

The role of career adaptability in skills supply

Evidence Report 35
August 2011

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August 2011



Foreword

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills is a social partnership, led by Commissioners from large and small employers, trade unions and the voluntary sector. Our mission is to raise skill levels to help drive enterprise, create more and better jobs and promote economic growth. Our strategic objectives are to:

- Provide outstanding labour market intelligence which helps businesses and people make the best choices for them;
- Work with businesses to develop the best market solutions which leverage greater investment in skills;
- Maximise the impact of employment and skills policies and employer behaviour to support jobs and growth and secure an internationally competitive skills base.

These strategic objectives are supported by a research programme that provides a robust evidence base for our insights and actions and which draws on good practice and the most innovative thinking. The research programme is underpinned by a number of core principles including the importance of: ensuring '**relevance**' to our most pressing strategic priorities; '**salience**' and effectively translating and sharing the key insights we find; **international benchmarking** and drawing insights from good practice abroad; **high quality** analysis which is leading edge, robust and action orientated; being **responsive** to immediate needs as well as taking a longer term perspective. We also work closely with key partners to ensure a **co-ordinated** approach to research.

This study, undertaken by the Warwick Institute of Employment Research, explores the concept of career adaptability and builds on existing national and international research as well as complementing previous work by the UK Commission on employability (UKCES, 2009). The report improves our understanding of the wide range of goals, aspirations, achievements and identities that shape the way that individuals interact with and move through the labour market. It highlights the dynamic way in which individuals engage with learning and development pathways, sometimes with transformational shifts in perspective as their careers unfold, which can involve periods of up-skilling and re-skilling. The research considers the potential advantages of career adaptability: for improving public policy in areas such as the quality and effectiveness of career support services; and for encouraging greater autonomy and control by individuals of their careers. Whilst this report focuses primarily on the supply side there is also potential for the Career Adaptability concept to be a valuable addition on the demand side, supporting

the case for expansive learning environments in the modern workplace (Felstead *et al.*, 2011).

Sharing the findings of our research and engaging with our audience is important to further develop the evidence on which we base our work. Evidence Reports are our chief means of reporting our detailed analytical work. Each Evidence Report is accompanied by an executive summary. All of our outputs can be accessed on the UK Commission's website at www.ukces.org.uk

But these outputs are only the beginning of the process and we will be continually looking for mechanisms to share our findings, debate the issues they raise and extend their reach and impact.

We hope you find this report useful and informative. If you would like to provide any feedback or comments, or have any queries please e-mail info@ukces.org.uk, quoting the report title or series number.

Lesley Giles

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The need to re-balance the economy to secure economic recovery, renewal and growth, in parallel with achieving increased efficiency gains in public spending has been recognised as critical by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. With eighty per cent of the 2020 workforce already in work, it is clear that: 'We must fix the 'stock' of adult skills as well as the 'flow' of young people into the labour market' (UKCES, 2010, p. 103). What is missing in this analysis of the skills problem, however, is a sense of the progression of individuals through work across the life course, particularly insofar as this involves movement between sectors. As a consequence, the dynamic way in which individuals become engaged with learning and development pathways, which can involve up-skilling, re-skilling and sometimes transformational shifts in perspective as their careers unfold, has remained largely absent from current policy analysis in this area.

This study examines the potential of the concept of career adaptability for increasing the quality of careers support services and enabling individuals to become self-sufficient by supporting themselves. Career adaptability could also fit with the goal of enhancing high performance working (Felstead *et al.*, 2011). The inter-relationship between career adaptability and employability is considered alongside relevant policy initiatives that could benefit, potentially, from the adoption of career adaptability both by individuals and organisations. Findings highlight the need for a stronger policy framework that helps motivate and inspire individuals to take action at different ages and stages in the life course (that is, new ways of combining learning, earning and active citizenship). Individuals have a wide range of goals, aspirations, achievements and identities, which emerge in a variety of community contexts, institutions, qualification structures and labour markets. Those who do not engage in substantive up-skilling or re-skilling through either formal learning or learning through work, for periods of five to ten years, run the risk of being 'locked into' a particular way of working. They become more vulnerable in the

labour market, especially where there is a significant change in their job or their circumstances, because their ability to be adaptable with regard to their career progression can decay.

Findings from this study indicate that adopting a competency approach¹ to developing career adaptive behaviour could provide a useful framework to promote the need for individuals to adopt certain behaviours to help realise their career aspirations. Additionally, this approach offers a potentially constructive framework for raising awareness of self-defeating behaviours in which some individuals may be inclined to engage.

What is ‘career adaptability’?

A key focus for this study was to explore whether and how, career adaptability can impact positively on skills development and supply in the UK by encouraging and supporting autonomy in individuals. The term career adaptability describes the conscious and continuous exploration of both the self and the environment, where the eventual aim is to achieve synergy between the individual, their identity and an occupational environment. Developing career adaptability has a focus on supporting and encouraging individuals to be autonomous, by taking responsibility for their own career development. The operational definition of career adaptability used for this study was: **‘The capability of an individual to make a series of successful transitions where the labour market, organisation of work and underlying occupational and organisational knowledge bases may all be subject to considerable change’**. Using this definition, it has been possible to focus on the practical implications of career adaptability, alongside the drivers for its development at the level of the individual.

This study involved an explicitly qualitative evaluation of the career biographies of 64 adults across two different country contexts: the UK and Norway (32 in each). It sought to identify how adaptive individuals had navigated their career pathways over time and

¹ Competencies or proficiencies are defining standards that can be used to specify readiness for the next career step.

across occupations and sectors. For this study, interview data from 32 interviews with adults in the Norwegian labour market previously undertaken for a European study have been analysed and compared with data from 32 interviews with adults in transition in the UK labour market, undertaken specifically for this study. Additionally, the research complements and extends an ongoing international, twenty country study into the concept of career adaptability and quantitative measurement of this concept².

Policy implications

This report identifies six key areas for action in building a more robust policy framework within which career adaptability could play a key role.

- The design and development of careers support services, both within and outside of the workplace, must take full account of individuals' 'state of readiness' to manage and implement effective decision-making in relation to learning and work. This means finding new ways of personalising services for the individual and developing innovative strategies so that careers professionals, welfare to work providers, teachers and employers can make more effective use of 'career stories and trajectories' within education and employment settings. The working relationship between careers professionals and human resource professionals merits more detailed attention given this is currently under-researched within public, private and voluntary/community sector contexts and these contrasting, yet complementary professional roles, bridge the education and employment divide.
- There is a new requirement to move beyond traditional and static concepts of 'employability' so that individuals are better equipped to be more resilient and to manage risk and uncertainty in fast changing education and labour markets. A critical issue is how best individuals can learn to develop and apply career adaptive competencies most effectively. Learners, teachers, lecturers, trainers, employers (and others involved in the education and employment sectors) all have a very wide range of perspectives, though need to understand that, given demographic trends, it is

² Since this study is ongoing, it is not possible to provide references at the time of writing.

crucial that young people and adults at all stages of their career progression are 'ready' to continue their development in increasingly demanding employment, education or training contexts.

- The use of the term 'opportunity structures' conveys the existing tension between the need for openness and flexibility on the one hand and structured pathways on the other. Finding an accommodation which works well for most members of a society by providing opportunities for those who do not fit initially, should be the goal of a Continuing Vocational Training (CVT) policy, informed by concerns for individual career development. The principles of flexicurity can be helpful in this respect, but extending the breadth and quality of the opportunity structures should be a primary goal of policy in this area.
- The focus on formal qualifications as a proxy for learning and development does not do justice to the range, depth and variety of different forms of learning-while-working that contributes to the acquisition of career adaptive competencies. The latter should be promoted and the most appropriate timing for validation of different forms of learning and the use of qualifications in this process be considered.
- Existing progression measures that capture individuals' learning and work destinations must operate beyond a one-off 'snapshot approach' in order to build and extend the body of knowledge of individuals' career trajectories and career adaptability competencies. In this context, there is scope to further review how government plans³ to incorporate new 'destination measures' will assess impact and individuals' progression in learning and work. By doing so, greater emphasis on capturing career adaptive competencies and the lessons learned can be disseminated more effectively within and across professional networks. Also, greater use can be made of information communications technologies (ICT) developments as a potentially low cost tool for capturing data and tracking individuals' career trajectories over time. However, both of these have staff training and workforce development implications.

³ BIS (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, Norwich: The Stationery Office, para 5.15.

- Exploring a ‘career clusters’ approach to supporting individual progression at a local level, as recently outlined by The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (April 2011), could be extended further to include the use of career adaptive competencies designed to enhance individuals’ understanding of the structure of jobs, job requirements and advancement pathways. There is scope to consider how this might link and further enhance relevant government initiatives such as ‘Investors in People’, ‘Lifelong Learning Accounts’ and the emerging new ‘National Careers Service’ in England.

Career adaptability from a skills supply perspective

A psycho-social perspective was adopted for the study, which looks at the psychological development of individuals within a social environment. This approach distinguishes between personality characteristics related to adaptability (like being proactive or flexible), which can be regarded as pre-requisites of adaptive behaviour, alongside the psycho-social self-regulatory competencies that shape career adaptive strategies and behaviours within work.

From a skills supply perspective, taking a psycho-social approach is helpful since it focuses on the need for individuals to self-regulate to accommodate change that has the potential to impact on the particular social context in which they are located. This includes the disequilibrium that is likely to be caused by: occupational traumas (like redundancy); employment transitions (like job change); and developmental tasks (like the need to up-skill or re-skill). It can be driven by an individual seeking new challenges or wishing to adopt new perspectives associated with engagement in substantive personal development. Because adaptability is closely linked to identity development, the willingness to engage with a complex career trajectory, rather than seeking stability, is likely to vary amongst individuals.

Individual characteristics of career adaptability

Career adaptability is mediated by a number of individual personality factors and is associated with other closely related variables. A set of five career adaptive competencies (control, curiosity, commitment, confidence and concern) developed from on-going international research, provides a useful framework for a retrospective examination of career adaptive behaviour in 64 career narratives of adults from two countries (the UK and Norway). Not all personality factors and associated variables are evident in the stories of all the adults who demonstrated career adaptive behaviour in this

research. For example, some adults did not regard themselves as planful, recognising, with the benefit of hindsight, that this had been something of an impediment. They were, however, still able to demonstrate how they could be adaptive in their approach to their own career progression.

What is evident from this research is that varied combinations of the factors and behaviours associated with career adaptability are identifiable across both different career trajectories and across country contexts. The competencies for developing career adaptive behaviour, however, seemed to hold constant in those demonstrating high levels of adaptability.

Context and opportunities

The potential for individuals to develop career adaptive responses to their career progression and the labour market are mediated not only by the broad economic context in which individuals are operating, but also by the opportunities to which they have access. Different economic conditions, for example, provide different labour market opportunities. The UK and Norway currently represent contrasting economies: Norway has a buoyant and growing economy, while the UK is emerging from economic recession. Irrespective of the prevailing economic conditions, career adaptability appears to have relevance to individuals. For those struggling with unemployment or facing redundancy, adaptive responses to situations beyond the control of the individual are essential for individuals to sustain a positive disposition to personal development. Even for individuals in buoyant economies, unexpected and traumatic circumstances out of the control of the individual (like relocation of a company, death of a family member or divorce) place demands on individuals for adaptive responses.

In addition, individuals operating in the same labour market face structural disadvantage. Factors such as gender, ethnicity, age, socio economic status are associated with social inequality and under-achievement, and their impact is magnified when more than one converges in an individual (for example, an older woman from a minority ethnic group). For many facing structural disadvantage, the research data show how these mediators of career adaptability have impeded and inhibited progress. For many others however, the data illustrates how facing barriers that are beyond the control of the individual can, for some, serve to sharpen and harden resolve to overcome difficulties and contribute to the development of career adaptive competencies.

Learning and development

The research undertaken for this study indicates that the role of learning in developing career adaptability at work has four dimensions. The first involves learning through challenging work: mastering the practical, cognitive and communicative demands linked with particular work roles and work processes. The second has a primary cognitive focus and involves updating a substantive knowledge base (or mastering a new additional substantive knowledge base). Knowledge updating may play an important role in extending adaptability beyond a focus on the current work role. The third dimension has a primary communicative focus and comprises learning through (and beyond) interactions at work. Finally, the fourth dimension focuses upon how career adaptability is facilitated by individuals becoming more self-directed and self-reflexive in their learning and development.

Career orientation and transitioning styles

Critiques of the matching approach to skills supply are increasing in number and subtlety. According to the traditional 'matching model', choice of the 'right' job occurs when individuals have achieved first, an accurate understanding of their individual traits (e.g. personal abilities, aptitudes, interests, etc.); second, knowledge of jobs and the labour market; and third, made a rational and objective judgement about the relationship between these two groups of facts. When individuals are in the 'right' job, this means the jobs that are most suited to their aptitudes and abilities, in which they can be expected to perform best and where their productivity is highest.

