part-time students and some students on placements. Advertisements appeared in departmental magazines, especially in strongly vocational departments where students tend not to be strong users of the careers service otherwise. Other universities carried out similar levels of marketing.

8.2.3 De Montfort included information and posters about the service in launch packs sent to all associate colleges, promotional packs to their contacts in distance learning and part-time learning units, emailed details of the e-guidance service to all of their students who were registered with the Prospects website. Computer screens in the student services resource area also had a screen saver advertising the email service.
8.2.4 Liverpool Hope held an official launch with invited guests from all heads of subject areas and made specific presentations to all first and third year students by subject group, as well as the students at six associated colleges in the North West for which the careers service is responsible. The e-guidance address was also added to the reverse of the appointment card given to anyone who makes an appointment for an interview, stressing that they can access email advice and guidance via this service to prepare them for their interview. They also made the use of it a requirement as part of a “Mathematics and Education in Society” course module delivered to final year students, who were asked to email their career enquiries and then disseminate the information received in an assignment, (this generated, reportedly, 20-25 enquiries, “about one week’s worth of statistics”).

8.2.5 At Middlesex, in addition, a series of emails publicising the service were sent out to all enrolled students and inserts about the service were enclosed in other publications, and references on mouse mats, bookmarks and web cards.

8.2.6 Marketing is not enough? After all this activity it was still frustrating to find that there were significant numbers of students who “didn’t know about it” – the overwhelming response to a sample survey at Bradford. Evidence from elsewhere shows that marketing alone is not enough, or at least that it takes longer to build up awareness of the service than was originally anticipated.

8.3 An alternative approach

8.3.1 Strathclyde took the view, on the other hand, that the email service should be integrated as far as possible with their existing services. Therefore, this included the fact that email was one way to get help in their normal marketing literature, featuring it in all leaflets explaining what the careers service does. They also placed access points to the email service, not on the front page of their website (“our concerns were that such an offer might encourage laziness”), but on inside pages, so that the user would only reach the email access point after having worked through the rest of a page containing advice and information. At that point they might see the words “Unanswered questions? Email-Us!” This, they argue, is more in line with a needs-based approach to service delivery.

8.3.2 This view is endorsed by some other services. Bradford reported:

“With hindsight, because we ran the service as a ‘stand-alone’ project, we did not explain fully to clients its benefits in relation to our other services. Future marketing will adopt the ‘needs-based’ principle which has been so successful for our website. . . . We have had to ask ourselves when CAVE would be the most appropriate medium for our clients and what the CAVE service can deliver better and quicker than our traditional services (and, of course, what it can’t!). The CAVE service is no longer marketed as a ‘stand-alone’ option but as an integrated element of our guidance services, with an explanation of its benefits and its limitations.” (Wilson and Linley, 2003)

8.4 The results – a disappointment or what might have been expected?

8.4.1 Short of the target. After so much effort expended on publicity, the results fell far short of the target of 2,000 enquiries in the year or ten per day, which some of the services had set. The number of enquiries handled over the year ranged from 180 to 311. Not all sites managed to start their service as early in the year as others and it may have taken time to build up publicity. Strathclyde, who “went live” only in April 2003, with, as we have seen, less specific marketing, had answered 280 queries in seven months. These results might seem disappointing to some, and certainly contrasted with the concerns expressed by some advisers involved in earlier projects about the possibility of careers services losing control of email enquiries if the current trend of use continued (Offer et al., 2001 p.42) In practice a more sober analysis is required.
8.4.2 **The total eligible population** of an email guidance service at any university will vary widely. It should presumably include all current students, undergraduate and postgraduate, full-time and part-time as well as distance learners, and graduates of the university for the number of years after graduation during which they are able to access the careers service. Since email is independent of time and place, the number of those for whom it is a real access point is going to be larger than for the face-to-face service at the careers centre. Indeed, the desire to offer a service to those hitherto unable to access it, is surely one of the key reasons for setting up an email service and, though not officially stated by any of the pilot services in their formal contract with Graduate Prospects, it was mentioned more than once in discussions with the external evaluator.

8.4.3 **Complexities.** However, it appears to be much more difficult to define who is a “current student” of the university than who is a graduate. Complexities arise from such factors as the franchising of courses in other colleges, networking across colleges and campuses in the local area, and considerations as to whether a student is “extra-curricular” but counted within the total. Figures even for the “eligible population” of those using the face-to-face service were not usually to hand, and requests for them caused some problems. In addition, different careers services offer services to their graduates for different lengths of time, ranging from about two years after graduation to life! So that too, can seriously affect the figures. Add to this that there is an almost infinite number of prospective students who could send in queries by email, and the difficulty of ever estimating the size of the audience for an email service can appear insuperable.

8.4.4 **Benchmark data.** In the end, we adopted as a benchmark, the assumption in paragraph 8.4.2 above, that all current students, full and part-time however defined locally, and all graduates for an arbitrary period of three years after graduation (this being the period when most enquiries are in fact likely), constitute a reasonable guess at the potential user group for an e-guidance service. Taking the number of enquiries dealt with in the year as a percentage of the total population, it then follows (subject to all the caveats above) that our pilot services were probably used by between 0.6% and 2.3% of the eligible population so defined. If only current students are taken into account, the percentage may rise to 3% or 4%. The graduate population is perhaps a less quantifiable quantity because many will be happily settled in a job so the real figure for potential graduate guidance seekers is hard to anticipate. The percentages given here, however, are fairly consistent across the five services. In other words, any careers service manager thinking of embarking on setting up such an email service could anticipate that, at least in the first few years, a figure of no more than around 3-4% of the eligible population for that university would use it.

8.4.5 **Other factors.** These percentages must be set against two other factors. Graduate Prospects’ national service for graduates deals with an average of 1,000 careers queries per month, which at first sight looks much more successful than the figures for the local project. If we try to work out the eligible population for the Graduate Questiontime service, however, the percentage who use the service may not be so different. If we assume around 300,000 graduates leave higher education every year, and as the national email service is available to graduates for up to five years after graduation, this means a total eligible population from the UK of 1,500,000, from whom 12,150 emails were received in 12 months, which works out at about 0.8%. Of course, Graduate Questiontime is a national service, open to all EEA graduates seeking study or work in the UK, and as such, will have an even bigger and more intangible audience than UK graduates alone, and a large proportion of these will also be in work or learning, or unable to speak good English, and hence perhaps less likely to send in an enquiry. The percentage reached of the
population of those who may need the help, could therefore rise, we calculated, to between 1% and 2% of those eligible to use it.

**8.4.6 A comparable result?** Despite the complexities and uncertainties of the calculations here, it is clear that we are not dealing with percentages much above the 3-4% mark whatever population baseline we assume. It seems that the local services are not doing much worse in reaching their audiences than the national Graduate Questiontime service, which is also marketed heavily, and has been running for over two years now.

**8.4.7 Vis a vis face-to-face.** Finally, it is worth considering the relationship between the percentage using the email service and those using the face-to-face services of the careers centre. Again, it was sometimes difficult to work out the eligible populations of the respective universities for these services, but estimates that were offered suggested 9-12% was a reasonable figure. Such statistics could vary significantly according to time of year and depend on whether one is considering all face-to-face contact, or just the longer interviews or appointments. Many of the actual enquiries look like those that would be brought to a drop-in session or short appointment. For specific comparison, at Strathclyde, during the period April – September 2003, 193 email enquiries may be compared to 597 long appointments, face-to-face with an adviser, 243 short appointments, and 208 “CV drop in” sessions. Local variations between services are considerable, however, including varying degrees of involvement in group work and the flexibility of arrangements for one-to-one, face-to-face appointments.

**8.4.8 A hypothesis.** No records are generally kept of all the traffic that passes through a careers centre. Granted all the considerable uncertainties of the calculations, it may, nevertheless, be a viable hypothesis for the future that the ratio of use of face-to-face compared to email services could be expected to be something like 4 to 1. Such a hypothesis, like all hypotheses, remains to be tested. It may, nevertheless, help with practical management forecasting, or provide the basis for more in-depth research.

**8.4.9 Achievement as expected.** However, in these terms, the project’s achievements in numbers of users look very much within the realms of what might have been expected and the main problem is the relatively over-ambitious initial “target” set.

**8.5 Should numbers be a target at all?**

**8.5.1 Strathclyde,** as already mentioned, took a somewhat different stance towards the “target” from the start. Their previous experience with the West of Scotland Graduate Careers Email Service (Gow, 2002) was partly responsible for this. For them, the issue was not one of attaining high numbers of users, nor of proving that an email service could be provided, but of the “effectiveness” of providing careers support by email to those who used it, within an integrated set of “methods by which our students and graduates receive advice, guidance and information”. This stance, as has already been said, affected the positioning of the email access point on the website, and the level and type of marketing undertaken. “We do not have numerical targets for how many students and graduates we will advise face-to-face or for how many we want to come to seminars. Neither did we, therefore, set numerical targets for Email-Us”. However, they still received 280 enquiries in seven months, which, in percentage terms as far as these can be calculated, was not dissimilar from the results achieved elsewhere.

**8.6 Total enquiries received**

**8.6.1 Of course,** there still are practical managerial arguments for trying to assess the likely uptake of any such new service, and to decide on realistic levels of resource provision for it. As was pointed out earlier, the project was a research project, and the size of the sample is not
immaterial to the validity of the results. In our case, the sample was a total (across all five centres) of 1,362 enquiries received.

8.7 What topics were most commonly asked about?

8.7.1 The fact that the software enables the local service to pre-categorise enquiries by topic means that the categories are not necessarily the same ones in each of the pilot services. Strathclyde, for example, set 12 topic headings - from which users are obliged to select one (see figure 1 below). These, then, also determined whether the query was answered by a receptionist, SES co-ordinator, a member of information staff, or a careers adviser – a feature unique to Strathclyde’s particular approach to the project (see table 1 below).

Figure 1. Strathclyde - Number of email enquiries by category

Table 1. How Strathclyde matched categories of enquiry to staff roles:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How to explore your options</th>
<th>Advisers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career changes</td>
<td>Advisers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying vacancies</td>
<td>Advisers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making applications</td>
<td>Advisers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews and assessment centres</td>
<td>Advisers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further study</td>
<td>Advisers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on a specific job/employer</td>
<td>Information staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internships/vacation work</td>
<td>Student Employment Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time work whilst studying</td>
<td>Student Employment Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working abroad</td>
<td>Information staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on qualifications</td>
<td>Information staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careers service facilities and events</td>
<td>Receptionist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8.7.2 **Bradford**, by contrast, had only eight headings, and did not necessarily use them to allocate enquiries to particular staff members. In descending order of frequency there were enquiries categorised as applications, further study, job sources, occupational choice, placements, working abroad, selection interviews, and “other”. These are reported as numbers of enquiries, in figure 2 above.

8.7.3 Middlesex’s top category for enquiries, by contrast, was Postgraduate study (28%), followed closely by Finding a Job (26%), then Career Choice (16%), Applying for Teacher Training (12%) and Module Choice (4%). Other, uncategorised enquiries amounted to 19% of the total.