However, the model (developed over a century ago) is based on some questionable assumptions. These include that it is possible to measure, objectively and accurately, individual aptitudes and attributes required for particular jobs. Another assumption is that individuals are naturally pre-disposed to engage in 'rational' behaviours that focus on maximising their economic benefits whenever it comes to job choice. Further, it assumes a degree of labour market stability, with jobs and sectors having predictable requirements, to which the objectively measured abilities of individuals can be matched. Whilst this may have been the case over a century ago, when the model was developed, it is certainly no longer true, with volatility and fluidity being defining characteristics of global labour markets.

If it is accepted that a rational approach to career progression is by no means universal. Notions of reflection, happenstance, opportunism, adaptability and intuition need to be

incorporated in attempts to try to develop a more rigorous understanding of adult transitional and career behaviour. Individuals have different approaches to career progression, and three main orientations have been identified within this study which embody career adaptive behaviours in different ways: strategic; evaluative and opportunistic. The matching approach requires a strategic orientation, which was found in only a small number of cases in this study. More common were evaluative and opportunistic approaches to progressing careers. Whilst the individuals who participated in this study differed in their orientations to career progression, all in some way engaged in the development of career adaptive competencies

1 Introduction

1.1 Raising individual aspiration

The need to re-balance the economy to secure economic recovery, renewal and growth, in parallel with achieving increased efficiency gains has been recognised as critical by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, with three key underlying factors identified: individual aspiration; employer demand; and responsive provision (UKCES, 2010, p. 9). With eighty per cent of the 2020 workforce already in work, it is clear that: 'We must fix the 'stock' of adult skills as well as the 'flow' of young people into the labour market' (UKCES, 2010, p. 103). What is missing in this analysis of the skills problem, however, is a sense of the progression of individuals through work across the life course, particularly insofar as this involves movement between sectors. As a consequence, the dynamic way in which individuals become engaged with learning and development pathways, which can involve up-skilling, re-skilling and sometimes transformational shifts in perspective as their careers unfold, has remained largely absent from current policy analysis in this area.

This study argues that one crucial element in understanding skills supply (the accumulation of skills) and successful labour market transitions, is through an examination of the concept of 'career adaptability'. There is an extensive body of evidence that shows that more skilled workers are more productive, flexible and adaptable (UKCES, 2010, p. 29), indicating an inter-relationship between higher skills, flexibility and adaptability. Moreover, the concept of career adaptability is strategically important. Whilst 'employability' seeks to ensure that individuals can find a place in the labour market, 'career adaptability' is concerned with the development of and support for, the capability of an individual for making a series of successful transitions where the labour market, organisation of work and underlying occupational and organisational knowledge bases may all be subject to constant change. It is about supporting autonomy and, crucially, recognises that 'career' belongs to the individual, not to the employing organisation (Duarte, 2004).

1.2 Approach to research

This study has been undertaken by the Warwick Institute for Employment Research. It built upon a major ten country investigation into changing patterns of career development across Europe, which highlighted how some people were much more successful than

others in negotiating a series of work-related transitions (Brown *et al.*, 2010). From this European study, interview data from 32 interviews with adults in the Norwegian labour market have been analysed and compared with data from 32 interviews with adults in transition in the UK labour market, undertaken specifically for this study.

For the UK sample, data were collected from a variety of individuals to ensure a varied and interesting sample. The sample was primarily drawn from people currently in occupations requiring a high level of skill, but it should be noted that preference was given to those who had changed career and/or who had at some stage of their career worked in low skilled employment, with a minority of respondents currently working in relatively low skilled occupations. Researchers were selective in the sampling, but only to the extent of ensuring a balance of male and female participants across the age range employed in a variety of sectors. Women outnumbered men, which is typical of research populations generally, where volunteers are sought. Of the 32 interviewees comprising the UK sample, 62.5 per cent (n=20) were female and 37.5 per cent (n=12) were male. A small proportion of the interviewees 9 per cent (n=3) and 3 per cent (n=1) were aged 19-29 years and 60 plus, respectively. Higher proportions were aged 30-39 years (28 per cent, n=9), 40-49 years (28 per cent, n=9) and 50-59 years (31 per cent, n=9). Nearly half of interviewees were in full-time employment at the time of the interview (47 per cent, n=15). Nineteen per cent (n=6) of interviewees were in part-time work, 22 per cent (n=7) were self-employed and the remaining 13 per cent (n=4) were unemployed (one of these interviewees was in full-time education). Further details of the sample (that is, qualification, levels and sectors in which individuals had been employed) can be found in the Technical Report for this study.

Secondary data analysis used 32 existing interview transcripts from Norway. Data were collected from a variety of individuals to ensure a varied and interesting sample. The criteria for drawing the broad sample was the same as for the UK: individuals were contacted who had participated in a previous European Commission project, which had focused mainly upon highly skilled workers in health, engineering and ICT, and had given their individual consent to be interviewed (Brown *et al.*, 2010). The Norwegian sample for the survey research had in part initially been raised by contacting some large companies in target sectors (health service; oil and gas industry; public sector IT department; transportation), which explains the narrower distribution of current sectors in the Norwegian sample. The interviews took place in summer 2010, before this project was commissioned by the UK Commission. Researchers were selective in the sampling, but only to the extent of trying to ensure a balance of male and female participants across the

age range in a variety of positions (more information on the sample is presented in the Technical Report).

The research complements and extends an ongoing international, twenty country study into the concept of career adaptability, which we argue is a key concept for understanding successful labour market transitions and accumulation of skills at the individual level. The psycho-social approach to career adaptability adopted by this ongoing international study is also adopted here, because it lends itself to an exploration of the competencies that need to be developed to increase career adaptability in individuals.

The study has, therefore, taken place against international scholarship into the nature, validity and applicability of the concept of career adaptability in supporting individual aspiration and transition.

1.3 Aims and objectives

The aim of the study was to assess and develop existing (national and international) knowledge about career adaptability, with particular emphasis on skills accumulation, in order to provide a platform for the development and support of career adaptability in a UK context.

The objectives linked to this aim were to:

- examine how career adaptability can be used to raise the aspirations of individuals at both higher and lower levels of skills;
- explore the potential of the concept of career adaptability to empower individuals to take positive decisions and actions regarding their skills development;
- consider whether career adaptability has a role in making access to training and learning more equitable;
- understand how career adaptability facilitates participation in skill development in a range of employment, education, training and other contexts; and
- investigate the influence of particular labour market conditions in supporting career adaptability (through an Anglo-Norwegian comparison).

1.4 Report structure

There are two separate, but linked reports from this study. This, the first, comprises the main document. It examines the current literature in the area of career adaptability and from this, considers the relevance of related concepts to the research findings. It also explores the applications of psycho-social competencies that may increase individuals' career adaptability, using case studies⁴ from the research to evaluate the practical value of taking a competency approach to supporting the development of individual career adaptability. The second document is the 'Technical Report', with details of the research including the methodology adopted, descriptive statistics of the overall sample, and comparisons of selected dimensions of the UK and Norwegian data.

In this, the main report, there are seven sections, following this introduction. The second section examines the concept of career adaptability, through a review of current research literature. The third examines: individual characteristics that are relevant to an understanding of the concept of career adaptability; related concepts; and the five competencies of career adaptability developed from international research. The fourth section discusses context and opportunity (like changing labour markets and factors associated with social disadvantage, such as gender) that the research findings from this study indicate have an influence on career adaptable behaviour. The fifth and sixth sections examine crucial mediating factors that operate between the individual and behaviours that can be regarded as career adaptive. Specifically, the fifth discusses issues related to learning and development and the sixth presents an analysis of the broad career orientations of the research participants. The seventh, final, section presents a summary and a general discussion of the key findings of the study and some implications for policy and practice.

⁴ Case study summaries developed from the interviews are available on request from: Jenny.Bimrose@warwick.ac.uk.

2 Career adaptability

Chapter Summary

- Career adaptability describes the conscious and continuous exploration of both the self and the environment, where the eventual aim is to achieve synergy between the individual, their identity and an occupational environment.
- A key focus for this study was to explore whether and how, the concept of career adaptability can impact positively on skills development and supply in the UK.
- A psycho-social approach to career adaptability distinguishes between personality characteristics related to adaptability (like being proactive or flexible), which are pre-requisites to adaptive behaviour, alongside the five self-regulatory competencies of career adaptability that shape adaptive strategies and behaviours (curiosity, control, commitment, confidence and concern).
- Career adaptability can be driven by an individual seeking new challenges or wishing to adopt new perspectives associated with engagement in substantive personal development.
- From a skills supply perspective, taking this type of approach is helpful since it focuses on the need for individuals to self-regulate to accommodate change that has the potential to impact on the particular social context in which they are located.
- The dominant features which characterise an individual's career adaptability profile comprise individual (personality) characteristics; context and opportunities (opportunity structures); learning and development; and career orientation.

2.1 Defining career adaptability

Until the early 1980's, the developmental concept of 'career maturation' was used widely to denote an individual's vocational progression. Once, however, it was accepted that becoming mature was not necessarily contingent on ageing, the uncritical application of the concept of career maturity to adults was challenged: 'Rather, each individual should be seen as engaged in the process of finding a balance between acceptance of the pressures that come from the world of work and making his or her own impact upon the environment' (Super and Knasel, 1981, p.198-199). 'Career adaptability' came into use to define the ability to make career choices and adapt to vocational tasks (Brizzi, 1990; Super and Knasel, 1981). For adults, this term was regarded as particularly apposite

since it focused on the relationship between the individual and the environment (Super and Knasel, 1981) and accommodated the notion that adults engage in both career transitions and career change by developing coping responses and behaviours (Dix and Savickas, 1995).

Over the past three decades, a range of related concepts and operational definitions have emerged. Career adaptability is increasingly regarded as a multi-dimensional construct that relates to the variable capacity of individuals to negotiate transitions successfully (Savickas, 2008). It describes the conscious and continuous exploration of both the self and the environment, where the eventual aim is to achieve synergy between the individual, their identity and an occupational environment. Of course, because adaptability is closely linked to identity development, individuals' willingness to engage with a complex career trajectory, rather than seek stability, will vary. A widely accepted definition of career adaptability, which builds on the original work of Super and Knasel (1981), is: 'the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions' (Savickas, 1997, p. 254).

More recent work, comprising an ongoing twenty country investigation, firmly adopts a psycho-social perspective and represents the most developed conceptualisation of career adaptability. It emphasises a contextual dimension by referring to the impact of various changes on the social integration of individuals. Here, career adaptability is defined as an: '...individual's readiness and resources for coping with current and anticipated tasks, transitions, traumas in their occupational roles that, to some degree large or small, alter their social integration' (Savickas, 2008, p. 4-5). The study is closely aligned to the life designing approach to careers (Savickas *et al.*, 2009).

From a skills supply perspective, taking a psycho-social approach is helpful since it focuses on the need for individuals to self-regulate and be autonomous in accommodating change that has the potential to impact on the particular social context in which they are located. This includes the disequilibrium that is likely to be caused by: occupational traumas (like redundancy); employment transitions (like job change); and developmental tasks (like the need to up-skill or re-skill). It can be driven by an individual seeking new challenges or wishing to adopt new perspectives associated with engagement in substantive personal development (Savickas, 2008).

The operational definition of career adaptability that was used for this study was: **'The capability of an individual to make a series of successful transitions where the**

labour market, organisation of work and underlying occupational and organisational knowledge bases may all be subject to considerable change'. Using this definition, it has been possible to focus on the practical implications of career adaptability, alongside the drivers for its development at the level of the individual.

2.2 Becoming adaptable

This analysis of 64 career biographies of adults in labour market transitions from the UK and Norway shows that actual experiences of employment, learning and labour market transitions can contribute, cumulatively over time, to the development and refinement of adaptive competencies. Indeed, given the developmental nature of adaptive competencies, the potential exists for individuals to become more adaptive.

For adults who are actively making transitions through the labour market, findings from this study indicate that career adaptability operates at three levels.

- Personality – indicating intra-personal characteristics like proactivity (investigative, looking for fresh challenges, etc.) and the willingness to seek out new contexts and opportunities.
- Psycho-social competence – related to psycho-social aspects (like how well an individual is able to interact with others, take their perspective, etc.), where the development in career adaptive competencies could make a difference to how easily a person forms relationships that support transitions constructively.
- Actual experience (behaviours) – for example, when people are able to learn from moving between contexts voluntarily or involuntarily, in or between different education, training or employment settings. This process results in the refinement and development of career adaptability competencies appropriate for the context in which the individual is operating.

A key focus of the approach taken here is the nature of self-regulated learning required to accommodate a changing, sometimes volatile, labour market, where individuals take responsibility for, and control of, their own learning. This is typically triggered by the anxiety produced by either anticipated or unexpected events (for example redundancy, job change or re-training, see 2.1 above). Optimally, the anxiety motivates the individual to engage in adaptive behaviours that reduce the disorientation created by a changed or changing context and demonstrate autonomy. However, this does not always happen, with the risk that individuals become detached or disillusioned, become stuck or suffer

downward career drift.