8.7.4 At De Montfort most enquiries (37%) were about searching for jobs, followed by application enquiries (20%).

8.7.5 Liverpool Hope with a high proportion of students studying and aiming at education as a career had as their second highest category, not surprisingly, enquiries about PGCE courses (19%). The largest single category, however, was described as “General Guidance and Information” (38%). Other categories included Postgraduate study (other than PGCE) (15%), Career Change (12%), Job Applications and Interviews (9%), and CVs (7%). Information about careers and jobs related to my degree, what can I do with a degree in X, and where to find job vacancies, were frequent queries.

However, the fact that for much of the year Hope had no website to speak of, may have meant that the email service stood in on some occasions for topics that might otherwise have been dealt with on such a site.

8.7.6 **Localised content analysis.** Within the system used in all services, users are invited to select from a drop-down menu of topics, which then sets the strapline for each enquiry. However, as we can see, this menu is increasingly determined by the local service and has, in most cases, been amended as experience grew. Thus, a kind of informal content analysis was carried
out by some of the services which may have involved recategorising a user’s own selection as to what a query might be about. Even where the same category heading is used, therefore, allocation to this is not necessarily the same from one service to another. This flexibility of categorisation makes it impossible to compare statistics reliably across the five sites.

8.7.7 **Guidance or information?** We might speculate that the differences between Strathclyde and the four other pilot services could be due to users having already worked through the website before reaching the email access point, hence having answered more of the specific, informational questions, leaving the broader “guidance-related” issues to float to the top. Liverpool Hope, where a much more personalised service enabled users to email a named adviser, may also have picked up more general guidance issues than those services who stuck to a team approach and who tended to have more of those enquiries which users can formulate clearly for themselves and perhaps feel more comfortable presenting – to do with getting a job, handling applications and interviews etc. But this is a purely speculative hypothesis that needs to be tested in future research. Issues to do with further study appear, however, to be a common and popular feature across all services. Some of these issues are taken up in a later section on the content of the emails themselves.

8.7.8 For comparison, the national Graduate Questiontime service classified its queries under 13 headings of which the largest groups were: Job hunting (20%); Further study (18%); What to do with my degree (15%); Career change (14%); Specific occupational query (9%) and Application forms and CVs (6%).

8.7.9 Among all these statistics “Further Study” seems to be a generally common and significant query area, and should be analysed further, although obviously the category may not have been similarly used by all the services involved. Comparisons across the services must, therefore, be treated with caution.

8.8 **Time management issues**

8.8.1 **How long do they take to answer?**

i. The estimate for this varied widely from a few minutes to an hour and a half, with most being around the length of a normal “drop-in” style encounter. De Montfort, for example, suggested the average time for them was fourteen minutes (by comparison with a 30 minute allocation for a face-to-face interview). “What takes time” said one adviser, “is when you get an enquiry that is way out of your normal area.” This, of course, was a specific issue only in those services who chose to take the strict team approach, whereby the duty adviser takes the next query from the mailbox on a first-come-first-served basis, and, hence, the normal allocation by subject specialism among careers advisers is bypassed - the contrast, again, is mainly with Strathclyde’s approach. The familiarity of the adviser with the subject area of the enquiry is thus a key factor, and less experienced/recently qualified advisers may also take longer - this could also have a beneficial professional development aspect.

ii. The nature of the question itself is also, naturally, a key determinant. More coherent and focused questions also take less time to answer. The quality and precision of the pre-access “registration” process can have an impact on this: users can be encouraged to think more precisely what their enquiry is about, but such pre-emption needs to be used with caution. In replying, the use of information templates, developed for the national service for graduates, and adapted for use in the local projects by some of the local services, as well as the build-up of a database of responses to common questions over time, means that as a service acquires experience it can also cut and paste more often to deal with “standard” questions.
iii. At Bradford, specifically to meet the demand for on-line resources to respond to questions, a Resources Database was created, an extension of one already in use in the information room to keep track of resources available and aid ordering of materials. It was modified to be searchable by the AGCAS occupational index and other general categories, and extended to include details of useful websites as well as resources available in the information room. It can now be used by advisers to search for resources both on paper and on-line, that may be relevant to the queries they are answering. At the time of this report, the database had over 550 resources and was constantly growing.

iv. Neither saving nor costing time. A good summary of the issue was provided during a conversation at Strathclyde with the deputy head of service: “All of us now know of times when we have dealt with an email and it has taken us two minutes to deal with, and that is tremendous, because at some point in the past that person would have got a twenty-minute appointment. So there are times in which it is very time efficient. Equally, there are other times when it takes twenty minutes or longer because you have to go away and look something up. So it is neither greatly saving time, nor costing time….”

8.8.2 How do you allocate staff time?
Time management is also, of course, about the way in which the service allocates staff time to cover the emails received. Guaranteed turnaround times varied from three days (the most usual) to five. Strathclyde’s is five days, and this extra allowance may be a concomitant of their more personalised and specialist approach: with an interchangeable team operating an essentially anonymous service, it is easier to deliver shorter turnaround times. With a high proportion of part-time advisers, and sticking to subject specialisations, it is harder to guarantee shorter, swifter responses, especially over weekends. There were several other ways of managing time, however. Some services required staff to set aside specific time in their diaries every week to deal with email enquiries, others simply made it a function of the duty officer for that week to deal with all email enquiries. At De Montfort, emails were simply “slotted in as they come” with no allocated times as such. The latter approach is, of course, more feasible where the number of emails coming in is relatively low and would need to be modified if there were a significant and sustained surge in enquiries. At Bradford, for example, “a total of 18 hours of adviser time was allocated per week, with a reduced 50% capacity during non-teaching/vacation periods. A timetable was implemented to attempt to ensure that advisers’ time was spread evenly over the week so that emails could be dealt with quickly and efficiently” (Wilson and Linley, 2003).

8.8.3 Who runs it?
There were also interesting differences between the pilot sites in terms of which staff were involved – Strathclyde, for example, used all grades of staff from a range of teams, according to the subject of the enquiry, whereas Middlesex only used careers advisers. At Liverpool Hope, all enquiries were taken by one adviser. At Bradford and De Montfort, the project was managed and administered on a day-to-day basis by information officers, who, at Bradford, also regularly fielded a proportion of the questions.

8.8.4 What are the peak times for use?
i. Most places experienced peak usage in the first half of the academic year and a relatively lower demand after that. This reflects the use of Graduate Questiontime nationally to some extent, but the national service also gets very busy from June through to September. Some of the local services tended to get busier then also – Bradford’s figures are given opposite as an example – see figure 3 - but the second peak in the summer is less prominent. Others had rather fewer emails later in the
academic year. Middlesex had 92 enquiries in the first quarter of the year, but 38 and 44 in the third and fourth quarters respectively. This again, may reflect local circumstances – timing of exams etc – but the degree of variation over a year needs to be taken into account in any management thinking about resource allocation.

ii. An intriguing analysis of the times at which enquirers send off their email messages also throws light on the need or otherwise for a 24/7 service. Strathclyde offered the opinion that a significant number of enquiries had been input outside normal office hours, suggesting that users may not get down to thinking about such issues until after the normal day has finished. However, Bradford found that 68% of use was during normal office hours (9-5) and 22.5% on weekdays outside these hours. 9.5% of queries were made at weekends. The proportions suggest that for some people, email is actually a preferred or more convenient mode of access to the service, even when face-to-face facilities are available. This, again will be affected by the perceived accessibility of the physical careers centre itself, and comparisons across services will have to take wide variations in other factors into account. As Bradford pointed out, their campus has “a very high proportion of computers to students and, of course, access to the internet is free from anywhere on campus”.

iii. Users of the system at Liverpool Hope said that “they like the freedom to ask their questions whenever they feel they need to, and can then take their time to digest the advice and guidance received.” The adviser also commented that “likewise, it provides me with the flexibility to fit my working hours around other commitments.” She added that “questions have been received late at night, first thing in the morning, and even on Christmas Day!” - needless to say, it was not a requirement of the project that advisers open their mailboxes late at night or on Christmas Day.

Figure 3. Bradford - Monthly e-guidance queries
8.9 Who do enquiries generally come from?

8.9.1 In terms of subject disciplines (either current, or those of the first degree for graduates), there is again, and naturally, variation between institutions, because of the different sizes of faculties and disciplines at different places. At Strathclyde, where the largest number of face-to-face enquiries come from students in law, engineering, and accountancy, the same emphasis appeared in the email service. “Our heaviest users are those who were always the heaviest users of the careers service anyway.” At Middlesex, also, students from computing and IT, social sciences, accountancy and finance, and law were the largest sources of queries, in that order, but in general enquiries there appear to have been “spread across the subject areas” and included art and design students.

8.9.2 In terms of user locations, not everyone was able to measure this. Bradford recorded that 49% of enquiries came from users in Bradford, suggesting that “even when distance is not an issue, email is seen as a useful contact method”. (Wilson and Linley, 2003, p 18). Another 12% came from elsewhere in Yorkshire, 28% from elsewhere in the UK and 11% from abroad. 51% were thus defined as ‘distance clients’ as they may “experience difficulty accessing some of our services due to their location”. For De Montfort also, there was particular satisfaction that “distance learners seemed to find the service so helpful, allowing them to access careers information, advice and guidance, often for the first time”. Of those Bradford enquirers from abroad, “a significant number were either from graduates living outside the country or prospective students enquiring about course and work permits.” (Ibid. p 18). This echoes the finding of the West of Scotland Graduate Email Careers Service (see Appendix 3, Section 2).

8.9.3 In terms of personal characteristics, there were, again, significant differences from place to place. At Bradford, for example, 53% of enquirers were male and 47% female, whereas the proportions were almost exactly reversed at Middlesex - 55% female and 45% male. This variation is, therefore, less likely to be due to the medium used than to the gender and subject balances at particular universities. For comparison, the Graduate Questiontime gender statistics of users are 60% female, 40% male.

8.9.4 Because email is a relatively anonymous medium, and because the services chose not to instigate a lengthy registration procedure, which might have been off-putting, more details of personal characteristics are not generally available. In their evaluation of customer feedback, however, Middlesex chose to ask about age and ethnic background. Of the relatively small number (38) who replied to this survey, the largest single ethnic group were Asian (15), compared to 8 White, 8 Black, and 6 others, with one who withheld information. In terms of age, the same group identified themselves as mainly in the 18-25 age group (21 people), but 8 were over thirty and 2 of these were 41 or older. Again, the proportions seem likely to reflect local characteristics of the institution and its “catchment area” rather than the nature of email.

“Some non-Strathclyders were ignoring the fact that Email-Us! is not for them. That gave us a dilemma – do we answer or not? In the end we have decided to take a middle course. This means that we reply – it would be rude not to – but do not spend time as we would with our own clients in giving detailed answers. We are most likely simply to refer to Prospects.ac.uk and point out that they are not eligible users of Email-Us! though we have been happy to refer on in this instance. If they follow up, our stance is that we shall not reply again. Fortunately this has not happened often, as we would have difficulties here at Strathclyde in setting up a password-protected system.”

8.10 When they are referred, who are they referred to?

8.10.1 Bradford analysed the resources or services to which their users were referred as a result of their enquiries (see figure 4 below). The vast majority of referrals (57%) were to on-line resources including their own website (13%), and the Prospects website (24%). 23% were referred to paper-based resources, including those in the careers centre information room. 4% were referred to Prospects Planner, off-line, while Mutual Aid got another 4%. 12% were referred for careers appointments, face-to-face. This last figure could confirm the impression, mentioned in other sections, that about 12% of enquiries might be deemed to require a “guidance” response and that advisers have tended to deal with this by referring enquirers off-line to face-to-face appointments, rather than attempting to deal with the issues in any depth on-line.
We engaged actively with Graduate Prospects in the design of the evaluation tools, having considerable expertise at Strathclyde of conducting the four levels of Evaluation (after the Donald Kilpatrick model). The resulting confirmation, combined with level 1: reaction evaluation, provides good feedback on the usability of, and immediate reaction to, using Email-Us! We feel that it is important to combine the confirmation (of receipt of an email query) with seeking feedback – when the two were separate we suspect that few even read the request for feedback thinking that it was a duplicate of the confirmation. We were particularly keen to be able to get feedback after the reply had been given so that we could identify that the users’ needs were met, not just that the technology works and they like having the opportunity to use email to get careers support form us. We are grateful for the staff at Graduate Prospects taking this on, appreciating that it was a technological challenge.

Report from University of Strathclyde Careers Service (McCulloch, 2003)

Clearly, all the pilot services had objectives they hoped to attain, (see chapter 5) but how would they tell they had achieved them? At a workshop in January 2003, representatives of the pilot services agreed that the following were the most important indicators of success:

- customer satisfaction
- integration
- range and reach
- quality
- effectiveness
- sustainability

9.1 Customer satisfaction

It was broadly agreed that user satisfaction was key. If the service was widely used, clearly meeting a need, and users said so, continuing to use it, for example, after graduation, and recommending it to others, all services would regard that as success.

The absolute numbers using the service are clearly one piece of evidence here. As we have seen they are broadly comparable to those of the more established and successful Graduate Questiontime service. To decide if this indicates customer satisfaction, data will need to be collected for at least another year to establish whether the trend is upwards or not. Asking about how users found out about the service could establish if word of mouth was a major factor, for example. At present, what little information we have on this point seems to suggest that on-line sources (e.g. references from the Prospects website, or the local service’s own website) are the most significant.

Having only used the service once, and finding it to be excellent, I don’t feel that any improvements are necessary.

I found the advice and service excellent and will definitely come back to you via email in the future as I know you’ll reply asap. Many thanks for all your help so far!

I didn’t find anything wrong with the service. I had a very quick and helpful reply and this led to me finding the course I was looking for and I am now enrolled on the course. Thank you very much

(Responses at Bradford to the question as to what could be improved in the service. From Wilson and Linley, 2003)

9.1.2 However, the system itself provides, as already described (see chapter 3), regular feedback mechanisms for sampling customer satisfaction. At Middlesex, for example, 95% of respondents said it had been a “useful facility” and 97% found it user-friendly, and the remainder in both cases merely said they “did not know”. Similar feedback has been received elsewhere - see table 2 page 32 for Strathclyde’s customer feedback data. Liverpool Hope’s e-guidance adviser commented “To date there has been no negative response.” Bradford carried out two feedback days on campus where students were invited to fill in a questionnaire on both the email and traditional services. Three per cent of the sample had used the email services and, of
managing e-guidance 33

Indicators of success

and the Bradford survey confirms what has been known from earlier surveys (e.g. Offer et al, 2001 p.10) – a significant and increasing majority of students are using the Internet for career purposes on a regular (monthly, weekly or daily) basis. Only 17% of the survey sample said they “never” did so - however, even a minority as small as this must, of course, be taken into account. In addition, 73% agreed or strongly agreed with a further statement that “being able to access careers information and advice whilst not on campus is important to me” and 24% of students agreed or strongly agreed that “I prefer to communicate via email rather than in person” while only 42% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Finally, while 65% indicated they would prefer to speak to an adviser rather than use email when seeking individual careers advice, 9% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 26% refused to agree or disagree with the statement. Thus, there is evidence of at least some students for whom email is the preferred mode of interaction, even when face-to-face is available. At Middlesex from a small sample of ten students followed up by the system, five said they would prefer email or web-based services for future careers advice, while one opted for the telephone and only one for face-to-face contact. Three remained uncertain. Liverpool Hope’s adviser commented that “not everyone feels comfortable talking face-to-face with a stranger. The e-guidance facility provides for impersonal communication initially, although a relationship can then be built from the security of their own environment.” (Mair. G., 2003)

Feedback from the system is provided in two stages – the first customer satisfaction questionnaire is illustrated in table 2 page 32. This occurs as soon as the student has submitted their careers query. The student is asked to complete a few questions on the ease of use and accessibility of the e-guidance service.

9.1.3 Resistance to the medium of the service is clearly low – the only problem in increasing numbers would seem to be to make it, and keep it, more widely known. There is clearly a sizeable pool of untapped users on many campuses. On the whole, Internet access is not difficult for the bulk of current university students, those who hadn’t, just under half (49%) said “I didn’t know about it”, while 29% said “I don’t currently need careers help”. Interestingly, 18% said “I would prefer to speak to someone personally”. Other reasons given included – “It’s easy to drop by on campus”, “already have a job”, “too lazy, not a priority for my time”, “looking for a job in another country”, and “delay in response: not everything can be mentioned”. Asked if they would use the email service in future, 31% said “definitely”, and 36% “probably” and only 6% said “no”. The reasons given by this last group included several who already had definite career destinations and only two clear negatives “too much like spam” and “hate email – much too much email”. In the light of the current general problems email services of all kinds are having with “information pollution” these tiny straws in the wind may be worth keeping a watch on for the future (see, e.g. Coughlan, S. 2003).

Thank you so much for all your help... I always find your feedback extremely useful and am very appreciative of all the time and trouble you take to make it highly relevant to my question.

Thank you very much for being so prompt in your reply. The information you have given has been very useful.

I am a lot clearer about what’s going on and I like to tell you thank you for the information that you have giving me.

(Comments made on the Middlesex email service, MEG. Farrar, E., 2003)

9.1.4 Feedback from the system is provided in two stages – the first customer satisfaction questionnaire is illustrated in table 2 page 32. This occurs as soon as the student has submitted their careers query. The student is asked to complete a few questions on the ease of use and accessibility of the e-guidance service.
Table 2. Strathclyde - Customer Feedback, stage 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It was useful to have the facility to email my question</td>
<td>134 yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It linked from a relevant topic or area on the website</td>
<td>97 yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to submit my query was explained well</td>
<td>130 yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understood why I needed to give details before submitting my query</td>
<td>133 yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was user friendly</td>
<td>131 yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was easy to find</td>
<td>117 yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How did you find out about the opportunity to email for advice?**

- Our website                                                               | 88       |
- Referral by careers service                                              | 16       |
- Marketing/flyer/poster                                                    | 3        |
- Word of mouth                                                             | 17       |
- Prospects.ac.uk                                                           | 4        |
- Other                                                                     | 10       |

9.1.5 This is followed up later with a second request for more in-depth feedback five days after the adviser’s reply has been sent to the student. Table 3 below shows an example.

Table 3. Strathclyde - Customer Feedback, stage 2 (28 responses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am clear about the main issues relating to my enquiry</td>
<td>10 yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand the next steps I should take</td>
<td>16 yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have the information I need to move on</td>
<td>17 yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How helpful did you find any resources recommended to you?**

- Helped a lot                                                              | 13       |
- Helped a little                                                           | 1        |
- Made no difference                                                        | 6        |
- Made things worse                                                         | 1        |
- Did not use                                                               | 3        |

**The reply covered all the points you raised**                            | 20 yes   |
**The reply was provided in an acceptable period of time.**               | 27 yes   |
**Email-us! is a good addition to our Careers Service**                    | 21 yes   |

**Which method would you prefer to use to gain careers advice in future?**

- Internet/e-mail                                                           | 16       |
- Face-to-face                                                              | 10       |
- Telephone                                                                 | 0        |
9.1.6 Strathclyde comment particularly on these figures: “Our evaluation of face-to-face interactions also shows that clients are not always clear about the issues or the next steps to take. This is most prevalent amongst those who are at a very early stage of career thinking but who hope for a quick fix. A closer look at the feedback identifies those who responded ‘no’ and ‘don’t know’ as mainly those whose queries were about exploring options or who wanted information about the Careers Service, postgrad study etc. We’d therefore recommend adding a new option ‘not relevant’.”

9.2 Integration.
A more complex set of indicators is subsumed by the word “integration”.

9.2.1 Impact on other services and resources. In one sense, this may be about the impact of the email service on other services and resources – are they used more or less because of this? Watts (Watts et al., 1996, p.276) summarises the use of computer-based resources as stand-alone, supported (in which the user is seen, perhaps briefly, before or after the use of the system), incorporated (the computer system is used within another guidance intervention), or progressive (the use of the computer is preceded and/or followed by other guidance interventions in a developmental sequence). The progressive model seems to have been quite common in some of the pilot services. Liverpool Hope, as we have already seen, used “careers interview appointment cards” to market the email service explicitly as a preparation for the interview and the adviser there commented that “the Project Team does not see e-guidance as replacing the careers interview, but as an additional complementary resource” and that “many like the opportunity to access both mediums.” (Mair, 2003). Moreover, “students and graduates also use the e-guidance service to follow up information given to them at face-to-face interviews.” At Middlesex, referral to existing services was “frequent” where the user was a current student. “We are quite keen for them to come in to the website first, because there is a lot of information there…”

9.2.2 Fitting into the total package. Does the email system fit in as part of a package that includes other services and resources, does it promote their uses, or does it stand alone and disconnect from them? What does the system look like with or without it? This is reminiscent also of some of the points made in chapter 4 of Careers Services: Technology and the Future (Offer et al., 2001). If the email link is a link among links – and therefore subject to the need-based rules for links, (Offer, 2003, p. 23) – as it was on the Strathclyde website - it is, therefore, more clearly a part of the whole system of resources and services offered, with a clear role to play. The other four services, however, chose to make the email service an alternative reception point, which the user could choose to access instead of exploring the website or visiting the careers centre. There are arguments for this approach, chiefly that the choice of email as the access point to the careers service is a “learning style” issue, but it can mean advisers have to do more work down the line to ensure that enquirers access relevant other resources and services.

9.2.3 Other projects and initiatives – IMPACT, for example – should be integrated with the email service and one could expect referrals across the boundaries with other services and projects and from tutors within the academic departments, both from and to the email service. That means for some services, referrals both ways across the boundaries of traditional student services. Guidelines for such referrals should also be in place. While there is anecdotal evidence of conversations and informal referrals between careers adviser and other professionals in student services, there is no hard evidence that this has been taken much further. Only in Bradford, where the IMPACT project works within the four universities in West Yorkshire, has a project officer with such a remit apparently worked across the boundaries. Here “she used emails to encourage participation in

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1 IMPACT – a positive action scheme managed by Bradford and working across the four universities of West Yorkshire.
the Project and to start a dialogue and these now form a substantial element of her interactions. She believes that, for many people in her target group, the comfort of making the first contact by email was a crucial step in building up their confidence to seek further detailed help." (Wilson and Linley, 2003, p.17). Liverpool Hope also mention the positive response from other academic staff who had begun to recommend it to their students – “the service has also strengthened our links and knowledge of other departments and services within the university due to the variety of questions that have been received….” and the work done on this has “assisted in forging stronger links with other members of staff within the Hope Community.” (Mair, G. 2003).