The adaptive behaviours required for positive change are likely to involve tackling a series of inter-related problems, as the individual works towards achieving an ultimate goal that is consistent with their values, interests, abilities and aspirations. Faced, for example, with the looming threat of redundancy, an individual may decide to re-skill or up-skill. To achieve this ultimate goal, they will need to engage in problem solving behaviours to deal with a series of inter-related issues, each with a small-scale, but related, goal. This could comprise: locating a suitable course; securing the necessary resources (time as well as finance); starting and then following through the training to successful completion; actively seeking alternative employment opportunities requiring the new skill set; and then securing an alternative employment niche (either an offer of employment or becoming self-employed). Each 'mini' goal must be achieved as part of the overall process of changing career direction. Once these inter-related goal-orientated, adaptive behaviours have been successfully completed, the individual will have changed a situation that had become (or was becoming) unacceptable to them, to one that is more acceptable.

2.3 Measuring adaptability

A key focus for this study was to explore whether and how, career adaptability can impact positively on skills development and supply in the UK. The existing literature regards career adaptability as an aggregate construct, comprising a range of characteristics, behaviours, skills, competencies and aptitudes, which can be measured using different proxies. Much of the relevant quantitative work undertaken has focused on the measurement of specific elements of career adaptability, using various inventories and scales. Most has been undertaken with adolescents and college students, with only a limited focus on unemployed adults and those facing involuntary career transitions. Consequently, existing measures tend to be self-assessments, designed for young people that are, at least in some degree, prospective in approach. The international study into career adaptability, which frames the broad outline of the study reported here, has, for example, explicitly modelled career adaptability as a formative, not a reflective, construct.

In contrast, the research study reported here adopted a retrospective and reflective approach – asking adults to reflect on their experiences of labour market transition, comment on the strategies they deployed and what, with the benefit of hindsight, they

might have done differently. This approach has analytical power in that it enables individuals to 'tell their career stories', who invariably respond well to being given an opportunity to do so. Most individuals in our sample constructed coherent career narratives that had a current value in offering perspectives on where they were now, had been, and were going in their work lives. It could be argued that the career stories of some individuals may have been partly based on past events that have been reinterpreted from how they felt at the time they occurred. However, this misses an essential point about career adaptability: it is how the past is interpreted and reinterpreted which can act as a trigger to positive engagement with education and training when faced with labour market transitions. Hence, it is the stories in which we are interested, rather than searching for an unobtainable 'truth' about their attitudes and behaviours in the past.

An explicitly qualitative, reflective investigation was undertaken of the career narratives of 64 adults across two different country contexts, the UK and Norway (32 in each). Norway is an interesting comparator because it currently has a buoyant labour market and low unemployment, so enables an exploration of the extent to which career adaptability takes different forms in different structural contexts, given that career adaptability is likely to be influenced by the dynamic interaction between structure (e.g. labour markets and organisational) and agency (i.e. individual).

Findings from this study have, therefore, the potential to widen and extend the knowledge base of career adaptability by providing an analysis of how it could be used. Some key concepts can be retrospectively applied by, for example, using reflective techniques to analyse critical turning points and coping strategies adopted by adults in labour market transitions. In this way, a slightly different perspective on career adaptability is provided, since a young person's anticipation of their possible future behaviour lacks the perspective of lived experiences. Adults, at different stages of their career development, are able to analyse transitions by reflecting on what actually occurred, what triggered these transitions, how they reacted, how their behaviour changed (or did not change) and how this has impacted on their life course.

This reflective approach has provided deep insights into dominant features that characterise an individual's career adaptability profile, namely: individual (personality) characteristics; context and opportunities (opportunity structures); learning and development; and career orientation. These features are in constant and dynamic interaction, one with another.

3 Individual characteristics

Chapter Summary

- Career adaptability is mediated by a number of individual personality factors and by other related variables.
- A set of five individual competencies have been identified from ongoing international research and provide a useful framework for a retrospective analysis of adult career adaptive behaviour evident in the sample from two countries.
- Not all factors and variables are evident in the stories of all participants who demonstrated career adaptive behaviour.
- What is evident from this research is that different combinations of factors, competencies and behaviours are identifiable both across different career trajectories and across different country contexts.
- The competency framework identified here, however, can help individuals understand how to develop adaptive career behaviour.

3.1 Introduction

This section examines individual characteristics that play a key role in the development of career adaptability. These include personality characteristics that influence how well individuals adjust to working in different work contexts, how flexible individuals are when faced with change, how proactive they are in looking for new challenges, and how willing they are to make plans with implications for their future career. Alongside personality characteristics, individuals also differ in the extent to which they explore possible future career roles, identities and work environments; display career resilience in the face of change; and how decisive they are in making career decisions in the light of changed circumstances. Finally, the section explores a life design approach to career development that proposes a focus upon key career adaptability competencies (control, curiosity, commitment, confidence and concern).

3.2 Personality characteristics

3.2.1 Control and self-regulation

Self-regulation and control figure prominently in the literature and research into career adaptability (Balin and Hirschi, 2010; Creed *et al.*, 2009; Duffy, 2010; Fugate *et al.*, 2004; Savickas, 2008; Savickas and Porfeli, 2010). Self-regulation is regarded as part of control and in this particular context refers to the strategies that individuals employ to adjust to different occupational settings. Control refers to the strategies that individuals employ to influence different settings. Research indicates how individuals need to feel in control of their lives to adapt their careers (Blustein *et al.*, 2008; Duffy, 2010) and that individuals with a clear sense of control engage more in career exploration activities, take responsibility for their career development and are more decisive in terms of their career (Luzzo and Ward, 1995).

It was striking that many research participants highlighted how important it was that they were in control of own career development and that they were able to self-regulate their behaviour. For example, one Norwegian male (aged 47), who had started his working life in the engineering sector but was working in the oil industry at the time of the interview, demonstrated a high propensity for control by saying that he was:

‘Always seeking a move before getting into a rut. I have made major industry shifts – and am willing to do so again. I always have my eyes and ears open for possible changes. My career development is very self-generated’ (N 43).

A UK male participant (aged 30), who had worked after leaving school at 18, then spent time abroad in employment in the Far East, has recently returned to the UK to undergraduate study. He has found the transition to mature student difficult, but feels that this has helped him learn how to be self-regulated because of the importance of maintaining momentum by studying every day. This change from employee to student status represents something of a high risk strategy for him, as part of the process of re-directing his career, so he has ‘moments of panic, but then quickly moves into a strategic reflection of what to do next’ and takes action (UK 9).

Both these examples demonstrate the importance of control and self-regulation in the management of career progression.

3.2.2 Flexibility and openness

The concepts of flexibility and openness are also embedded in the literature on career adaptability (Blustein, 1997; Creed *et al.*, 2009; Fugate *et al.*, 2004; Herr, 1992; Heslin, 2005; Morrison and Hall, 2002). Flexibility relates to an individual's willingness to transform and develop themselves, in response to demanding circumstances, with openness being part of flexibility, since it relates to receptiveness to change. More particularly, flexibility is defined as fluidity in a dynamic environment (Blustein, 1997). For change to occur, an individual needs to be convinced that they can be flexible in learning new competencies, as well as the skills to develop and adapt, such as keeping abreast of technological developments and changing work processes. This is achieved through a process of reflection, during which 'defensive reasoning' should be reduced, so that individuals can learn from their experiences (Heslin 2005, p. 385). Flexible and open behaviour then enables individuals to incorporate new roles and responsibilities into their personal identities as well as learning continuously throughout their career (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006; Morrison and Hall, 2002; Verbruggen and Sels, 2008).

A UK research participant, John⁵ (aged 58), provides a vivid example of these concepts. He left school with few qualifications and trained as a carpet fitter. He: 'grew up in an era where you had a job-for-life' and worked in the same sector for over three decades, until he suffered a stroke due to over-work and stress. His medical consultant recommended that he changed career, but he had lost confidence and doubted his ability to return to any type of full time work. Able to access professional support, his potential for working in social care was highlighted by a careers practitioner. This was not an area of work he had ever considered, but he was flexible, open and willing to try anything to get work. First, he secured a placement in social care, which led to part-time employment and eventually a portfolio of two part-time jobs in social care. He has now worked in social care for the last seven years, has completed relevant work-based qualifications and feels: 'very lucky and very happy working' and is 'nowhere near' to considering retirement (UK 13).

⁵ Please note that all names of research participants have been changed to protect identity.

From the Norwegian sample, a woman (aged 42) currently employed in the oil and gas industry, also illustrates the value of flexibility and openness. She reported how she had consciously planned to get as wide an experience as possible in different roles, because: 'I have seen that those with the most experience are flexible and can be used in many different roles' (N 6). From her personal observations of colleagues in the workplace, she had understood the value of opening herself up to varied experiences because of the way this led to progression. Further, she was also able to appreciate the premium that was attached to flexibility in the workplace.

3.2.3 Proactivity

Individuals who are proactive anticipate change and react accordingly (Cronshaw and Jethmalani, 2005; Ebberwein *et al.*, 2004). Proactivity, that is, being investigative and looking for fresh challenges, is strongly associated with career adaptability. Its importance in career development has been emphasised (Cronshaw and Jethmalani, 2005; Duffy, 2010; Ebberwein, *et al.*, 2004; Morrison and Hall, 2002; Savickas, *et al.*, 2009; Savickas and Porfeli, 2010), since it can drive the willingness to seek out new contexts in which to work, together with the readiness to face change and engage in transitions. Conscientious, well-organised individuals can also be proactive through action, so it is not just individuals who change – they will also aim to change their environment (Super and Knasel, 1981), to achieve a better fit – even when the environment is not requesting this type of change (Duffy, 2010; Morrison and Hall, 2002; Savickas, *et al.*, 2009).

Many research participants who had experienced successful career transitions had been proactive by, for example, actively seeking challenging tasks and having a very positive attitude towards change. One Norwegian woman in her early 40's explained how she changed her previous job because: 'I was ready for new tasks, new things' and had 'changed other jobs for greater challenge, as they became boring'. She likes working with people and thinks of change as something good: 'If I still was at the same place where I was 25 years ago, I would turn insane, you know? Change is important for your own development and your competence development' (N 21).

A UK woman (aged 35) described how she left her job in scientific research and development after three years, because she wanted to develop her communication skills, which she regarded as being under-developed at that time. She went to Africa to take a job in sales, since she recognised that working in a culturally different context would not only extend her communication skills, but also provide the type of experiences that would

be crucially important for the type of management position she saw for herself in the future (UK 1).

A third female participant, also from the UK (aged 41), started out at age 16 in retail and has moved to the education sector via a number of labour market moves. One significant transition occurred when she had been working for a large retail organisation that had just begun a programme of redundancies. She could see the '*catastrophic impact*' that the redundancies were having on both those who were being made redundant and their families. On Millennium Eve, aged 30, she thought: 'My life is not what I want it to be and that's not going to happen to me!' She decided to resign from her current position and took a high risk career break to think about what she wanted to do next:

'You've got to make changes happen – be proactive! Move away from being powerless to being powerful – making choices is not about accepting your lot. You can influence your own life hugely (UK 2)'.

All of these three examples of proactive behaviour highlight its importance – taking the initiative in identifying and implementing change to achieve a particular career goal.

3.2.4 Planfulness

The ability to plan for the future, or a planfulness aptitude, is widely regarded as integral to career adaptability (Creed *et al.*, 2009; Ebberwein, *et al.*, 2004; Gunkel *et al.*, 2010; Hirschi, 2009; Morrison and Hall, 2002; Patton *et al.*, 2004; Rottinghaus *et al.*, 2005; Super and Knasel, 1981). This refers to being able to plan, map out the future direction and anticipate change and when individuals have: 'a sense of realism about personal and contextual factors affecting the situation, they have a head start when the transition begins' (Ebberwein, *et al.*, 2004, p. 304).

Integral to planfulness is goal setting. This is not limited to an individual's ability to shape their own career goals, but also their ability to set and achieve realistic goals (Ebberwein, *et al.*, 2004; Fouad and Bynner, 2008; Patton *et al.*, 2004; Savickas, 2008). Those facing job loss and involuntary career transitions need to be able to anticipate and react to changes, as well as understanding how to achieve realistic goals to navigate themselves out of the situation in which they find themselves (Ebberwein, *et al.*, 2004).

While there may be considerable differences regarding individuals' willingness to make plans, data from this study indicate how being able to plan for the future and set career goals helps people cope with problems that arise in their career development. A

Norwegian woman (aged 45) had worked in three different jobs, starting in the hospitality industry, but then switching to transport. She felt 'held up' in her current job because it required a greater level of commitment than she was currently able to give, so was using the following planful coping strategy: 'I don't think it is very disappointing and sad. I just think, "my time will come!" In the meantime, I develop my skills so that I'm ready' (N 238).

A UK male participant (aged 66), also illustrates the value of a planful approach to career development. He started his working life in the education sector and is now 'fully occupied as a self-employed management consultant', having engaged with multiple transitions. He describes his approach as: 'planful and conscious that decisions often have to be made, so it's always best to be prepared for the worst case scenario – and have a strategy for response when and if, needed'. He also realises that transitions were often a: 'leap into the unknown', with life being essentially unpredictable. Nevertheless, it is important to 'Be aware at the back of your mind that nothing is stable. Keep thinking about contingency plans: what might you do if things don't go to plan?' (UK 23).