9.2.4 If the email service is integrated, it will be filling an identified gap in provision, and staff will understand clearly why they use it or recommend its use in certain circumstances, as opposed to other particular resources or services. The end users too will understand what it can offer them in their terms, and what it can do for them, in comparison with other ways of accessing and using the resources of the careers service. In conversation with staff at the pilot services, we have a sense that a clear understanding of the areas of need that are appropriately dealt with by email, is firming up. Strathclyde’s development of the categories list as a means of identifying the needs appropriate to the medium is the most formal confirmation of this. Users with other needs that cannot be subsumed under these headings are advised to make contact in other ways. This is based on similar guidelines to those used in the physical reception area of the service. The larger the careers service, the more important this managerial clarity may be, while for places like Liverpool Hope, the flexibility of delivery that comes from a small service closely in touch with its clientele, means that the contract with the client can be more easily negotiated at a personal level. They also experimented further than some of the other pilots in linking the use of e-guidance with their curriculum-based work. In Bradford “the CAVE service is no longer marketed as a ‘stand-alone’ option, but as an integrated element of our guidance services, with an explanation of its benefits and its limitations”. (Wilson and Linley, 2003).

9.3 Range, reach, and boundaries

9.3.1 Range. There was clearly an intention to extend existing services to existing clients, beyond the normal parameters of careers centre opening hours and the physical geography of the campus and careers centre. The email service’s ambitious targets may have been partly fuelled by this intention. As we have seen, the email services certainly were available and, more importantly, used, outside normal office hours. Many services, however, also wanted to see the service covering a range of topics. The success of this we have already documented in chapter 8 while some of the issues that success raises are broached in chapter 10. As several of the services point out, the success of the email facility does not seem to have entailed any visible reduction in the demand for other, face-to-face services.

9.3.2 Reach. As well as serving a lot of people and hence meeting the targets of the project, the pilot services generally hope to reach different types of groups, in particular those who are not currently well represented among careers service users. The fact of having a range of users and reaching particular target audiences, is as important for some as the total numbers. Although the new element in this project, as opposed to its predecessors, was the setting up of a systematic managed resource for current students, the service was obviously also including graduates in its remit. Graduates did use the service (45% of the CAVE service’s enquiries came from Bradford graduates, for example) but a particular new, though small, group were prospective students – 2% of enquiries in Bradford’s case. The Liverpool Hope service was marketed on Open Days/Evenings and Information Days and
9.3.3 Testing the boundaries. It was hoped the email service would test the boundaries of the medium, giving genuine evidence about what is in fact possible and how it can be developed. The chief of these issues are dealt with in chapter 10 in more detail.

9.4 Quality
This has to be maintained, here as elsewhere. The same standards cover email as cover other aspects of the service, though it may be a little harder to define exactly how the Matrix standards, for example, apply in the relatively unfamiliar context. Users should also be able to access the service whenever they want it and expect to get a response within the stated time span. The same scrutiny of the process, as is applied to interviews or drop-in sessions, should probably also be applied to email queries and responses. There is no specific evidence that this was done formally at any of the pilot services, and the national service, Graduate Questiontime, remains the only one to have received Matrix accreditation in this way. This will presumably only be a matter of time.

9.5 Effectiveness

9.5.1 It should be judged effective also by the staff, who needed to be convinced that this is indeed an effective way of using their time and extending their skill and knowledge to a wider audience. Staff feedback was largely positive. Many were relieved that the demands of the email service had not swamped them after all.

9.5.2 The adviser responsible for the service at Liverpool Hope concludes: “My overall evaluation of the e-guidance service is extremely positive. I feel it enables us to provide a valued and essential service to our students and graduates…. this is a respected and appreciated method of careers advice and guidance delivery.” (Mair, 2003). The e-guidance system was “easy to use and manage. I particularly appreciate the monitoring of the statistics facility. It has proved an invaluable tool in highlighting the peaks and troughs in our service and mirrored that of the face-to-face interviews in our office.” This positive assessment is echoed across all the services. Everyone wants to continue using it.

9.5.3 Strathclyde, whose reasons for taking it on had a lot to do with wanting to streamline the existing use of email for staff, commented “We are highly satisfied that with most traffic now coming through Email-Us! we have a streamlined, comprehensive and easily managed system. All advisers, information staff and receptionist have benefited. With regard to management information, the way in which the system is set up to provide graphs of all key elements of usage is excellent… Staff feedback is very positive… The implementation was very smooth… Using Email-Us felt very natural to us from the outset.” (McCulloch, 2003)

9.5.4 At Middlesex the project coordinator commented that “All the careers advisers quickly became adept at using the software and constructing the responses even in subject areas that were unfamiliar. However, the overall impression is that what is being offered to
students is information and advice, not guidance” (This point will be taken up again in chapter 10.) “All careers advisers have found it to be a useful addition to the way in which we interact with students.” (Middlesex, 2003)

As a newly qualified careers adviser in my first post, I personally found e-guidance an excellent way of professionally developing my advice and guidance skills and occupational knowledge. It allowed me to research my responses and, if necessary, to check with colleagues on the validity of my information.

A highly successful project that has achieved a significant proportion of its aims.

I think it fills a gap for those who can’t or don’t feel able to access us.

I believe that I’m giving information rather than guidance. As there’s no concurrent exchange of dialogue, I find myself guessing at what they really want and sometimes giving them several possible angles to cover the topic.

I think it’s a valuable addition to our range of services from an information and advice perspective. But I agree that I don’t think it’s guidance. Maybe if it were a more personalised system where the student knew they could enter into a dialogue with the same adviser it would develop that way.

Comments on the service from staff of the various pilot services

9.6 Sustainability

9.6.1 At the same time, it must also be a sustainable resource, which demands realistic time allocations, and it should attract core funding once the experimental project period is over. As Gow (2002b) remarks “The fact that the West of Scotland Graduate Careers Email Service did not survive beyond the pilot phase due to the lack of ongoing funding, simply emphasises the fact that the demand, the desire and the expertise are all in place, and it is simply an issue of resourcing which now holds back the development of this resource.” (page 31). Lack of resourcing can be in terms of both funds and also of IT support.

9.6.2 As the Head of Service at Liverpool Hope said: “E-Guidance is not an easy or cheap option. Without CSU (now Graduate Prospects) funding we would not have been able to commit a full member of staff to it. Nor could we have developed the IT framework.”

9.6.3 All services seem intent on continuing the use of the software, and Graduate Prospects is to continue providing it through Prospects Net. There is, therefore, for the time being at least, a sustainable future for e-guidance. All see it as an enhancement to their existing services and an easy-to-use and effective tool, which they hope to develop further.
10. Sampling the content. “Yes, but is it guidance?”

10.1 A common objection to the notion of e-guidance is that while it may be possible to deliver information and advice by email, “guidance” properly so-called is not feasible, or not effective, via email. This view was debated most recently by Marris et al (2003) where the argument was put forward that “Most e-guidance is a one-off response to a presenting query…As a consequence, there is an inherent lack of dialogue, which makes it impossible to draw on the effective questioning techniques and counselling skills that are necessary to facilitate guidance. Guidance becomes, in most cases, diluted to information provision, which can be unhelpful or misleading in the absence of an understanding of the client’s decision-making context.”

10.2 Echoes of this view were heard from some, but not all, advisers during the present project. The Middlesex report makes a similar but shorter point (see section 9.5.4 above), continuing “the general feeling is that because of the one-way nature of the communication it is not possible to enter into what would be recognised as a true guidance process.” Comments of some careers advisers in some other project sites have echoed this position. On the other hand, the head of service at Liverpool Hope took an alternative view:

“Several heads of service have expressed concerns that E-Guidance is not guidance in the professional sense. In our experience, such claims are unjustified. Throughout the project, evaluations have been excellent. The quality of the service has been beyond doubt. If guidance means, ultimately, helping an individual to become autonomous (see McNair, 1997) then there is no reason why EGI should be less effective than traditional guidance models.”

10.3 It is important but difficult to clarify what we mean by “guidance”. Offer (2003) argues that “the distinction between ‘guidance’ and ‘information’ may not stand up to scrutiny - guidance effectively subsumes information: the two terms are not strictly alternatives.” On this view, guidance is composed of specific outcomes, such as those outlined in DOTS (Law and Watts, 1977) or FIRST (Bedford, 1982) delivered by activities, such as the UDACE (1986) seven activities of guidance, of which informing, and advising are as much a part as counselling or advocacy. “Guidance” is then the umbrella term, which encompasses and describes the whole. If this is so, it seems self-evident that email can and does deliver “guidance”, for example, in the description of feedback from the national Graduate Questiontime project, below.

Using a set of five statements for agreement based on the FIRST model of guidance outcomes (Bedford, 1982a and b), it was established that as a result of using the service, 42% of clients agreed they felt clearer about what they wanted to do (Focus), 33% indicated they were better informed, about the opportunities (Information), 34% that they were more realistic (Realism), 36% that they were more aware of the range of options to choose from (Scope), and 41% that they were more able to take action to get what they wanted (Tactics). (Madahar, 2003, p.40. erratum)

10.4 On the other hand we might resort to official definitions.

10.4.1 The Learning and Skills Council defines guidance as

“An in-depth interview or other activity conducted by a trained adviser, which helps clients to explore a range of options, to relate information to their own needs and circumstance and to make decisions about their career (i.e. their progression in learning and work). It may or may not include psychometric assessment” (IAG Funding Guidance 2003/2004, p.3).

10.4.2 The Guidance Council defines guidance for the user as helping you to
“explore your options, relate information to your own needs and circumstances, and make decisions about your career. This could include helping you to set goals for learning and work.”


10.4.3 “Exploring options” was one of the categories used to classify enquirers’ questions in more than one service – e.g. Strathclyde (para. 8.7.1 figure 1, page 25) and other elements of this definition also relate to topic headings offered at registration for the email service in several of our pilot sites e.g. “Career Changes” (Strathclyde), “Career choice…. Career implications of module choice” (Middlesex), “Occupational choice” (Bradford), “Career change”, “General guidance and information” (Liverpool Hope). It appears, then, that the services were at least expecting to handle what might officially have been designated “guidance” issues.

10.5 Key elements of the guidance process? All this does not necessarily get to the bottom of what the original objections were about. These are coming from experienced and trained guidance practitioners rather than policy makers. They are essentially saying three things. Firstly, the lack of non-verbal communication means that the normal process of establishing a relationship or rapport with the client is impossible. The email relationship lacks warmth. “You can’t show empathy by email”, as one adviser claimed. Secondly, interaction and “dialogue” are absent as a result, so that identification of the issues that concern the client, and, hence, their needs, becomes very much more difficult. Another way of putting this might be to say that of the UDACE (1986) activities, informing and advising may be possible by email, but not “counselling”, which involves helping the client to identify the issue where this is uncertain at first. To establish some evidence for or against such conclusions, it was necessary to take a closer look at what was going on in the enquiries themselves and the responses given to them by the advisers. Fortunately this is a more practical proposition with email than with face-to-face interviews.

10.6 Accordingly a random stratified sample of 75 email questions and answers (minus the name of adviser or client and other identifying features, to ensure no breach of confidentiality) was taken from the pilot services, and a further 15 for comparison from the national Graduate Questintime service. The selection ensured an equal sample from each service, and spread across the whole year or similar period of operation. We believe it therefore offers a representative selection of approximately 5% of the questions and responses in the pilot services. The responses were analysed by the project evaluator.

10.7 What guidance outcomes or needs? The pilot project questions and responses were dealt with separately from the national sample. The Bedford (1982) model of guidance outcomes, FIRST, was used to identify the issues raised and dealt with, as it seemed particularly appropriate, having been first developed as a tool for assessing careers adviser’s interviews. It involves five outcomes – focus (having narrowed down the options), information (being better informed about them), realism (being more realistic about oneself or the labour market), scope (having a greater awareness of the range of options one might choose from) and tactics (knowing what the next steps are and how best to achieve what one wants). More than one issue or need might, of course, be raised and dealt with in one question and answer. Our sample appeared to be predominantly about tactics (53%) and information (44%) – i.e. principally about job search and applications or relatively straightforward requests for information on choices that appeared to have been already made. However, focus (15%) and scope (29%) also occurred. Realism was an issue in only 5% of cases. We added a sixth issue – decision making – to examine where the client appeared to need help in choosing between alternatives, since this is not specifically addressed by the FIRST model. This seemed to be the issue in 7% of cases.
10.8 **How many need guidance?** If we accept that guidance (in the sense of “counselling” in the UDACE definitions) is necessary when the issue or some part of it may be unclear to the client, or when they appear uncertain themselves about their declared aims, then about 10% of the sample seemed to require guidance. They used words or phrases like “I’m a bit unsure…” “I’m rather unsure as to the options available to me”, “I’m not sure whether it’s the right field for me”. “I need time out to see if this is the right career for me”. They may also have demonstrated the need for clarification in presenting a number of conflicting ideas which one would have wanted to explore the reasons for in an equivalent face-to-face situation. Mention of a need or desire to change careers was also categorised as a possible trigger for “guidance” in calculating the numbers in the sample that might require it, as was a large number of open-ended questions from the enquirer. Clearly anyone who had no idea what to do was also in need of guidance.

10.9 **A typology of responses?** Advisers in the pilot project dealt with such “guidance” enquiries in a fairly conservative manner. The typology of websites (Offer et al, 2001) describes how these can alternatively funnel the user into off-line services, divert them to other on-line resources, or offer guidance directly on-site. A similar set of approaches is relevant here. Confronted by the need for guidance, the adviser more often than not funnelled the user towards a face-to-face appointment at the careers centre. There is nothing professionally wrong with this response, of course, and it may be fuelled by an accurate judgement that this matter is better handled that way or by a policy decision at management level. A small number, mainly from only one of the pilot services, “diverted” the guidance seeker to Prospects Planner (on- or off-line) as a relevant resource. Only rarely did anyone actually attempt to give guidance on-line – i.e. to ask the questions, prompt the thinking and suggest the process of self-examination that might be relevant to the uncertainty of the enquiry.

10.10 **Dialogue/interaction?** As far as one could see from the small number of reviewed enquiries, all of them were first questions, so there was almost no evidence of dialogue following on from the adviser’s responses. Since it was also rare for the adviser to ask clarifying questions in response to the query (in about 5% of cases), the initiative needed to start a dialogue via a second follow up email seems to rest with the client, although many of the responses from the adviser end with an invitation to come back for more help or information if required. In only two cases did the adviser, faced with a lack of detail, say something like “could you be a bit more specific about what sort of administration or which areas of research interest you?” and invite the client to think about their interests and work preferences, concluding “I look forward to hearing from you very soon with more details…” while providing immediate references to work on. Follow-up questions are a minority of the whole, in any case, as the general statistics show – in most cases about 10% – though the one service that had a named adviser (Liverpool Hope) appeared also to have a higher proportion of follow-up enquiries. This may be worth exploring further.

10.11 **The tone of the exchanges** is usually fairly neutral. The questions from the clients, especially current students, vary from very short, very specific one-line queries to longer accounts of a paragraph or more. Those which are longer still are generally from graduates or mature students with more to tell or more apparently complex questions. The advisers are professional, friendly, but objective, with occasional short, conventional expressions of warmth and feeling, such as “it is good to hear from our graduates” or “good luck with your options” or “I’m sorry to hear you have been unsuccessful in your….. application” or “we look forward to seeing you soon” or simply “thank you for your question”. Where these occur they do help in small ways to humanise the process, but could become mechanical “customer care” statements if used too regularly. By

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*Follow-up enquiries did occur, but did not fall within the random sampling*
contrast, an occasional statement such as “Please let me know how it works out for you” manages to suggest an on-going personal interest in the client’s future. A few advisers appeared to use quite terse, task-orientated answering styles that ignore anything but the direct question without wasting time on opening sentences or closing good wishes. In one case an adviser had obviously had a telephone conversation with the client (who gave their mobile number in the email) and used the email reply to follow this up. In another case the adviser had obviously met the client in person at a meeting the previous week and acknowledges that “it’s good to hear from you after meeting last week”. In only one case did an adviser use anything approaching what Murphy and Mitchell (1998) refer to as “descriptive immediacy” – in this instance, anticipating and describing the client’s (rather than the adviser’s) response. After asking whether the client has considered something that might appear obvious, the adviser demonstrates they are attempting to envisage the client’s reaction to what they are writing and adds “I’m sure you probably have, and are just now yelling at the screen of course!!!”.

10.12 Advisers in the Graduate Questiontime sample of 15 responses spread over two years (and similarly anonymous to the reviewer) have had considerable experience of using this particular email system and working around its constraints. The enquiries they get, it must be said, also give them more to go on in many cases – graduates have more of a story to tell, more complex situations to explain. The advisers respond to this. They also more often demonstrate their extra experience with a somewhat more systematically set out reply. Since their client group are less likely to be within easy reach of a careers centre it is perhaps understandable that only occasionally is that option referred to when the client apparently needs guidance. There are, equally, more serious attempts to give guidance on-line than in the pilot project, and this is tackled usually in a manner analogous to the way in which some websites offer advice to those who want to “know where to start” or haven’t any ideas. The adviser offers a series of questions and activities for the client to follow up individually that may help to bring about the focus they seek or increase the scope of their thinking, and help with decision making. About half the enquiries appear to need some sort of guidance or support for decision making. However, there is no more use of the question asking for more detail to enable the adviser to make a better response than in the pilot project sample. The responses read as if the adviser has to deal with the issue in one go, and cannot risk letting the client go without a full answer. It may be one of the features of this particular email system that advisers adopting the team approach do feel that they cannot wait for a second email from the client, since they will not necessarily be there to deal with it.

10.13 An effective dialogue. One of the responses in the national Graduate Questiontime sample, however, proved that an email service, even when set up like this one, can generate and sustain such a dialogue effectively. In this case, the enquirer and the advisers engaged in a sequence of four questions and responses to deal with a client who appeared initially to be having some considerable difficulties, and to be somewhat depressed. The evaluator could not tell, of course, if it was in fact the same adviser who provided all four replies, but although it seems unlikely, given the way the system works, the fact that one cannot tell is perhaps a tribute to the professionalism of the team. This was a case where a personal relationship was quite important and it is apparent the client felt listened to and supported, finally getting the job they needed and sounding much more emotionally balanced at the end. The adviser(s) display empathy throughout – e.g. “it made me very sad to hear your account of… try to stay positive….you really do sound more positive,… I’m so pleased everything has worked out for you…” Such little verbal touches make the exchange a much less impersonal affair and, in this case, appear
So can guidance be delivered by email? On the admittedly limited evidence we have here, the onus would seem to be on those who doubt it to prove that it can’t. Guidance outcomes are being achieved, according to client feedback, and dialogue is possible. It may be more difficult to interact with someone on-line, but some people may prefer to interact that way rather than face to face. The particular system being used here – especially when it is used in what we have defined as the “team approach” – may discourage some advisers from using it as the starting point for a dialogue, since they have come to see it as requiring a one-off answer to specific questions and tend to refer the user to off-line face-to-face services when they are obviously available rather than attempt on-line guidance. Using probing questions or asking for more detail and being confident enough to anticipate a follow-up response from the enquirer is not much in evidence at the moment, even where it would be useful. For example, one enquiry talked of a career change to a very different type of career, and the adviser responded simply with information about that new career rather than asking for the (unwritten) reasons that lay behind the desire to change, and on which a much more effective reply could have been sent. In a face-to-face situation this might have been probed, but it could also have been done on-line. Email typically, in private life, leads easily to conversation and interaction. Personal relationships are easily built elsewhere on-line. There is no obvious professional reason why relationship and dialogue should be impossible in interactions of this kind, except perhaps a practical managerial concern for costs and benefits. The concern in some of the pilot projects that one reason for low take-up of the service was the preference for a personalised service with a named adviser responding, may be a related issue. Two services took this line from the start, and others may move in that direction later, but the national service has already shown that even with anonymous advisers, dialogue and rapport can be built in certain cases.

Lessons from counselling and therapy. Beyond the evidence already cited, it is difficult to say how much the loss of non-verbal communication in guidance is a handicap. However, the related fields of counselling and psychotherapy, where feeling and emotions are generally more potent components of the conversation, and the topics are usually more personal and confidential, seem to have been able to cope with the problem despite ongoing controversy. Sampson et al. (1997) report that as a result of a survey, they discovered “275 practitioners currently offering direct counselling services across the Internet” – more than six years ago. The number has almost certainly multiplied since. Some of these will be by other media (chat, videoconferencing) but a substantial number are via email. Wright (2002), quoting Ginns, reported that the Samaritans dealt with 25,000 email contacts in 1999 and 57,000 in 2000 and were anticipating a similar rate of increase in 2001 (see also Baughan, 2000). Wright also quotes the analysis of a survey for the British Association for Counselling (Parker, 1999) where 30% of BAC members contacted responded, of whom 10% had used email for counselling with clients, 5% as an adjunct to face-to-face counselling, while another 10% felt strongly it was not possible. Griffiths and Cooper (2003, p.116) claim that on-line therapy appears to be growing “at exponential rates…” If
personal counselling and therapy can live with it, what is so special about guidance that it cannot?

10.16 But can you deliver empathy without non-verbal communication?

10.16.1 Apart from the examples we have already given, Murphy and Mitchell (1998) are perhaps one of the best exponents of the case for on-line empathy. In their account of therap-email, they specifically address the challenges of conveying human warmth and emotion in such a setting and the lack of non-verbal cues. They developed practical innovations such as “emotional bracketing” - stating explicitly (in brackets) the feelings the written words carry, to emphasise this where necessary - and “descriptive immediacy” - which, loosely, involves describing in writing what the client would see the therapist doing that was relevant to the words – a kind of written non-verbal cue. These are just examples of literary techniques which, they argue, are the non-verbal communication of therap-email.