In addition to these individual personality characteristics that are often pre-requisites for career adaptive behaviour, there are a number of factors with which it is strongly associated.

3.3 Other individual factors associated with career adaptability

3.3.1 Career, self and environmental exploration

A major element of career adaptive behaviour is exploration, which is defined broadly in terms of career exploration, self-exploration and environmental exploration (Blustein, 1997; Creed, *et al.*, 2009; Duarte, 1995; Duffy, 2010; Patton, *et al.*, 2004; Super, 1988; van Vianen *et al.*, 2009; Zikic and Klehe, 2006). Exploration relates to a certain curiosity about possible selves and identities, together with available opportunities (Savickas, *et al.*, 2009). The three types of exploration, relevant to career adaptability, can be identified from the literature.

- Career exploration, relating to those who seek out careers information, as well as reflect on their career and future plans (see Balin and Hirschi, 2010; Creed, *et al.*, 2009; Patton *et al.*, 2004; Super and Knasel, 1981).
- Self-exploration, characteristic of those who have an understanding of themselves, their competences and skills, which can be gained through a process of self-reflection

(Creed *et al.*, 2009; Duarte, 1995; Fouad and Bynner, 2008).

- Environmental exploration, describing those who investigate and understand employment opportunities available to them and also those who actively seek out support from family, friends and significant others (Creed *et al.*, 2009; Duarte, 1995; Fouad and Bynner, 2008).

Together, these behaviours reflect the interplay between the individual, their context and environment and are pivotal to successful navigation of the world of work (Duffy, 2010). The management of employability is largely a question of how cultural capital is translated into personal capital, with cultural capital being partly dependent upon the different familial, employment and educational contexts through which people pass and which give rise to different ways of being and becoming that prepare people for alternative futures (Brown *et al.*, 2003). The importance of developing social and human capital is also emphasised in the career adaptability literature (Creed *et al.*, 2009; Franz, 1983; Fugate *et al.*, 2004; Karaevli and Hall, 2006; McArdle *et al.*, 2007) and can be regarded as being closely aligned to systematic exploration and recognition of personal assets, as well as liabilities.

Where individuals are located outside the labour market, it is crucial for them to gain knowledge of opportunities and choices by undertaking greater career exploration (Blustein, 1997; Duarte, 1995; Duffy, 2010; Fouad and Bynner, 2008; Super and Knasel, 1981; van Vianen *et al.*, 2009; Zikic and Klehe, 2006). It was noticeable that a number of the Norwegian research participants (for example, N 49; N 28; N 51) had either never consciously 'had ambitions or dreams for a career', or else only made a forced job change: 'It is strange, that it has become so important to have a career'⁶. However, others regarded career development and career exploration as inter-related processes. One Norwegian respondent, for example, explained how study or work overseas provides

⁶ Career in Norwegian can be translated as *karriere*, but with connotations of profession *profesjon*. In this sense it may be that 'career' in Norwegian is interpreted closer to the German sense of *Beruf* - something more than a series of jobs - closer to a chosen occupation or vocation. While UK participants were more likely to regard their career as referring to the series of jobs, they had held even if they did not have a career in a broader sense.

you with a different perspective: 'My career development has also been a very useful experience, getting insight in different fields. Also important is travel to foreign countries; human relations and intercultural competence' (N 43). In cases such as this career exploration could act to raise individual aspirations.

3.3.2 Career resilience

Resilience refers to the capability and capacity to withstand change, implying the development of individual (and institutional) coping strategies. Career resilience refers to the capacity of an individual to respond to both positive and negative events and to move forward. It is about being able to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity, whilst at the same time being flexible and autonomous. Some (Goodman, 1994; Kohn *et al.*, 2003) have argued that career resilience is close to the definition of career adaptability proposed by Super and Knasel (1981). However, resilience seems to imply the ability to survive change once it happens, whereas career adaptability has a stronger proactive dimension.

A UK male participant (aged 57) provides an example of career resilience defined in this way. Trained as an apprentice craft engineer from the age of 16, Bill had worked in production on factory shop floors for many years of his working life. Then he was given the chance to move into the stores, after which he moved into the office. This triggered the opportunity to go on a two year course at his local University, with the fees paid by his employer. The first taste of study in higher education was stimulating and validating for Bill, but half way through the course, his company collapsed and he was made redundant. Because he would have had to pay the remaining course fees, he left half way through and now 'bitterly regrets it'. Though able to find employment again fairly quickly, he was made redundant from this next job after only a relatively short time. He found another job, this time with an American company, but after the catastrophe of 9/11, the company withdrew from its operations in the UK, so he was made redundant yet again. By now he was over 55 and felt that he was coming up against age discrimination in his attempts to re-enter the labour market, so decided to use some of his redundancy money to set up a small business. This process provided him with an interesting set of challenges, but now the business is set up, Bill recognises that it is not what he really wants to be doing. His main motivation was to create a small business for his wife to move into and manage, when she is ready. He is ready to move on to something that is more stimulating and personally challenging.

Bill's career trajectory is vivid testimony to his considerable career resilience. In a volatile

and contracting labour market, he was able to demonstrate various coping strategies, tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity over long periods of time, whilst at the same time demonstrating flexibility and autonomy. With the benefit of hindsight, he now feels that he should have continued with his University course, because: 'Knowledge is the key to everything' (UK 8). He believes that getting a qualification may very well have made all the difference to his job prospects, because it would have increased his potential to look for jobs in different sectors, rather than becoming the victim of successive redundancies.

3.3.3 Career decisiveness and career-decision-making

In order to prepare for, develop and progress careers, individuals have to make career decisions throughout their lifespan. In the current economic situation in the UK, these decisions can have a profound impact on job prospects. Career decision making is a complex process involving a range of processes, behaviours, environment and contextual factors, together with individual preferences and beliefs. Some researchers regard career decision making and decisiveness as an integral part of career adaptability (Blustein, 1997; Creed *et al.*, 2009; Duffy and Blustein, 2005; Duffy and Raque-Bogdan, 2010; Gunkel, *et al.*, 2010; Koen *et al.*, 2010; Krieshok *et al.*, 2009; Super and Knasel, 1981; van Vianen *et al.*, 2009; Zikic and Klehe, 2006). Undoubtedly, they are part of successful career transitions, since they contribute positively to preparing for and managing, voluntary and involuntary changes in the workplace.

This notion receives support from our career biographies, with some individuals taking decisive action, while others recognise that they had a tendency to let opportunities slip by. One example of career decisiveness relates to a Norwegian man (aged 47) who recommends: 'it is important not to get in a rut in the workplace, and therefore move within the organisation or to other companies. I always have my eyes and ears open for possible changes'. Another example from the UK sample is of a woman (aged 35), who described how all her job moves have been 'conscious decisions to change' and that she is a 'logical decision-maker', writing a list of 'pros and cons' for each decision to be made (UK 16).

In contrast, there were examples of research participants who recognised that they had not demonstrated career decisiveness over their careers and consequently had incurred penalties. For example, a Norwegian woman (aged 59) stated that: 'I am not very good at planning, so I deal with things as they come' (N 211), then went on to caution against this pattern of behaviour for others, who she felt should be more decisive in making a career

plan and then building their career in a more systematic fashion:

'To have too many detours in your career path is not smart. To plan a career path and take the appropriate training and the appropriate jobs that will help you get the right experience, meaning you build your career stone by stone and not as I have done'.

Similarly, a female from the UK sample (aged 49) reflected on how even now she was 'still an opportunist', but that this was risky – she had become more 'risk averse' over the years because of her changing context – with caring responsibilities for two school-age children and elderly parents (UK 4).

Career decision-making has aspects of planfulness and decisiveness, which are often, but not always inter-related. Planfulness allows individuals to take decisive action in a technically rational sense of review, plan and act. However, it is possible to take decisive action by responding quickly to opportunities which arise, even if they are not planned for, an example of what Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) identify as 'pragmatic rationality'.

3.4 Competencies for career adaptability

A life design approach to career development has been proposed, with five key career adaptability competencies – the five "C"s – as one focal point (Savickas *et al.*, 2009). This argues that a support system for life designing and building must do more than just help people acquire skills to deal with current changes and developmental issues. It should also help them to determine for themselves which skills and knowledge they value in their lifelong learning development and then help them to determine "how" (the needed method), "who" (the person or specialist that can give the support), "where" (the environment in which it should take place) and "when" (the best moment for the intervention) these skills and knowledge may be acquired (Savickas *et al.*, 2009 p. 244). Helping individuals become autonomous is paramount.

Within this approach, five separate but inter-related competencies are identified as crucial for increasing individuals' career adaptive responses to transitions. They are: control, curiosity, commitment, confidence and concern. In this context:

- control emphasises the need for individuals to exert a degree of influence on their situations;
- curiosity emphasises the value in broadening horizons by exploring social opportunities and possibilities;

- commitment stresses how individuals should experiment with new and different activities and projects, rather than being focused narrowly on getting into a particular job, so that new possibilities can be generated;
- confidence relates to believing in yourself and your ability to achieve what is necessary to achieve your career goal;
- concern refers to stimulating or developing a positive and optimistic attitude to the future. (Savickas *et al.*, 2009, p.245).

This research study was expressly set up to explore the potential of the concept of career adaptability to empower individuals to take positive decisions and actions regarding their skill development (see page 3, second bullet). A case study of a UK participant, aged 44 years old, illustrates the approach adopted (UK 5).

Claudia describes herself as being from an African family. She was a microbiologist for the National Health Service (NHS) for 13 years and holds three Masters qualifications as well her initial BSc. There was a strong parental expectation that she would study the sciences – and it was ‘never an option to fail or not to do well’.

After completing her first Masters, she got a job with a hospital as a trainee microbiology scientist. Then she moved to another large specialist hospital and started her second Masters. Soon, she began to feel ‘limited’ in her job. One day, colleagues were talking about pensions. She decided that remaining in that environment: ‘would drive me mad!’ She left without a job to go to, but the following day, was offered employment with a private hospital through an agency: ‘So you’ve always got options’. After a while, she was approached by a health clinic to work in the area of business development. She took the job and enrolled on an MBA, but when she discovered that her employer would not allow her the flexibility necessary to undertake her part time study, she resigned.

To support herself financially while studying her MBA, she worked as a locum. During this period she became interested in recruitment. The Director of the Business School where she was studying her MBA offered her a part-time job where she had to organise work placements and work experience for students. As a consequence, she was ‘head hunted’. She worked for this company for some time before leaving for a similar organisation.

During these multiple transitions, she ‘networked like mad’, finding that she was good at connecting with people and helping people connect with others. Her learning experiences were all positive – or at least ‘none were bad – it’s the person, not the qualifications!’ At the same time, she recognises that some groups in society may have to work harder than others: ‘For an African family, to progress in this society, you need education – that piece of paper’. Claudia has always tried to help others and feels that this is a core personal value. Helping others also provides networking opportunities.

She believes that: ‘...if there is something you really want to do – if it’s a passion – you don’t give up!’ However, this has to be tempered with common sense. She does recognise that something can still be a passion when an individual is not perhaps sufficiently competent. In this case, you just have to be realistic. Now she wants to set up her own business. At the moment, she’s taking a break, for about 6 months, to ‘get my head right’. Then she intends ‘to actively pursue a job’. The current economic context represents ‘really hard times’. The mantra is that there are no jobs – but Claudia firmly

believes that there are still opportunities. It is just that the 'candidate pool' is larger: 'The trick is to distinguish yourself from others out there! That's what's happening now!' Claudia identified her aspirations: to write a book; own a really good retail outlet; and teach. She is particularly keen to develop her creative talents. At the moment, she is: '...taking it one day at a time. You know you're running but not going anywhere – like a treadmill. It always works out in the end. Sometimes you need luck – and if you're not out there, you won't be in the game. Just got to keep going!'

The five career adaptive competencies provide a framework for evaluating the extent to which Claudia has become adaptive over her years in the labour market.

Control: Claudia's career story illustrates the way she has consistently taken control of her career direction. After spending over a decade working in a scientific laboratory for which she had become very well qualified, she left as soon as she found this occupational environment confining, even though she did not have a job to go to. Again, after enrolling on an MBA and finding that her employer was not prepared to support her professional development by giving her the flexibility needed to study part-time, she resigned and found another way of financing her way through study.

Curiosity: the desire to broaden her horizons is evident throughout Claudia's story. Her propensity to study, first an undergraduate degree, followed by no fewer than three Masters' qualifications, indicates her determination to add to her knowledge and understanding. She has also consistently updated her knowledge by undertaking informal learning activities. Now at something of a crossroads in her life, she is contemplating taking quite different career directions – so her appetite for expanding her knowledge and experience remains.

Commitment: along the way, Claudia has held to her core belief of helping others. This had not only helped expand horizons, but also develop networks. Her openness to change and opportunity has ensured a diverse set of employment experiences in contrasting occupational environments. From each, she has benefitted by developing her knowledge base and horizons for future action. Being passionate about the future is a key factor in her success.