E-mail empathy – Does the sender pay attention to, and anticipate, the needs of the recipient? Empathic people will specifically respond to what their email partners have said. They ask their partners questions about themselves and their lives. But they also construct their messages anticipating what it will be like for the recipient to read it. They write in a style that is both engaging and readily understood. With appropriate use of spacing, paragraph breaks and various keyboard characters (……/****) to serve as highlights and dividers, they visually construct the message so that it is easy and pleasing to read. They estimate just how long is too long. Essentially they are good writers who pay attention to the needs of their audience…

Suler, 2003, E-mail communications and relationship, at http://truecenterpoint.com/ce/emailrel.html

10.17 Not a substitute: but a starting point for development – technological and professional. All the pilot services are clear that the email service is not a substitute for the face-to-face service. As Sampson et al. (1997) pointed out some time ago, on-line counselling can be part of a progression towards other modes of interaction for some clients. Many of the advisers on the pilot projects would agree with that. However, on the evidence presented in this chapter, there is plenty of room for innovative exploration of the options and skills involved, both technological and professional. This might, of course, include synchronous as well as asynchronous media. The example of
Connexions Direct (see Appendix 3) illustrates some of the things that are possible technically, especially with the development of text messaging and chat. It is also possible to move the model of the service along the continuum, as some of the pilot services have done, towards a more personalised relationship between enquirer and adviser. The story of the Apaja Centre in Helsinki (see Appendix 3) is instructive here, but not necessarily the only alternative. Graduate Questiontime’s adviser team have already shown that they can construct dialogue and facilitate interaction within the present system. Exploring the boundaries of what might be done was part of the objectives of some of the pilot services, and it would be a pity if this elaboration were to be curtailed by an a priori insistence that guidance is impossible by email.
11. Key issues and learning points

The nature of the target group, the context in which it comes to the point of sending an email message, the filters that can be set up to manage the system: all have relevance to the strategic implications of a relatively new and untried medium that is certain to increase in significance as careers services respond to the Harris Report’s vision of a careers service that “makes best use of new technologies to reach the greatest number of people.” (Offer et al. 2001)

Email cannot be ignored. This is a fact not only because working with emerging technology is essential for the continued relevant development of careers services in the UK, but because this new technology is bringing new competitors into our marketplace. If…someone else provides a service, there is no guarantee that it will be as diverse, as professional, or of the quality which graduates demand. (Gow, 2002b)

Certain key issues arose from the experience of the project. They generally constitute key questions that need to be answered by anyone setting up a similar email-based service since they offer significant strategic and professional alternatives.

11.1 Team or personalised approaches

11.1.1 On the one hand some services imitated closely the model of delivery set by Graduate Questiontime on Prospects.ac.uk: the enquiry is answered by the next available adviser or (in some places) information staff member in the team, who will take the next query off the top of the list and deal with it whatever its content. Any follow-up response to that response (a “handful” according to one estimate, but up to 10% or more in others) will, therefore, not necessarily be dealt with by the same adviser – the enquirer is dealing with a system or team rather than with an individual counsellor with whom they establish a personal relationship. The closest face-to-face equivalent is the drop-in session rather than the one-to-one in-depth interview. Time to deal with email is blocked out in advance in staff diaries or allocated in a similar fashion to the duty adviser rota with which it may overlap.

11.1.2 Possible features of a team approach are the fact that an adviser may be called on to answer questions on areas of the labour market they would previously not have specialised in, and more frequent recourse to advice from colleagues, including information staff, can enhance the “team” atmosphere, with more shared practice between colleagues on the staff side, by contrast with the relative exclusiveness of a more traditional adviser/client relationship. People learn more about the different ways in which their colleagues work and learn from each other in the process. In one service, as a result of the introduction of the email service, information staff experienced an increased number of questions asked of them by advisers, possibly because the latter were being drawn into earlier phases of the information, advice and guidance process to deal with questions and issues that might previously have been filtered out by the information team. Such enhanced cooperation between different types of staff can obviously have beneficial effects on morale and communication generally. This happened at Bradford. However, it can also mean that advisers handle a proportion of enquiries that would otherwise have been dispatched by information staff if they had come in via the physical reception area. A modified version of this model is for one member of staff to take responsibility for carrying out a rough sieve of enquiries and ensuring that turnaround times are always met.

11.1.3 Joined up working? Another, and slightly different, meaning of the “team” approach occurs in those services which are more closely integrated with the general student services of the university: here the email service, by fielding most queries if they can be answered, and accepting referrals from
adjacent student services, may be seen as extending the possibilities for working closely with non-careers colleagues and dealing with queries that require a response that goes beyond “careers” work, “blurring the professional boundaries”, as one service put it. The extent to which this actually occurred in the project is unclear, but it remains a theoretical possibility.

11.1.4 A more personalised approach. At Liverpool Hope, however, a much more personalised approach was taken, with the adviser principally responsible having her name alongside the e-guidance service on the website, and encouraging enquirers to follow up the email with personal contact at the careers centre where necessary. This was how email had been dealt with previously in other services – deriving from a personal relationship – and there was increasing speculation as to whether such personalisation might increase the numbers using the email service. The service at Hope did develop significantly more follow-up enquiries (22%) than most other places, (including some longer term contacts where email might be used to offer on-going support to a client over vacation periods).

11.1.5 Guaranteed response times. The “team approach” may, then, in some forms, discourage enquirers from responding to an anonymous adviser – although this is by no means true in all cases, particularly at the national level of Graduate Questiontime. But how can a three-day time limit for responding to queries be guaranteed in a more personalised service? The advantage of being able to guarantee a prompt response to an enquiry is one of the quality elements of email over other interventions and clients seem to have appreciated the speed of reply in many cases. At Hope, with a dedicated adviser, taking full and enthusiastic responsibility for the service, backed up in emergency by colleagues, this did not cause problems, but it could have done so elsewhere.

11.1.6 The specialist team approach. There is yet another alternative – the Strathclyde approach, already described (chapter 8) where the user’s choice of the topic of their enquiry and statement of subject discipline, present or past, triggers a specific staff member to pick up that email from the ‘in-tray’. This, from one point of view, could be the best of all worlds – the traditional specialist skills of advisers could be deployed, and all staff could potentially become part of the team that delivered the service. The downside is that Strathclyde needed to increase the response time to five days, and that elsewhere, more than one adviser said they actually enjoyed taking on enquiries in new areas outside their specialism, for a change. Those advisers who already have heavy caseloads in certain popular subject areas, may also simply increase these, as email enquiries are added to the in-tray. The diagnostic categories clearly do have to be made watertight, which involves significant extra development time; otherwise time could be lost in reallocating and rerouting misdiagnosed queries. However, the same problem occurs in other parts of the service, including off-line. Clarifying it here can lead to clearer roles elsewhere too.

11.1.7 At the end of the first year of the project, however, there were signs that several services were considering moving towards a more personalised service, adding the careers adviser’s own name to the end of the email. According to Wilson and Linley (2003) a client actually went as far as to write in response to an anonymous signature “May I ask whom I am addressing? Furnishing your name will certainly help to create a rapport.” 59% of students in the Bradford survey said it was important to them always to contact the same person when seeking advice. As a result, advisers are now to give their name at the end of the email, and will be “working on the CAVE service in teams of two for a two-week period. This will help both with workload planning and, hopefully, will allow the same adviser to respond to any immediate follow-up queries…” (Wilson and Linley, 2003).
11.2 Embedded or additional services: local, regional or national?

11.2.1 This construct comes largely from the West of Scotland Graduate Email Service project: two possible models for the development of email were identified there – either the facility would be offered by an individual careers service within their own resources – an embedded service – or it would be recognised that “email careers guidance requires expertise and development which is additional to the work already being undertaken with students and graduates by careers services, …(and) need not be physically based with the ‘home’ careers service” (Gow, 2002b) – the additional service.

11.2.2 The present project has to some extent blurred this distinction by making the technical structures available from a national source, but allowing individual services to customise the entry points and deliver the actual responses to questions, minimising the duplication of technical resources while localising the professional guidance expertise. However, the issue remains, as a variation of the local/regional/national debate highlighted already in chapter 3 of Careers Services: Technology and the Future (Offer et al. 2001). Where should e-guidance services be most effectively located and maintained, given that a “virtual” service can be located anywhere? On the one hand, there is clearly a “risk of duplication of work across careers services in terms of structuring, maintenance and policy and practice” in any purely local provision (Gow, 2002b). On the other hand, there are arguments for the face validity of local services and the value of local knowledge and awareness in keeping the service truly responsive to its users’ needs, especially where these users are current students – the arguments may be differently weighted in the case of graduates. The rise of regional websites for graduates means that cooperative working between local and regional careers services could, in some areas, present an alternative to a purely local model of delivery.

11.3 Stand alone or contextualised

11.3.1 In all cases the gateway to the email service was via the careers services’ website. Thus, what is distributed in publicity literature is not an email address, but a website address where the email enquirer can find the gateway and enter their enquiry. As with the national Graduate Questiontime on Prospects.ac.uk, users will need to visit the website to send an email. To that extent it is already contextualised. This is important because it allows the service to frame the enquiry and start the process of identifying needs and negotiating a “contract” with the enquirer, in a way that would not be possible from a simple email address. In addition, “using a form on a web page to capture information can also allow advisers to gain the explicit permission of a user as to the uses of their information”, (Gow, 2002a, p.39)

11.3.2 A question arises, however, as to whether the gateway should be on the website home page, or embedded within the site itself at those points where it represents an appropriate alternative or addition to information or advice already offered on the site itself. The latter was the approach taken at Strathclyde. This might reduce the number of “impulse” users, and hence the total numbers, but would, it is argued, mean that the incoming emails would be more informed and the issues better clarified, since the user will have sent in their query because it has not been answered by the information and advice already on the site. The email gateway will probably then be linked from more than one page within the site. Placing it on the home page, it has been argued, “encourages laziness”, the “please-sort-out-my-life syndrome” as one adviser put it.

11.3.3 An alternative argument might be that the email service is appropriate to a particular type of caller who will have preferred to get the information or advice that way and who might have been unwilling to delve into the website to find the answer, and never have made contact at all, if that were
necessary. If so, the purpose of reaching out to groups who are underrepresented in the present categories of users of the careers service may be better served by accepting a certain amount of duplication within the provision of service, based on what might be loosely called “learning style”. Some users, therefore, will access the service because it is an email service regardless of whether their needs could have been met elsewhere on the website. For such people an access point on the home page is important, even if there are others dotted around the website. The hypotheses involved here have yet to be properly tested.

11.4 Training – skills, demands and opportunities

11.4.1 The delivery of an email service may require new or upgraded skills, but this was not a key concern for most services. Technical fluency with computer-based systems was variable within the teams involved, and some were initially better than others at such matters as cutting and pasting from web pages, or searching the Web for information. Tasks such as composing a response in Word, and then pasting it into an email reply, may not, even now, be a simple skill for everyone. The introduction of a spellchecker to the system was helpful in this respect. Keyboard skills and the speeds achieved may still, however, limit productivity for some advisers.

11.4.2 More central may be the ability to analyse a text and extract and summarise the key issues quickly, especially if it is not clear what the enquirer is asking. The ability to deliver in writing as much as possible of what one conveys in speech in a face-to-face communication is also important, and though analogous, is not the same skill. The need to do these things, and also to adapt your own written style to that of the client, to aid rapport, was another perceived need in some services.

11.4.3 A non-directive, informal style may not always come easy: as one adviser commented, professionals in writing tend to adopt a rather formal manner and may need to learn to convey warmth and empathy in written words. The ability to express what is generally referred to as empathy and to build rapport on-line is an art which opponents of email as a means of delivering guidance would describe as only remotely achievable. However, the use of such techniques as “emotional bracketing” and “descriptive immediacy” (Murphy and Mitchell, 1998, already described in chapter 10) can be learnt and examination of the practice of others in the related fields of counselling and therapy, along with a study of the “Psychology of Cyberspace” (Suler, 2003, see also chapter 10) may facilitate the development of email-specific skills usable in guidance.

11.4.4 The use of email also offers possibilities for training and development to new and less experienced advisers, who may have space and time to put together a response to a question they would have struggled with face to face. Several of the pilot services explored the possibility of drawing on colleagues and sharing experiences and expertise with others, even using peer review as a deliberate way of stimulating group learning. Some advisers clearly felt the advantage of a team approach was the openness it can facilitate about each other’s work. In any case, the system used here means that all responses are open to other advisers and can be searched for references or ideas, or simply to check that one is on the right lines. The possibilities of supervision are also considerable, (with the proviso that confidentiality and security must be preserved, and that client consent should be obtained for uses of their material beyond those of guidance alone). It is even possible that email delivery might be used as a preliminary training role for an adviser before they move into face-to-face guidance. At least one less experienced adviser found this an advantage.

11.4.5 In one case an adviser described how email from graduates in particular drew on more in-depth knowledge of
professions by the adviser: a graduate with a pharmacy degree, who did not use the service at all while at university, had asked questions about the ways forward from the particular point in the profession he had reached. This is not everyday territory for many advisers, but illustrates how email services configured in the “team approach” may draw advisers into less familiar areas of knowledge, and create a need for initial and additional research before responding, as well as introducing a new audience for some university careers services, which may throw up new training needs.

11.4.6 **Continuous professional development.** While training needs may not have been identified by the staff involved, it should not be assumed that that is the end of the matter. Given that email is a very new medium, new skills have to be applied or old ones adapted. Until we have had some years’ experience of it, it is important, as elsewhere, to be constantly on the lookout for ways of developing professional skills. We would recommend regular review and on-going analysis of the learning points arising elsewhere from the use of on-line counselling and therapy (e.g. Suler, 2003, Murphy and Mitchell, 1998, Griffiths, M. and Cooper, G. 2003), as well as the sharing of experiences and insights with others involved in the use of email for guidance purpose (e.g. at LearnDirect and Connexions Direct).

11.4.7 The **Advisers’ Checklist** in Appendix 1 draws together some of the more practical observations on the skills required by advisers in using email. It has been tested out on practitioners in the pilot services and amended according to the feedback.

### 11.5 Ethical Issues

#### 11.5.1 Security and confidentiality. These issues lie behind a number of objections to the use of email as a guidance tool. There is, certainly, a need to refresh one’s understanding of professional ethics, and legal and moral issues surrounding the security and confidentiality of personal material in electronic format. All data provided by users is password protected. However, where a more personalised approach is adopted, the security of the adviser him/herself is also a consideration: there has been advice against, for example, adding the picture of the adviser in question to the email entry point. There may be differences, also, between data protection policies at each university. It should be emphasised, however, that confidentiality is an ethical as well as legal issue, and any guarantee to users must ultimately rest on the professional standards of those who deliver the service.

11.5.2 **The application of existing standards.** In an area as relatively new as this, such standards are still fraught with controversy (see, for example, Bloom, 1998). Some of the (typically) American codes of ethics for on-line guidance and counselling may be worth investigating until such time as a UK version is developed. The work of Sampson (1997 and 2003) is particularly pertinent to our area. With some allowance for the fact that the generally less sensitive information contained in typical e-guidance exchange does not need a sledge hammer to crack a nut, these can be helpful reminders of professional codes we already subscribe to, but have not yet applied to the contexts offered by the new media. As one adviser said, the same guidance principles essentially apply – unconditional positive regard, impartiality, etc.

#### 11.9 Attachments: a practical problem

There is no option to attach files to the email enquiry in this system – to avoid the danger of viruses and also to stop the careers advice via email service becoming a CV checking service. (The CV checking service offered nationally on Prospects.ac.uk is only available if one uses the CV form from My Prospects.) This means that if the enquirer needs their CV checked another email address must be offered which allows attachments, or they have to send it by post or bring it in person. One adviser felt that the need to qualify carefully what you say in commenting on a CV (because the opinion offered is, of necessity, quite subjective and may contradict what an enquirer might be told elsewhere) meant that it was preferable anyway to do this in a face-to-face context.
References and bibliography


Parker, L. (1999) *Counselling Online: Survey on the Extent of, and Attitudes to, Online Counselling amongst 425 BAC Members*. British Association for Counselling, Rugby.


(See also Shy, J.D. and Sampson, J.P. Distance Counselling Bibliography retrieved 08/11/03 from http://www.career.fsu.edu/documents/bibliographies/Distance%20Counseling_7_22.htm)
Using email for advice and guidance: an advisers’ checklist

Don’t expect advice and guidance by email to take less time on average than it takes face to face or on the telephone. A common complaint by advisers is that it may sometimes take longer because you try to “cover all the points”, uncertain if you’ve understood precisely what the enquiry was about. Big issues may underlie a simple issue. But some queries can be dispatched in less time than might have been allocated for e.g. a fifteen-minute drop-in session, and when you’ve finished one, you can go on to the next without waiting for the next client to “arrive”. (Just don’t become an automaton! You need a short break in between.)

Make sure you know what you intend the medium to be for and make it clear to users. A contract is needed as for face-to-face advice and guidance: what can be done and what can’t. What is this best for? What kind of queries are better dealt with another way? You need to be clear about this and clear with them. “Email” means many things to many people.

Decide what/who it is appropriate to deal with by email and what/who you would refer to another medium or resource. Does the email system you have set up mean you can refer people to a website, a computer program, a local course, a tutor or student services adviser, a counsellor, a book? In which case, you may not need to do everything with the email – it is part of a package, not the whole response.

Make enquirers clear about the lack of confidentiality if that is relevant to their query. Email is about as confidential and secure as a postcard, unless your system has some built-in extra security such as encryption.

Don’t respond instantly. The big advantage of email - over telephone, face to face or chat - is you don’t have to. Take time, make sure you understand the query, consult colleagues or do some research, if necessary, and make sure you’ve answered the question. You can “play above your level” in this way – the less experienced can look things up and consult colleagues for help before replying. But keep to the turnaround time you promised.

Prepare answers to FAQs and cut and paste to use your time efficiently, but don’t forget the uniqueness of individual needs that can lie behind the most standard presenting question. If in doubt, check it out. Send simple information where asked for it, but make the caveats clear; if there are some, and invite the enquirer to send more details if that could make for a different answer.

Allow for the need to probe presenting questions or ask for more information from the enquirer. Will your system allow you to respond to an initial enquiry with a request for clarification or more information, and to exchange several emails until you have agreed what the real issue is?

Check your assumptions constantly. If you can do so without breach of confidentiality, periodically check a sample of queries with a colleague. Do they see things you don’t? Your assumptions may be about the enquirer: even email can elicit stereotypes – bad spelling, a “foreign” name etc, can cause you to react unconsciously and sometimes irrationally. Your assumptions may also be about the local circumstances: your advice may be good for this area but not for the area the enquirer comes from. With email you don’t always know where that is.

Don’t overwhelm with information. It’s not good practice in face-to-face interviews, and it’s not good practice here either. But it’s the first reaction of the weaker adviser to cut and paste their entire knowledge of the subject into the answer. Better to keep it simple and refer them to where they can get the full details – on-line and by simply clicking on the link you provided in your response, if possible:
an on-line reference is more likely to be followed up by an on-line enquirer. It also encourages an active response.

**Spend some time trying to identify the needs.** A short checklist you can work through, based on a model of guidance or action planning (e.g. Where are they now? Where do they want to be? How do they get there? What barriers do there seem to be?) can be a useful framework to ensure you pay attention to all the aspects of the incoming email rather than the one that strikes you first. If you can, ensure the link to the email address for enquirers is framed on a website and that enquirers are asked to give some details of the topic and themselves along with the email message. There is a balance to be struck between intrusive long-winded questionnaires and no information at all accompanying an enquiry. If enquirers “register” in some way, you may ensure that queries are better thought out and hence easier to diagnose and respond to. Where the email is situated on the website may also help to ensure they have worked through some issues and identified some of their own needs first.

**Hone your writing skills.** Practise writing things informally, but succinctly and clearly. Writing is what you have to be good at, but may not be your strongest suit. Test out the results on a colleague – if they don’t get it first time, chances are neither will your enquirer. How can you create a warm, friendly atmosphere in a few written words? Try taping a response to an enquiry occasionally and writing down what you said. Does it sound different from what you would have written otherwise?

**Empathy is possible but different online.** “Empathic people… construct their messages anticipating what it will be like for the recipient to read it. They write in a style that is both engaging and readily understood. With appropriate use of spacing, paragraph breaks and various keyboard characters …to serve as highlights and dividers, they visually construct the message so that it is easy and pleasing to read. They estimate just how long is too long. Essentially they are good writers who pay attention to the needs of their audience…” Suler, 2003.

**Keep the records and keep them secure.** With email you have every word of the exchange. This is valuable and sensitive for legal/ethical reasons (check your understanding of what data protection legislation requires, check any professional ethical codes). Such “case study” material is also useful for training and development purposes with colleagues and supervisors, where confidentiality allows. You may need to make clear to enquirers upfront how their material may be used (anonymously) and for what purpose (training and development).

**Don’t use your personal email address** if you can help it and don’t give out your personal address or details. Use an organisational address instead. Apart from getting lots of spam, you, as well as your clients, can sometimes be at risk if you disclose too much.