Confidence: recognising that her family inculcated strong values around academic achievement, she understands how achievement became the norm. She has created opportunities for herself and taken full advantage of other opportunities, when they came along. Even when challenges were not within the direct sphere of her expertise and

experience, she never held back – being willing to embrace new environments and new learning challenges.

Concern: Claudia's story is illustrative of her optimistic and positive attitude to the future. She has developed a number of coping strategies that fit with her values and aspirations, with her aspirations being lifted in turn by her adaptability. These coping strategies include a series of positive beliefs: never give up; follow your dream; and understand that there is nothing wrong with people rejecting you, because it might be for the best.

The same five competencies were used as a framework to examine how one of the Norwegian sample (Ingrid, in her 40's) has become adaptive over her years in the labour market (N 21).

Control: Ingrid's career narrative shows she has consistently taken control of her career direction. Ingrid quit her first job (in the Post Office) to study for a degree in international marketing. She then had a series of jobs in sales and marketing, moving expressly 'for greater challenge – I was so young and fearless at the time'. She then moved into Human Resources and is now a Human Relations Manager in the oil industry, while also studying part-time for a Masters degree. She has been in the same job for nine years, partly because of her two children (11 and 13):

'the practical everyday life plays its role of course, taking the children to activities and so on. There is a lot of freedom [in my job and] since I have been here for so long I do the job faster and with less effort than I did as a newcomer. But maybe within a year...? Now I work very close to home so that's an aspect to keep in mind also.'

Curiosity: the desire for Ingrid to broaden her horizons is a clear thread running through her story. Besides doing degrees in two different subject areas, working in different jobs, sectors and industries, Ingrid has been geographically mobile, working in cities across the country. Even though she likes her current work, she recognises that future opportunities are likely to lie further afield:

'this is a fantastic exciting industry: my company operates globally and those kind of challenges I can't find in a national or local industry. I'd rather consider a change in the same industry but in another company. Maybe I expect a promotion after finishing my master degree, even though my motivation is my own learning experience and the new insight that comes with it.'

Her curiosity is clear throughout her story.

Commitment: Ingrid has consistently demonstrated a willingness to experiment with new

and different activities and projects, rather than being narrowly focused upon performing a single job role, so that new possibilities can be generated. Ingrid drew attention to how she learns at the workplace through 'informal training, learning by doing and guidance from others with more experience all the time.' She also identified having been engaged with internal and external formal training; interdisciplinary project work; learning from customers; continuing education at a technical school; courses in English; intercultural understanding; project management (global course); learning through job rotation (abroad); formal training by participation in learning circles; formal self-directed learning and participation in conferences.

Confidence: Ingrid believes in herself and has the ability to achieve what is necessary to achieve her career goals and this includes harnessing support from others:

'I have always had people around me who have given me support, even if I can remember that my parents were shocked when I quit my job (laughing). I have always had good role models around me and never felt that I didn't get support. Also working with colleagues with more professional knowledge and experience than me (guidance and coaching) has always been a useful way to develop knowledge and skills.'

Ingrid's confidence is not based on an unrealistic assessment of her own skills and abilities – she is prepared to work hard and her confidence is built on that foundation: 'there have been periods of a lot of learning, a lot of frustration and thinking of how to solve the tasks, but eventually, after solving them I have taken new steps to find new challenges and so on.'

Concern: Ingrid's story is illustrative of her optimistic and positive attitude to the future. She has a positive view of her past, present and future and weaves it altogether in a compelling narrative: 'today I consider changes more carefully, because I have children and have responsibility for others. These days, it's nothing spectacular taking a Master degree, but when I grew up, there were few in my family that took higher education.'

Her proactive approach to work is based on doing a job well; mastery of a knowledge base (she explicitly acknowledged how she had developed her 'professional knowledge by academically based practical learning') and strong organisational and relational skills. With regard to her own future, Ingrid emphasises in looking for her next job: 'I will use my networks to ensure that I take the right decision' and that you need 'to find out what you really want'. Interestingly, even with Ingrid's endorsement of needing to embrace change, this has to be strategic not uncritical: 'it must not be a change just for the sake of change'.

These two case studies demonstrate that the framework of adaptive competencies, developed from international research, has utility across the two different country contexts represented in this study.

The next section considers the impact of different contexts and opportunities, both operating as mediators, on the development of career adaptability.

4 Context and opportunity

Chapter Summary

- The potential for the development of career adaptive responses to the labour market are mediated not only by the broad economic context in which individuals are operating, but also by the opportunities to which they have access.
- Gender, ethnicity, age, socio economic status – all of these factors are associated with social inequality and under-achievement – and their impact is magnified when a set of factors converge in an individual.
- For many, the research data shows how these mediators of career adaptability impede and inhibit progress.
- For many also, the data illustrates how facing barriers that are beyond the control of the individual sharpens and hardens their resolve to overcome difficulties.

4.1 Different contexts

Social and economic structures (Fouad, 2007; Patton *et al.*, 2004), along with institutional contexts (Fouad and Bynner, 2008) are recognised as significant mediators of career adaptability. Since the overall sample for this research bridged two countries and economies (Norway and the UK), the different contexts in which the adult research participants across the two sub-samples were making their labour market transitions will be briefly considered.

4.1.1 The United Kingdom

The UK is currently the sixth largest economy in the world, the fourth largest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (UKCES, 2010). By one measure, it is the thirteenth most competitive in the world, representing a fall of one place from 2008 - 09. This drop in ranking is largely attributable to:

'...a weakening of the assessment of the financial market, based on rising concerns in the business sector about the soundness of banks on the back of several banking-sector bankruptcies and bailouts. In this context it is not surprising that a significant and growing weakness remains the United Kingdom's macroeconomic instability, with low national savings, an exploding public-sector deficit (related in large part to recent efforts to bail out the financial sector) and consequential public indebtedness' (UKCES, 2010, p.13).

According to statistics from the Office for National Statistics (2011), by the end of 2010, the number of people in employment had fallen and the number unemployed rose (to almost 8%). The number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (the claimant count) increased by 2,400 between December 2010 and January 2011 to reach 1.46 million. Whilst the number of male claimants has fallen for twelve consecutive months, the number of female claimants has increased for seven consecutive months. The number of women aged between 25 and 49 claiming Jobseeker's Allowance increased by 6,600 on the month to reach 244,500, the highest figure since comparable records for this series began in 1997.

Record numbers of people are working part-time because they cannot find full-time employment. The number of employees and self-employed people working part-time because they could not find a full time job recently increased to 1.19 million, the highest figure since comparable records began in 1992 (ONS, 2011).

4.1.2 Norway

The Norwegian economy operates welfare capitalism, featuring a combination of free market activity and government intervention and the government controls key areas of the economy, such as the vital petroleum sector, through large-scale state-majority-owned enterprises. The country is richly endowed with natural resources – petroleum, hydropower, fish, forests and minerals – and is highly dependent on the petroleum sector, which accounts for nearly half of exports and over 30 per cent of state revenue. Norway is the world's second-largest gas exporter. In anticipation of eventual declines in oil and gas production, Norway saves state revenue from the petroleum sector in the world's second largest sovereign wealth fund, valued at over \$500 billion in 2010 (CIA, 2011).

The mainland economy is continuing to strengthen, recovering quickly from a slight contraction in 2009, with the budget and current-account balance comfortably in surplus. The offshore sector is likely to be more volatile, but Norway is investing heavily in the offshore oil and gas sector for 2011. Petroleum companies are keen to capitalise on

higher prices and prospective energy demand to invest in exploration activity and field development (Bradbury, 2011). Unemployment remains low at less than 4 per cent.

4.1.3 UK: Norway labour market comparisons

Recent European policy concerns have focused on active labour market policies and promoting individual skills development as a key aspect of flexicurity (CEDEFOP, 2009; The Commission of the European Communities, 2009). From this perspective, the Norwegian government has been an exemplar of active intervention in the labour market through a policy of 'flexicurity'. Flexicurity is designed and implemented across four policy components: flexible and reliable contractual arrangements; comprehensive lifelong learning strategies; effective active labour market policies; and modern social security systems providing adequate income support during employment transitions (Nergaard, 2009). According to the logic of flexicurity, there is an incentive for learning in order to achieve vertical or horizontal job mobility, by taking the additional risk (which investment in learning implies) during or after the transition period in order to gain even better job security than before.

The question of whether different labour market and social security systems lead to different patterns of individual career development is an interesting one and the European Commission individual career development project investigated the question of whether career patterns might be expected to vary amongst different employability-flexibility-security combination types (Brown *et al.*, 2010). However, the types broke down in individual country cases, because the more important influence on career patterns was the structure of opportunities available in the different labour markets (Brown *et al.*, 2010). For example, the very high mobility experienced by many in the UK sample was more a function of the structure of the labour market and organisation of work than attributable to the particular combination of employability-flexibility-security characteristics. Indeed the high mobility itself created many more job opportunities which in turn fed further high levels of mobility. It is notable that within each of the three sectors (engineering, ICT and health) in the UK there are the dual expectations that people will have a relatively high number of jobs within the sector and that movement to other sectors is comparatively common. Neither of these assumptions held to anything like the same degree in any other country (Brown *et al.*, 2010).

For these reasons, it is clear that the opportunity structures within particular labour markets are far more relevant to individuals' career choices than particular configurations

of employability-flexibility-security. The latter characteristics influence the volume and type of opportunities available at any one time but the pathways available and different sets of expectations about career choice and occupational mobility are framed within clear opportunity structures which vary between countries. Perhaps the most obvious example is the way over the last decade most engineers graduating in the UK were aware that a career in merchant banking was not only possible but was a common pathway (Brown *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, from this perspective the UK and Norway were the most alike in having, for different reasons, the most open opportunity structures in terms of the range of paths an individual with a particular qualification could follow (Brown *et al.*, 2010).

From a perspective of individual career development it is interesting that it is very easy to move between sectors in the UK and Norway, even though the two countries operate very differently in relation to flexicurity. The UK provides opportunities for career change in a low security but high flexibility context, while Norway provides a context of high employability/security coupled with medium flexibility. Looking towards the future, however, there may be challenges in how best to support transitions to jobs requiring different skill sets as outlined by the Commission of the European Communities (2009) 'Consultation document on the future "EU 2020" strategy':

'New jobs requiring new skills will be created. Transition between jobs, between training and jobs will have to be managed. This is where flexicurity should be deployed to the full. The challenge is to find the best way to enhance on the one hand, the flexibility of labour markets both on work organisation and on labour relations, and on the other hand, the security provided by lifelong learning and appropriate social protection' (p. 6) .

The conclusion of the European Commission study on individual career development was that, insofar as the common principles of flexicurity (comprehensive lifelong learning strategies; effective active labour market policies; easing upward mobility and between unemployment or inactivity and work; continuous upgrading of skills) widen the opportunity structures available to people with particular sets of qualifications, then movements in this direction can be a useful means of encouraging individual aspirations and occupational mobility (Brown *et al.*, 2010). The pathways available and different sets of expectations about career choice and occupational mobility are framed within clear opportunity structures which vary (within and) between countries. If an individual is unsure what he or she wants to do or wants to change career direction, then the UK and Norway, with their wide range of general opportunities and openness to career change provide the greatest breadth of opportunities, particularly for graduates. However, if an

individual has a clear sense of career direction and wants to follow an established progression pathway, particularly below graduate level, then the structured opportunities available within the German and French systems might be attractive (Brown *et al.*, 2010).

The term 'opportunity structures' itself contains the tension between openness and flexibility on the one hand and structured pathways on the other. Both are valuable and it is finding an accommodation which works well for most members of a society and also provides opportunities for those who do not fit initially. This should be the goal of a Continuing Vocational Training policy, informed by concerns for individual career development. The principles of flexicurity can be helpful in this respect, but extending the breadth and quality of the opportunity structures should be the goal of policy in this area (Brown *et al.*, 2010).

UK and Norway differ in their unemployment rates, labour market policies and economic structure, so what might be the implications for career adaptability in country contexts with currently contrasting economic fortunes? Even though the country contexts for the two sub-samples were different, with respect to the economic opportunities available, the competency framework for career adaptive behaviour was found to be equally relevant in both research samples. In the UK, many participants related experiences of both voluntary and involuntary redundancy (in some cases, multiple experiences) and commented on the tough economic conditions which they were experiencing in their careers, but participants in Norway did not. The economy in Norway continues to be buoyant, with employment still a realistic prospect. The Norwegians did, however, report experiences of equally disruptive and unexpected events (for example, a company announcing a geographical relocation) which they had had to accommodate. Whilst their adaptive responses were sensitive to the economic context in which they were being played out, the competencies required to navigate themselves out of the circumstances into which they were precipitated remained the same.

4.2 Career adaptability in differing contexts

The career biographies provide illustrations of how contexts can operate as an inhibiting influence on the development of career adaptive behaviour. They also show how they can operate to support and enhance this behaviour. For example, from the UK sample, Steve, aged 55, recalled how he had taken a law degree initially, but then had decided that he did not want to become a lawyer. He was looking for a job 'at a time of high unemployment' when graduate opportunities were much scarcer than previously and the

economic context was operating as a powerful inhibitor of choice. However, he found his initial career 'due to serendipity'. He had worked in a particular hospital as a porter in his student vacations, so asked for a temporary job there and ended up staying for over a year: 'The job was enjoyable and I learned a great deal. I became a shop steward and was involved in negotiations with management'. As a consequence of these experiences, he then decided to move into Human Relations (HR). He moved first into HR in the National Health Service, then into HR in banking, where he worked for four different banks 'all with very different national cultures'. He explained how he had 'drawn together threads of experience' as his career developed, from the different contexts in which he was operating. In his early 50s, he undertook formal courses in preparation for switching to work in the pensions sector. The context was important here because opportunities had opened up due to legislative changes regarding pension trust fund administration. He had considered becoming self-employed ten years previously, so after training, set up a small company and moved into pension trustee services (UK 20).

Christina, a respondent from the Norwegian sample, aged 48, has had to adapt to working in a number of very different contexts. Initially she worked as a hotel receptionist in Germany, having completed a hotel staff apprenticeship. She then completed a degree in engineering and worked for 10 years in Switzerland and Germany in the power industry. Then she changed industry when she moved to Norway for family reasons and worked half-time on environmental issues. However, the company went bankrupt and she switched industries again, working in the oil industry, firstly in logistics and then getting promoted to a role as a project manager. She learns: 'a lot informally from colleagues as well as from courses' and one learning strategy is to: 'ask several people about how they solve the problem – and then I find a solution that suits me best.' Her employment history is very varied, as is her education. She has almost completed a part-time degree in Political Science (N 48).

Christina has worked in three countries in four industries in very different occupations and wants to work in a completely different sector again. She is proactive, has a positive attitude to change, likes challenge and has shown she can work with people, things and ideas. When reflecting upon her adaptation to changing contexts Christina points out how important it is to 'keep asking to get information. I have also found a network for women supportive and I would recommend that it is important to begin with networking early on in your career'. She has been successful in making a number of demanding transitions, but still looks for new challenges and would consider another industry change: 'Yes, I have

dreams about working with projects relating to human rights’.

4.3 Different opportunities

The policy interest in raising skill levels does not lie in the intrinsic value of skills themselves, but because skills have a crucial role in (i) raising employment and productivity and (ii) in addressing inequalities between groups in the UK (UKCES, 2010, p. 28).

The accident of birth – the family into which you are born – matters more in UK society than in many other countries (UKCES, 2010, p.27) – with intergenerational mobility very much higher in Norway than in the UK (Blanden *et al.*, 2005). Persistent social inequalities remain a feature of society, by gender, by ethnicity, by social class and between different regions and nations of the UK, with 5.3 million people with multiple disadvantages (UKCES, 2010, p. 25). The concept of multiple disadvantage here challenges the use of terms like ‘double jeopardy’ and ‘double disadvantage’, because such terms confound true understanding of the multiple and simultaneous inequalities experienced by people in whom different social divisions collide (Begum, 1994). The distribution of, and interaction between, these different dimensions of inequality are complex and difficult to unravel.

Age-related discrimination was perceived by an English male participant once he had reached the age of 55. He reflected on how people no longer took him seriously, expecting him to be heading for retirement: ‘They prefer to employ someone of 30 with kids and mortgage because they think they’re more likely to get up in the morning and go to work on time.’ He consequently saw little chance that he would be given the opportunity to work for an employing organisation again.

Four women in the UK sample were from minority ethnic groups. Across this sub-sample, ways in which opportunities were influenced by culture and by faith were identified in an illustrative way, rather than leading to broader conclusions. One explained how there was a strong value and tradition in her family towards sciences and law. At the age of 16, she was obliged to abandon arts subjects which she was good at and enjoyed, to take science subjects for ‘A’ level. Consequently, completing her examinations took five years to complete (whilst working part time). Only then was she mature enough to make a stand against her family and take a degree course that suited her creative abilities. Reflecting on that phase of her life, she remarked how: ‘that was a dark time,

academically'. Faith had also been a huge focus for one participant, who believed that culture and faith both had a 'real impact on where people end up'.

Gendered opportunity structures emerged as the strongest set of influences from the research sample – and especially where the influence of gender combined with age. From the UK sample, a woman aged 33 related her experiences of changing career direction from a management and technology consultancy firm where she had completed a graduate traineeship and then worked for about three years, to becoming a freelance assistant television producer. This work she described as: 'highly competitive, unpredictable and involved working long hours'. Recognising, though, that this was a 'lifestyle choice', she enjoys the creative and people-orientated aspects of her role and has learned industry specific skills that build upon her talents and interests. However, she feels there is 'limited job security' and that the industry is 'particularly difficult for women', especially those who wish to combine work with starting a family. She observed how 'many women in the industry disappear silently' when they reach their mid 30s to 40s because of the lack of job sharing and part-time opportunities. Because of the disadvantages she perceives as related to both gender and age in the industry, she is thinking about her career plans longer term, especially taking account of opportunities that enable women to combine work with family life.

This example highlights the penalties associated with a woman choosing to work in a sector that is predominantly male. The pattern of working, so characteristic of this sector, disadvantages younger women who wish to have children (or who have care responsibilities) and eliminates the participation of older women in significant numbers altogether. Unable to reconcile wanting to have a family with sustaining a career in this sector, the research participant is having to seek employment in a different sector that is more sympathetic to the lifestyle choice of starting a family. Since this consideration operates as a constraint for very many women (and some men), this provides an example of the way in which women's choice of job is mediated by the opportunity structures created by a sector. Norway has had some success with getting women into technical areas associated with the oil and gas industry, but it was noticeable that in two cases in the Norwegian sample where women had reached positions with demanding managerial responsibilities they had asked for a switch to less demanding roles because of family responsibilities.

Another gendered example of the constraining nature of opportunity structures comes from the UK sample. Aged 44, Lisa is 'taking a break', having just closed down her

complementary therapy business because she's 'not sure I want to do it anymore'. Married with two school-age children, she left school at 16 and went to college to train as a nursery nurse. After qualifying, she worked at a nursery school, then at 20 started studying to become a nurse. She worked as a nurse for seven years, during which time she was promoted to senior staff nurse. Wanting a change, she 'looked around' and decided to train in complementary therapies. She continued to work full time as a nurse for the first year whilst she was training, then for the second and third years of her training she worked part time as a nurse in a job share. As she married and moved location, she worked between nursing and complementary therapy, sometimes full time as a nurse, sometimes part time in her business. After having her first child, she carried on working until she had her second child. Then she felt obliged to curtail her business commitments, giving priority to child care. Now she wants something that 'feels right', after 'spending about 30 years of my life looking after other people'. Her parents ingrained strong work attitudes in her, so she has always tried to do something that is 'credible', not taking many risks. She feels that she has 'just exhausted herself over the years with the pressures of full time work and child care'. Now it is time to 'find herself' and do something she really enjoys doing: 'I need to have more fun – and there won't be any guilt!'

For women who conform to the social pressure to engage in 'women's work', Lisa shows how this can take a toll on individual productivity, as her decision to wind up her business has been precipitated by caring, constantly, for others – both in the public and private domains.

Another poignant example of the constraining nature of opportunity structures of age and gender, even in a buoyant labour market, comes from Karen, a 59 year old from the Norwegian sample, who became unemployed at the age of 50, having worked for 30 years as a secretary and then a marketing manager. She felt she could not get another job 'in marketing they don't want old cronies', whereas in her current field, accounting: 'age doesn't count so much.' Karen's transitions have not been smooth. She had lost her job following organisational changes, but as that job had some accounting responsibility, she decided to do a financial course arranged by the unemployment office, when she was unemployed: 'It was really a Eureka experience – I want to work in accounting!'

However, the training and the short temporary jobs she undertook simply to get more accounting experience meant the change process lasted five years, until eventually Karen got a permanent job at one of the employers where she was working as a

temporary member of staff.

The challenges in making the change over the five years were considerable: 'at the same time I got divorced, my mother died, I lost my job and I moved ... and my salary was reduced by (about £15,000) a year.' The course was demanding too: 'I learned accounting on my own and studied late at night, it was terribly tiring. That type of challenge you can only face once in a lifetime.' The process of mastering all the challenges, however, was ultimately affirming:

'I was very unsure of my own skills and ability to handle different jobs, at the time. But this experience has taught me that I can achieve what I want and I've got a lot of confidence with regards to tackling different types of jobs, environments and challenges. It has been an incredible learning experience and has given me a tremendous confidence that I'll manage.'

Her final reflection was a commentary upon opportunity structures and how disadvantage could be cumulative:

'I wish the labour market would be more suitable for us over 50 and especially women. What happens now is that you get pushed to the bottom and then someone younger and faster than you takes your job. I wish there were an increase in respect for experience and competence.'

In summary, gender, age, ethnicity and context are powerful factors which influence individuals' and employers' perceptions. The research findings highlighted lost opportunities to harness talent and skills which impacted not only on the individual but also on the economy. However, career adaptability has a role in raising the aspirations of individuals at both higher and lower levels of skills and in making access to training and learning more equitable. It was noted from the research that one crucial method of achieving success, through adaptive responses, is through learning and development. This is discussed in the next section.

5 Learning and development

Chapter Summary

- The role of learning in developing adaptability at work has four dimensions:
- learning through challenging work (or mastering the practical, cognitive and communicative demands linked with particular work roles and work processes);
- updating a substantive knowledge base (or mastering a new additional substantive knowledge base);
- learning through (and beyond) interactions at work; and
- being self-directed and self-reflexive.

5.1 Learning to adapt through challenging work

A predictor of career adaptability is the propensity of the individual to learn and develop their competences (Creed *et al.*, 2009; Cronshaw and Jethmalani, 2005; Fugate *et al.*, 2004; O'Connell *et al.*, 2008). One of the most powerful ways individuals become engaged with learning and development pathways, which can involve up-skilling, re-skilling or perspective transformation is through engagement with challenging work (Brown, 2009). Challenging work can lead to adaptability in a number of ways, but what also comes across in the following quotations from the Norwegian participants in this study is their sense of engagement with that challenging work:

- 'My new job involved me in a steep learning curve, but when I master the job – it gives me confidence'.
- 'My new job was technologically challenging, there were exciting products to work with and I am very good at adapting to what is required. It is important to be open and flexible'.
- 'Learning while working in a project has its benefits; working together towards a concrete goal and with people and groups that are dynamic'.
- 'The feeling of being good at what you do, to master the job – to be able to work purposefully'.
- 'My learning while working has been enriched with having changed industries. It is

healthy to switch jobs. I'm not afraid of changes and I look forward to changes.'

These positive attitudes towards learning through challenging work are mirrored in quotations from UK participants:

- 'Gained all my skills in the film industry on-the-job and through work experience, willing to ask how to do things when I do not know how'.
- 'Enjoy learning, think it is integral to working in IT, it is important to keep up-to-date – 3D graphics is a field which is moving fast'.
- 'Really excited about this opportunity and what it could lead to. I learnt most when doing challenging work'.
- 'I learned through challenging work; lots of interaction; learned about organisational cultures and management of change'.
- 'I learn on-the-job through project work'.

A woman from the UK sample exemplified how learning through challenging work can help build a platform from which it is possible to adapt to work in other fields. Her ten years working in safety critical environments (defence and engineering) produced a commitment to rigour and precision. Although this had clear benefits in how she approached her own work in future, she had to adapt to different attitudes and cultures in other environments, for example, when working in the policy arena 'I needed to negotiate the territory'. Additionally, learning from work could take unexpected turns. On several occasions, she was brought in to 'clear up a mess' caused by failure of colleagues to complete a project. On one occasion, the job involved considerable conflict resolution : 'I received no credit, but it was good experience'.

This example encapsulates a paradoxical aspect of adaptability. It is necessary to develop a particular way of thinking and practising associated with a discipline, occupation or knowledge base, but then the individual has to learn in what circumstances not to apply that particular approach when operating outside that area of expertise. The paradox is resolved because adaptable individuals have learned that mastery of a knowledge base (including appropriate ways of thinking and practising), which is itself a skill (or art), can be transferred.

Without the initial development of a rigorous base of particular ways of knowing, thinking and practising, individuals struggle to be effective when faced with complex problems at work. On the other hand, the adaptable individual knows that there are other situations at

work, particularly when working in teams, where individuals have a wide mix of backgrounds or when dealing with clients, customers or patients, when it is inappropriate to approach an issue solely from a particular perspective learned in the past.

5.2 Learning to adapt through updating a substantive knowledge base

Being able to engage with challenging work often depends upon having already mastered a substantive knowledge base. Many research participants had obtained specialist professional qualifications at the start of their careers: for example, nurses, engineers and software consultants, while other graduates had studied a wide range of subjects. Other participants had completed an apprenticeship or other vocational training. Nearly all participants saw what they had learned in their initial studies as relevant in some way to their current jobs, even when they were working in a different occupational area from that for which they had studied or trained. Several participants pointed out that this was because they had learned particular ways of thinking and practising that stood them in good stead for the rest of their career. The actual knowledge base itself, however, often required considerable updating and many of our participants did this partly through work activities and partly through career development activities away from work.