(A version of a paper by Marcus Offer, NICEC, originally funded by BECTA, but substantially updated and amended in the light of the experiences of advisers on this project and in the national service for graduates. With thanks to Mike Cox, Audrey McCulloch, Catherine Gregory and others)

**Further reading**


**Suler, J.** *E-Mail Communications and Relationships*, retrieved 08/11/03 from http://truecenterpoint.com/cc/emailrel.html
Appendix two - Screenshots from the e-guidance software system

Figure 5. Database of careers queries awaiting reply
Figure 6. Example of an opened query awaiting a reply
Figure 7. Careers query form (University of Bradford)
1. Services for Graduates – Graduate Prospects Ltd

1.1 The largest body of evidence concerning e-guidance in the UK comes from the Services for Graduates project (Madahar, 2003), of which the present project is an offshoot. The eligible population for the service consists of graduates, up to five years after graduating, who are nationals of states within the European Economic Area (EEA) aiming to study or work in the UK. Over 16,000 graduates had used the Graduate Questiontime careers advice by email service in the period under survey, an average of 1,000 a month, each receiving answers to their questions within three working days from a team of careers advisers. This was in addition to the numbers using the more specific on-line CV checking service, the graduate discussion forum and the careers chat live sessions. The service achieved accreditation against Matrix Standards for Information Advice and Guidance Services. The software on which it is based, including the automatic feedback and monitoring systems, is essentially the same as that used in the current project. Client feedback has been very positive, with an average of 87% indicating that services are easily accessible, easy to use, and provide the help and support the graduate needs. Clients also indicated that they had achieved a certain number of guidance outcomes. Using a set of five statements for agreement based on the FIRST model of guidance outcomes (Bedford, 1982a and b), it was established that, as a result of using the service, 42% of clients agreed they felt clearer about what they wanted to do (Focus), 33% indicated they were better informed about the opportunities (Information), 34% that they were more realistic (Realism), 36% that they were more aware of the range of options to choose from (Scope), and 41% that they were more able to take action to get what they wanted (Tactics). (Madahar, 2003, p.40. erratum)

1.2 The service was deliberately designed to “operate along similar lines to an HE careers service drop-in duty system, where graduates can just turn-up in order to see the duty adviser for a 15-minute consultation session” though advisers are not expected to keep to such a time limit, which is used purely for planning purposes. (ibid, p. 20)

1.3 Learning outcomes from this project included: how to develop a system to ensure that advisers can be allocated to the interactive services at peak times and at short notice; new skills of communicating via email; the development of training sessions, peer review procedures and evaluation exercises; and the thorough testing in practice of a software system that enables careers advisers to concentrate on the guidance issues, while also ensuring a steady flow of monitoring and evaluation feedback to enable the system to adjust to the changing demands of its clients over time. The different effects of different types of marketing activity in suddenly or steadily increasing graduate demand for the service is another practical learning point in managing such a facility. (ibid, p.20)

2. West of Scotland Graduate Careers Email Service

2.1 This project is particularly important because it formed the background for one of the participant services to our present project. The service was established in 2001, for a limited period, using money from the Services for Graduates project described above, in response to issues being raised by four west of Scotland university careers services (Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian, Paisley, and Strathclyde). These issues had to do particularly with the ad hoc, unstructured nature of current email use by clients seeking advice, and a concern that the potential of the medium was not being
sufficiently explored, while advisers were being “plunged into this form of communication without any real training or guidance on the provision of advice via email”. (Gow, 2002a) The project aimed, among other things, to “discover how and for what purposes graduates use an email service and what they want from it,” as well as to develop a “code of good practice for careers services” on the management and delivery of an email service (Gow, 2002a). Initial market research suggested that there was “a demand amongst graduates for such a service…. based on …regional and graduate expertise” and that graduates expected the development of careers provision would “take advantage of the development of technology” (Gow, 2002b). They wanted “information and advice tailored towards their needs and provided by professionals” and “felt it was important for such a service to have strong links with other virtual resources” (ibid).

2.2 In the event, the service handled 602 enquiries during the thirty weeks it was in existence, 442 of which were from individuals eligible to use it, and to whom detailed responses were sent. By far the largest group of users (200+) were aged 21-25, 50% from Glasgow, the majority from areas close to the university they had graduated from. As the report suggested (Gow, 2002a p. 21) this raised issues about why graduates would use an email service if they had access to face-to-face services that close at hand. It speculated that this might be to do with the type of service available in their own institution, factors preventing them using the local service, including opening times (e.g. for employed advice seekers), and “a simple preference for this type of communication”. 60% of users had previously studied sciences and engineering or business, law and finance (ibid, p 22). The types of query received were classified into three main groups: (i) information only, (ii) information and advice (e.g. “I’m not sure what to do now I’ve graduated – what are my options?”), and (iii) mainly advice (e.g. “should I stick with the company I am currently working for but unhappy with? I am scared that changing my job this early in my career will reflect badly…”) (ibid, p.22). The most common type of query was (ii). As the summary of the report says ‘An element of guidance which it was deemed not possible to effectively deliver via email due to the complex nature of the issues facing the graduate was occasionally required for type (iii) queries. In such cases, the adviser attempted to provide suggestions for a structured approach to tackle the issues whilst referring the user on to other, more appropriate forms of provision such as face-to-face interviews or Careerline.” (Gow, 2002b, p.5)

2.3 The report also raised the issue of the level at which such email services are best provided. Two possible models emerged – an “embedded” service, run from within the core structure and resources of the local careers service, and an “additional” service, which recognises that it is a service that “does not need to be physically based within the ‘home’ careers service of the graduate and for which additional expertise and development may be required. The former carries a “risk of duplication of work across careers services…. whilst also failing to tackle the continued non-uniformity of provision” (Gow, 2002b, p.4). However, the wider the geographical area covered the more diluted the knowledge of local provision and opportunities.

2.4 A number of learning outcomes were identified, including the need for graduates to register their query via a website to use the service in order to meet some of the requirements of data protection legislation, the need for a period of training for advisers new to the email format, for regular on-going evaluation and peer review. It also stressed that email is no less time consuming than face-to-face contact with graduates, and should not be regarded as a “quick fix”. Email should be regarded as “a part of a wider strategy of careers provision” in order to provide a wide range of resources to users and “to effectively refer them to the most appropriate resources for their needs” (Gow, 2002b, p.6). A major issue,
however, remained “a lack of resources to support the work, not only financially but also in terms of IT support. The project concluded, nevertheless, that careers services “have the capacity to link their expert knowledge of the graduate labour market to the opportunities which new technology has to offer. The further development of this area can only benefit all involved.” (ibid, p 8).

3 The Apaja Centre, Helsinki
The Apaja Centre was one of the services visited during the CSU/NICEC tour of Finland during the action research project “Careers Services: Technology and the Future” (Offer et al. 2001).

3.1 This centre, which has now ceased to operate, was set up to provide a learning environment where job seekers (graduates of any age from all over Finland) could design and implement individualised self-development and employment plans. It was, in the final stage, an entirely on-line service, including distance learning courses and workshops, as well as an on-line career counselling facility. This involved the user registering in the first instance, and, by contrast to the Graduate Questiontime programme, receiving a personalised service from a counsellor whose picture would be visible on the website. All subsequent emails from the user went to the same counsellor, and there could be up to eight contacts and an average of three between enquirer and counsellor. Dealing with an enquiry could take, it was said, around one to one-and-a-half hours. Such a service was clearly intended to mimic as closely as possible the face-to-face, one-to-one relationship developed in off-line guidance work (Offer et al. 2001, p.40/41 and 48). The email services here were integrated within an overall offering that was focused towards e-learning, with most activities being on-line career planning courses and on-line discussions between participants. The service was clearly aimed at reaching users across considerable geographical distances, who would not otherwise have been able to access campus-based services in Helsinki or elsewhere, and who might be many years away from graduation – 20%, it was reported, were people who graduated as far back as the 1970s.

4. Connexions Direct
4.1 This government-funded service is aimed at 13-19 year olds and covers wider issues than careers guidance alone. Access is via the Connexions Direct website at www.connexions-direct.com or via telephone. It was set up in September 2001 and by the end of July 2003 had helped around 49,000 young people, with a team of twenty-seven or more advisers using multi-channel call-centre technology. Demand for the service is increasing, and contacts have grown from around 100 a week in 2002 to 1,200 a week by July 2003 (Making Connexions, 2003).

4.2 Calls relate to a range of issues including family relationships, health, housing, learning, the law, money, personal development, substance misuse, and a significant number of callers are said to be in “despair” though crisis calls are only a small proportion (Loga, 2003). Callers can select a variety of ways of accessing the service, which is run at a national call centre and is open 8am to 2am every day. Advisers will deal with enquiries by email, telephone, chat, or text message. About a third of enquirers choose not to disclose their identity (ibid) and need not do so unless they require practical help, such as a place to stay for the night. Fewer than half the queries come by phone, most callers preferring to use email or web chat, but especially the latter. Chat is said to be particularly popular with young people, because of its relative anonymity. Career planning, work- or study-related issues make up about half the enquiries (ibid). Most calls are handled directly by the adviser and not through referral and the staff are not necessarily careers advisers and may come from a variety of backgrounds, including those with a counselling focus and others with more task-centred specialisms. They undergo an intensive four-week training involving ICT skills and specialist areas of information.
4.3 Email contact to Connexions Direct has increased significantly over the past six months, mainly due to a national awareness campaign for the Connexions Service as a whole. This can be seen in the following charts (figures 8 and 9 below).

4.4 In both charts below, email and SMS contacts are added together, this is because SMS text queries appear as emails for advisers. The majority of these contacts are emails, with SMS being a much more difficult medium for offering advice, restricted to 160 characters for reply. The proportion of telephone contacts (voice on the charts) increased over the awareness campaign. Television ads were expected to alternate between those displaying the phone number and those only giving the website address. When the web-chat facility was particularly busy, young people who could not get through

Figure 8. Contacts handled per month

Figure 9. Type of contact by month
to an adviser would regularly send an email query instead. Adults contacting the Learndirect advice line can do so by email, although this is not widely promoted at the moment. This may change when the IT system is updated, making the email facility more robust.

4.5 Since the service began, over 50% of contacts to Connexions Direct have concerned Learning and Careers. During some weeks of the recent awareness campaign, however, this increased to almost 70%. Ninety per cent of all contacts are from young people, with the other 10% made up of parents, Connexions partnerships, other organisations and service enquiries. In a typical month, the breakdown of contacts looks something like:

- Learning and Careers 50%
- Family and Relationships 12%
- Health – physical and mental 11%
- Sexual health and related issues 9%
- Work related 9%
- Housing and Homelessness 3%
- Money and debt related 2%
- Drugs and substance use 1%
- Legal and crime related less than 1%

4.6 A key issue for Connexions Direct has been relationships with, and referrals to, local Connexions partnerships. A large number are now signed up to market the service locally, but it continues to be delivered remotely from a national call centre, with access points from local Connexions services’ websites. But it remains a complementary national service, which is not run by local services, who may only do the marketing. Feedback from users goes to the DfES Careers Service National Unit.

4.7 Although Connexions Direct deals with a younger audience and much wider issues than the project being evaluated here, it does offer examples of advanced technological communication being used to deal with some very personal issues, and the integration of three or four different channels of communication is an impressive example of where graduate services could go next.

5. LearnDirect

5.1 LearnDirect is operated by University For Industry (UFI). Its national helpline service for adults seeking learning is well known, but generally as Europe’s largest telephone helpline service and call centre (Cf. Watts and Dent, 2002). Less commonly understood is the way email services have expanded recently from the use of email to support users of the related guidance software, LearnDirect Futures, where users were invited at particular points in the use of the program (notably the CV-building section) to email an adviser for more help, to a more general email service, “Get in touch”, available from the menus on the website at www.learndirect.co.uk. From here the email service is a fifth option, for example, on the National Learning Advice menu after “finding a course”, “jobs and careers”, “learning advice”, and “features” and occurs in three out of the five main sections the site is divided into, and is offered in conjunction with the telephone helpline number. The enquirer is asked “What is your enquiry about?” but needs to select from four options – “I’d like to email an adviser”, “I could not find the course information I wanted”, “General feedback” and “Problems logging on to LearnDirect Futures”. On selecting to email an adviser, the user has a blank box to enter their enquiry but is asked also to complete a form, if education/training is the issue, as to what subject they want, to what level, by what mode of study, and what qualifications and/or experience they have, and the area in which they wish to study. This service has been developed in the last two years.

5.2 The total number of email enquiries sent to the LearnDirect National Advice Line varies in the academic year, from approximately 700 emails per week during the peak time of year to 150 during the lowest. The email service for the National Advice Line began in January 2001. The main categories of topics enquirers will request information for are: course search requests for attendance and self study; career change; entry into careers; funding for education; and facilities for child care.