The research participants undertook a wide range of courses in order to update their skills and knowledge, as the following quotations illustrate:

- 'I enrolled for a part-time MSc – leaving full time employment to do this'.
- 'Took formal qualifications in leadership and management; coaching supervision; and reflective practice'.
- Completed an MSc Learning and Development: an Action Learning MSc – 'on how we add value to the business – it provided practical help to strategy development'.
- Completed a graduate IPM qualification and then two Masters – one in Industrial Relations and one in coaching.
- Holds a degree and 3 Masters degrees. Two of these are science related and the third is an MBA. CPD along the way – 'never stop learning!'.

In most cases, formal training clearly added value to individuals' career development, but one graduate took a Post Graduate Secretarial Course and regretted the training as 'it took a long time for me to get out of secretarial work'. Fifteen years later she again had serious reservations about her choice of formally accredited learning – she had studied

part-time for a Diploma in Management, but it was 'disorganised and not very relevant'. So unusually, her formal learning was not seen as significant for career development, which had been principally driven by learning on-the-job and from colleagues and she saw herself as essentially self-taught.

Some participants completed integrated training, which comprised formal learning, learning on-the-job and self-directed learning. For example, one respondent completed a graduate traineeship in accounting, while another had left school at 16 and started as a craft engineering apprentice: formal teaching on technician courses was complemented by training in the workplace which was 'very, very good'. He spent 6 months in every department in the company – from technical drawing to pattern making up to management. A 'very thorough apprenticeship: sets you up!'

UK participants in a number of fields, such as health, IT and engineering, drew attention to the need to keep up-to-date with their field's developing knowledge base. However, although they emphasised the value of taking a range of on-line courses, professional updating and similar for keeping their skills, knowledge and understanding current, many also opted to undertake more substantive programmes of learning and development. These included Masters degrees in computer generated imagery; control of infectious diseases; health care leadership and management; finance; MBA; psychology; educational management; occupational psychology; medical imaging science (ultrasound); and materials science (metallurgy). Such substantive provision was regularly viewed by participants as taking their learning and development to a new level and creating a platform for future career development, as the following quotes illustrate.

- 'Enabled me to draw together learning, experiences and other qualifications. Really excited about this opportunity and what it could lead to.'
- 'Gave me a good grounding in management and technical skills – the value of formal study is that it teaches you to write and make things explicit.'
- 'Important process for intellectual development, more critical way of thinking and adds depth to your approach.'

A similar picture was portrayed by the Norwegian participants who highlighted the value of a variety of ways to update their learning, including: professional updating courses; intensive courses on technology at university; certification courses; security management; quality and safety courses; and special nurse organisation and management.

The rationale for technological updating was clear amongst participants: ‘the industry is changing, so it is important to have a common conceptual framework’; and ‘it helps me master the job and it gives me confidence’. Individuals were combining processes of sense-making, with re-contextualisation of the development of knowledge and understanding, after intensive periods of knowledge development and application.

Whilst the use of formal course provision for those participants working in technical positions was also linked to knowledge development through challenging work (associated with project work, introduction of new techniques, products, technology or processes), updating formal knowledge was always linked to a range of more informal ways of knowledge development and utilisation. The search for knowledge by individuals working in technical areas in ICT, health and engineering was often broad, going well beyond just the development of technical skills. The search could incorporate aspects of technical:

- know-how (how to apply technologies);
- know-what (where and when technologies and knowledge could be applied);
- know-who (including an active search for people who would be valuable as members of a personal network); and
- know-why (a fuller understanding of work processes including, in some cases in health, a deeper scientific understanding) (Lundvall, 2002).

Individuals also often needed the ability to utilise different types of distributed knowledge available in texts, technologies, artefacts or organisational routines (Dosi and Grazzi, 2010).

Some engagement with higher levels of knowledge and understanding relevant to work is clearly required to keep up-to-date with current ways of thinking and practising, but the level of engagement exhibited by many of the participants in both countries went beyond simple up-dating. Rather, it was driven by a desire for sense-making and their own identity at work. That is, these participants were seeing their professional identities and personal identities as being complementary and took care to emphasise, for example, that although taking a Masters degree had value for their work, the primary driver was a personal one – linked to their belief in the value of their own personal learning and development.

Updating a knowledge base through engagement with formal provision also needs to be

complemented with other forms of learning and development. The transfer of appropriate knowledge between contexts (from learning to work) is not a straight forward process as it depends upon:

- understanding the new situation, a process that often depends on informal social learning;
- recognising which areas of knowledge are relevant to the new situation;
- focusing more precisely on what knowledge is needed for a particular decision or action;
- interpreting and/or transforming that knowledge to suit the new situation and context; and
- integrating the relevant aspects of knowledge prior to or during performance (Eraut, 2009).

However, once that knowledge updating and re-contextualisation is complete, individuals seem equipped to perform their existing role more effectively. It also seems to give them a platform to undertake further transitions. Thus, many participants who had achieved further technical qualifications, then went on to work in other areas: for example, management, teaching, consultancy or even more radical career changes.

The mechanism here may, therefore, be that the knowledge updating process (whether up-skilling or re-skilling) gets learners thinking both explicitly and implicitly about what constitutes effective performance in a changing context. The participants in the updating process seem to have learned or had reinforced how to apply their skills, knowledge and understanding in a range of contexts, which provides a foundation for or reinforcement to their ability to make successful transitions: they have become more adaptable. This process may also facilitate self-reflexiveness, which is considered in section 5.4.

5.3 Learning to adapt through interactions at work

Working and learning are social activities, with work relationships, interactions and learning influencing current and future opportunities for the development of work-relevant skills, knowledge and understanding (Brown, 2009). It is an open question whether interactions at work do lead to substantive learning and development, but what is not in question is that rich interactions do provide opportunities for substantive development. Many participants in both countries seemed well aware of the value of opportunities for

'learning by interacting'— they were seen as a key component of what they saw as learning-rich jobs, where you can learn from interacting with patients, colleagues, customers, clients etc..

- 'The job at the cancer centre - you have to deal with many situations spontaneously and with the patients' emotions. ...need a good working environment and support of colleagues. There are a lot of opportunities to learn...interdisciplinary learning...'
- 'We have a working environment where you learn from each other'.
- 'I've received training on the job. Now there are no courses, but I keep myself updated and I'm very independent. I must think quickly to find the solution when standing there with a customer'.
- 'I use all my skills and technical competence, but then I have to negotiate with clients all the time in order to get new work'.
- 'Client feedback on work motivates me for delivering better results. I do not need much support as a self-employed consultant, but my work does engage me with many different people'.

The cases above illustrate rich learning by interacting, which arise from work activities that are challenging in the demands they place upon individuals. However, the first case also shows how certain types of interactions, such as weekly case reviews (interdisciplinary learning), can be specifically set up to support collective learning and development. Indeed, participation in and learning through, interacting within communities and networks is a fundamental way for (re-)constructing a sense of the whole work process as well as a vehicle to develop expertise, including how to communicate effectively in different contexts. The interactions may be formalised, but they may also make use of more informal personal networks and relationships:

- 'I have always had people around me who have given me support and I have always had good role models around me and never felt that I didn't get support.'
- 'Informally, I learn a lot from colleagues. I ask several people about how they solve the problem – and then I find a solution that suits me best.'
- 'I keep asking questions to get information and I have found a network for women, which is most helpful.'
- 'My old job was very good in relation to getting contacts – provided me with business networking opportunities worldwide.'

- 'I was supported by colleagues and by my old and new bosses. I was pushed a little into the change.'

For workers engaged in a range of networks, learning by interacting often helped with different aspects of their work-related learning and development, only some of which were explicitly linked to the organisation for which they worked. In contrast, where access to a broad set of interactions was restricted, opportunities for learning as part of their everyday work were consequently limited. It may be that it is social capital, developed through participation in work-related networks, which plays a role in helping individuals sustain their employability (Brown, 2005). Such social capital is also likely to contribute to individuals' adaptability.

Some individuals were engaged in work that gave them opportunities for rich interactions across a range of contexts. This occurred because their work regularly took them to other workplaces, or they changed jobs or changed roles within an organisation, or they worked in a field with strong occupational networks. Personal networks were also utilised, drawing on support of people with whom they shared an educational background, or were former colleagues. These processes of learning through interaction and engagement with other people honed their skills in a number of respects, including the development of tacit skills associated with effective communication which could be applied in a range of contexts.

In such circumstances, there could be complementarity in the informal learning of technical, social and networking skills that were recognised as valuable for an individual's skill development at work. The informal learning associated with personal networks was often important in many contexts over a career – from hearing about job opportunities and gaining initial entry to work through to many aspects of continuing career development, including choices about different ways of updating skills, knowledge and experience. The experiences of many of the participants seemed resonant with earlier research where progress in work was often supported by spontaneous forms of learning in which informal work-based learning and self-managed competence development converge and where both are often at least partly dependent upon the quality of support from personal networks (Brown, 2005).

It was also noticeable that two participants who, early in their career were engaged in work that did not depend on well-developed communication skills, nevertheless found ways to engage in intensive interactions at work through union activity. A UK graduate hospital porter, who had not been able to find other work because of high levels of

unemployment, became a shop steward and developed into a highly skilled negotiator. After a year of these duties he decided to seek work in the human resources (HR) field – he talked it over with the HR manager of the hospital, with whom he had developed a strong working relationship, who recommended that he apply for a job in a nearby hospital. A Norwegian aircraft mechanic found his union roles much more demanding and rewarding than his work: ‘my union leader role (including being on the Board for 9 years) meant I developed as a person and learned to cope with many different situations’.

These examples of learning through rich interactions at work, but not directly through jobs, shows how the quality of interaction can be partly independent of the broader skill component of the job. This finding is exemplified in reverse by Eraut *et al.*, (2004), who highlighted how some highly qualified graduates were employed as professional engineers but, given a dearth of challenging projects, were given routine work. The lack of the promised professional interactions, in turn, compromised their opportunities for professional development.

Whilst interactions at work can be a driver for learning, they can also lead to a range of other opportunities to perform in new and challenging contexts. It is interesting that one participant, who worked largely alone as a technical writer, saw herself as (willingly) locked into her own field of expertise – the work itself presented new challenges, but the lack of meaningful interaction with others meant that she was not becoming more adaptable. So learning through meaningful interactions at work can be a powerful driver of adaptability, with the absence of such interactions an inhibitor of adaptive competence.

There appears to be one particular type of interaction at work which stands out as helping in the development of adaptability and that is supporting the learning of others. Time and again, individuals identified certain individuals or groups as being particularly helpful in their learning and development. By the same token, some participants highlighted how much they learned themselves or gained in other respects from supporting the learning of others. Some had responsibility for learning and development of others on a formal basis as coach, mentor, tutor or manager, whereas others performed this role as part of their duties within a team or project: ‘In our project teams there are lots of interdisciplinary exchanges and there is a lot of learning going on. For instance, an economist will learn about operations through participation in projects.’

In knowledge-intensive work and settings involving complex teamwork, many organisations explicitly use a developmental view of expertise that goes well beyond expecting technical proficiency and a commitment to continuing improvement. These

organisations pay particular attention to ensuring that their teams possess people able to support the learning of others (Brown, 2009). Organisations could create mechanisms to enhance peer support, mentoring and knowledge sharing in order to develop a culture of support for learning and development (Bryant and Terborg, 2008). One consequence of this seems to be that those with responsibility for supporting the learning and development of others become more reflexive of their own learning and development and this strengthens their capability to apply their own skills, knowledge and understanding in a range of contexts.

Overall, interactions at work can act as a driver of the development of adaptability in four ways.

- First, there is development arising from work activities which are challenging in the demands they place upon individuals: for example, in activities in counselling, negotiation or complex project management settings, interactions can be particularly demanding and individuals learn to adapt through processes of experience, reflection and learning.
- Second, there are certain types of interactions based on activities such as weekly case reviews, mentoring and peer support which are expressly concerned with helping people think about learning, development and effective performance by reflecting upon their experience.
- Third, interactions associated with participation in broader communities and networks can help individuals make sense of work processes in a wider context, thereby helping individuals understand where they are and where they might be within occupational, organisational and broader communities – this can then be a factor in facilitating successful career transitions.
- Fourth, interactions based around supporting the learning and development of others at work can help individuals to become more reflexive of their own learning and development and thereby strengthen their capability to apply their own skills, knowledge and understanding in a range of contexts as a basis of adaptability.

5.4 Learning to adapt through self-directed learning and self-reflexiveness

As argued above, learning to adapt is a social process, facilitated by interaction, but it is also necessarily an individual process. Even engagement with challenging work and

involvement in rich interactions does not necessarily lead to adaptability. Some individuals use a very limited repertoire of responses to such challenges, which mean they may actually become less, rather than more, adaptable. It has become clear from this study that the development of adaptability has to be self-directed. Learning and development at work depends partly on whether work offers an expansive learning environment and employers can play an enabling role in this respect (Fuller and Unwin, 2006; Felstead *et al.*, 2011). However, it is also dependent upon individual actions. People vary in their self-awareness about their goals, aspirations, motivation, personality, inter-personal skills and resilience. They also differ in their appreciation of learning opportunities, contextual understanding and their ability to develop relationships and networks to support their learning and development. Capabilities for critical analysis, critical reflection, visualisation and organisation and the ability to switch between context and generalisation, all help individuals to make the most of their learning opportunities (Brown, 2009). In this respect, career adaptability can empower individuals to take positive decisions and actions regarding their skills development.

At work, being self-directed in terms of taking advantage of learning opportunities is helpful for individual development (Bimrose and Brown, 2010). Eraut (2009) argues it can involve willingness to engage in a wide range of activities such as asking questions; getting information; finding key people to support you; listening and observing; learning from mistakes; giving and receiving feedback; trying things out; independent study; and working for a qualification. There were many examples of all behaviours in the data from the participants in both countries and it is noteworthy that besides identifying themselves as self-directed, participants were also able to articulate just such generic strategies that helped them build their careers and make successful transitions:

- 'I am very good in adapting to what is required! You need to be open and flexible. Try new things. Just do it.'
- 'There have been periods of a lot of learning, a lot of frustration and thinking of how to solve the tasks, but eventually, after solving them I have taken new steps to find new challenges and so on.'
- 'I have experienced different cultures. In a small company decisions are taken very quickly. Everybody can see who takes the decision ... In a large company: decisions are usually taken far from the workers ... cannot see who... and takes a lot longer.'
- 'My professional expertise is mostly gained through experience. I lay my reputation on the line with my problem-solving. You need to think positively; do not let daily

frustrations affect you; be realistic; get feedback. It costs to be in charge...'

- 'I often learn in retrospect, how I did it in the job. You often get feedback afterwards.'

One special aspect of being self-directed, illustrated by the quotes above, relates to being self-reflexive, able to identify your current skill set and how this might be enhanced and extended. Those who made successful transitions all seemed to be self-directed in either or both their learning and development and their career more generally. The link between being self-directed in your own learning and development and making successful transitions is transparent: if you can learn to adapt and continue to develop in your current job, even in less than ideal circumstances, then this provides a basis for making successful transitions in future. Several participants also pointed to the psychological dimension of how being self-directed and successful in making a major transition reinforced your confidence that you would be able to do this again in future, if required.

Those individuals who see that their skills can be transferred to other contexts have significant advantages in changing career direction over those who define themselves almost exclusively by their occupational and organisational attachments (Bimrose *et al.*, 2008). This advantage stems from the former having a dynamic sense of themselves as being able to navigate their own route through the labour market, whereas the latter are dependent upon the pathways linked to a particular organisation or occupation.

One final aspect of being self-directed surfaced in many of our participants' replies – people can learn from their lives through the stories they tell about them. Many of our participants recounted powerful narratives of where they had been, where they were and where they might be going. They were in charge of their own stories and such a perspective itself is an important component of adaptability.

Being self-reflexive and self-directed in relation to learning and development in general is useful, but a particular focus upon career development is also important. In this regard, awareness of career orientation and transitioning styles are important for understanding the ways in which individuals navigate change and will be discussed in the next section.

6 Career transitioning styles

Chapter Summary

- Critiques of the traditional matching approach to skills supply are increasing.
- If it is accepted that a rational approach to career progression is by no means universal, notions of reflection, happenstance, opportunism, adaptability and intuition need to be incorporated in attempts to try to develop a more rigorous understanding of raising aspirations.
- Career adaptive behaviour is an integral part of different broad career orientations.
- A strategic approach to career progression was found in only a small number of cases in the current study. More common were evaluative and opportunistic approaches to progressing careers.
- Whatever the orientation, these are important in raising individual aspiration.

6.1 Matching people to jobs

The dominant policy rhetoric around skills supply and demand derives from the matching model of vocational behaviour (Parsons, 1909). According to this model, choice of the 'right' job occurs when individuals have achieved first, an accurate understanding of their individual traits (e.g. abilities, aptitudes, interests, etc.); second, knowledge of jobs and the labour market; and third, made a rational and objective judgement about the relationship between these two groups of facts. When individuals are in the 'right' job, this means the jobs that are most suited to their aptitudes and abilities, in which they can be expected to perform best and where their productivity is highest.

However, the model (developed over a century ago) is based on some questionable assumptions. These include that it is possible to measure, objectively and accurately, individual aptitudes and attributes required for particular jobs. Another assumption is that individuals are naturally pre-disposed to engage in 'rational' behaviours that focus on maximising their economic benefits whenever it comes to job choice. Further, it assumes a degree of labour market stability, with jobs and sectors having predictable requirements, to which the objectively measured abilities of individuals can be matched. Whilst this may have been the case over a century ago, when the model was developed, it is certainly no longer true, with volatility and fluidity now being defining characteristics of

global labour markets. Finally, in focusing on individual abilities, aptitudes and interests, it marginalises both the role that emotions might play in job choice and the contexts in which individuals are trying to progress their careers. It is certainly not appropriate to underplay the role that emotions play in vocational behaviour and context is relevant for many individuals. This is particularly so for members of socially disadvantaged groups who struggle to overcome social and economic barriers before they are able to achieve their true potential (see section 4, above). Despite these, and other, criticisms, the matching paradigm continues to dominate policy debates around skills supply (See for example Skills Commission, 2008, p.20).

Career research and theory recognised the shortcomings of matching for supporting career transitions some time ago, with new approaches developed that accommodate the complexities, fluidity and dynamism of the contemporary labour market, as well as responding to the social equity agenda. However, policy influences practice (particularly in the public sector), through funding methodologies and assessment criteria for employee and organisational performance. Consequently, the influence of matching remains powerfully evident in policy and impacts on the delivery of services, with practitioners constrained in their ability to espouse new, emerging models to inform their work with clients/customers (Bimrose *et al.*, 2004).

Findings from this research support the established and growing critiques of the matching approach to skills supply and career development by providing further evidence of the range of influences and transitioning styles embraced by participants, many of whom demonstrated highly adaptive approaches to progressing their careers.

6.2 Transitioning styles

A four-fold typology of transitioning styles was identified from recent longitudinal, qualitative research into the effectiveness of career guidance, involving 50 individual cases over a period of five years (Bimrose, *et al.*, 2008). Characteristic patterns of behaviour were found to recur over time across distinct groups of adult participants, when individuals approached transition points and crises in their work lives. These 'styles' relate to the particular ways individuals approached, then dealt with, career and progression issues and three are particularly relevant for this study. They are: strategic, evaluative and opportunistic.

6.2.1 Strategic

The significance for the current investigation is that for the matching approach to skills supply to work effectively, then a broadly strategic orientation would be evident in the career stories of the majority of research participants. Representing focused decision making and based on cognitive processing, individuals demonstrating this strategic approach would base their vocational choices on an assessment of options and then formulate plans (sometimes detailed) to achieve a focused goal that maximises the benefits for them. They are committed to 'moving on' and would see their careers as something they actively construct. Typically, they believe that their current position and/or organisational attachment, represents just one phase of a career that could involve relatively frequent changes. They are reconciled to the need to adapt and update their skills, knowledge and understanding constantly. In summary, this approach to career progression is characterised by: a rational appraisal of information as the basis for action; a steadfast focus on a career goal together with a belief in their ability to produce the desired outcomes; a tendency to marginalise emotions and their 'emotional self' in decision making; well-developed problem solving skills, particularly the ability to circumvent difficulties that impede progress; and a predisposition to planning and planfulness.

This particular approach is illustrated by a 50 year old male participant from the UK (E 18) who is a Company Director on a self-employed basis in a business he set up with a partner 10 years ago. Before this, he worked for 13 years in medical sales and training in the pharmaceutical industry. He describes himself as an 'introvert' and 'self-starter' who is very 'self-reliant' and 'focused on doing the right thing for him and his wife to have a comfortable lifestyle'. He is highly organised and well connected, through shared contacts with his business partner, who has a very 'outgoing personality'. He does not like to work to other people's rules and is very focused on getting things done 'with minimum interference from others'. He is looking for his next challenge and has no plans to retire soon. The key to success he regards as 'to make decisions and stand by them and have no regret.'

However, this typically strategic approach was evident in only a minority (less than a quarter) of UK participants in this study.

6.2.2 Evaluative

An evaluative approach to career progression involves reflective self-appraisal through the identification and evaluation of individual needs, values and abilities. Typically, this orientation involves: a recurrent and ongoing process of critical self-reflection, based on emotional as well as practical considerations; an identification and evaluation of needs, values and abilities, which often become drivers; an increased understanding of the longer term consequences of their decisions; and the integration of self-learning in future behaviour. Tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity is characteristic of this style, because there is always the possibility that the process of critical self-reflection might indicate a different course of action. Over time, individuals espousing this style are likely to: enhance their self-awareness about their particular skill sets; increase their self-confidence; and start to identify longer-term career goals.

A 55 year old female participant from the UK (E 30) illustrates this transitioning style. Currently self-employed as an innovation consultant, she has recently completed a temporary part-time job as project co-ordinator that allowed her to undertake care responsibilities for an elderly parent. She is qualified with a first degree in conservation, a Masters, a doctorate in polymers and later an MBA. Her first job was running an inspection and analytic service for a new manufacturing plant for an American company. Then she moved into technical consulting on the application of advanced technical materials. Overall, she has worked in and for organisations in semi-conductor manufacturing; defence and engineering; national economic development agencies; universities, the European Commission, consulting companies and for a variety of public bodies. She describes herself as well organised and someone who takes personal responsibility. She likes to try new things – being driven by curiosity – and develop new areas by using her varied interests. Risk tolerant, she is prepared to ‘stick it out and complete’ once she has made a commitment and she is confident in her own ability and judgement to be successful: ‘I’m very aware of having to use my skill sets in different ways with different clients’. Recognising that in any job change, it is not possible to anticipate how team, work and culture will operate in practice, but that: ‘chance favours the prepared mind’.

6.2.3 Opportunistic

An opportunist orientation represents a distinctly different approach to career decision making compared with the other orientations considered above. Opportunists exploit

available opportunities rather than make conscious choices about work. As a consequence, career ideas may appear vague, undecided and uncertain. This style is characterised by: the ability (often preference) to cope with high levels of uncertainty; reluctance to close off options; the use of intuition, rather than rationality, in making decisions (what feels 'right'); a predisposition to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves unexpectedly; resistance (sometimes active) to planning; and an open and flexible approach.

A UK female participant, aged between 50 and 55 (N 6), illustrates this particular style, or orientation. After her degree course, she undertook secretarial training and worked as a secretary for a number of years. Then she got a job with the Board Secretariat of an organisation which was more administrative than secretarial. From here, she moved to the Policy Unit, which was her first real non-secretarial job. As a result of radical restructuring, she took voluntary redundancy and got temporary work. After this, she went to work for a non-government organisation (NGO) as a development officer. Another restructuring meant her job changed so she left and went to work for another NGO. She was then made redundant, got a full time temporary freelancing job, then a full time job nearer home with a Local Authority. Yet another restructuring means her job has just changed again.

When she was made redundant, she was wondering what she could do next when she went abroad on holiday. Sitting by the swimming pool, she met someone who headed up an organisation and they started chatting. On her return home, this person made contact and offered her some freelance work on a guaranteed daily rate over a specified period of time, which she accepted. This is indicative of how this participant operates – always staying open-minded and regarding everything as an opportunity: 'Go to all meetings and networking opportunities – you don't know who you'll meet! You have to stay optimistic. Try not to dwell on trivia or perceived injustices and be amazingly patient'.

Supporting individual aspiration effectively will require taking into account an individual's overarching orientation to their career development. Whether strategic and structured, opportunistic and intuitive or reflective and evaluative (or combinations at different times and in different contexts), this is likely to influence not only the ways in which career adaptive competencies are developed, but also the ways individuals engage with learning. It is only when this is understood that appropriate help that reflects this predisposition can be offered.

The next section will focus on a discussion of the findings from the study and implications

The role of careers adaptability in skills supply

for policy and practice.

7 Discussion: Policy and practice implications

Chapter Summary

- Benefits of career adaptability are well documented in the literature.
- Findings from this study highlight a competency framework as potentially valuable in helping adults increase adaptive behaviour and become more autonomous.
- Structural disadvantage continues to act as a brake on individual achievement and is an important mediating influence for career adaptability.
- Different career transitioning styles can both accommodate and influence career adaptive behaviour.
- Learning is critical in developing career adaptability, with four particular dimensions highlighted as crucial.
- Essentially about helping individuals become autonomous, career adaptability has the potential to empower individuals to take positive decisions and actions regarding their skills development.
- Both the relationship between career adaptability and high quality careers guidance services is considered, together with career adaptability and employability policies and practices, which require further scrutiny.
- Six key policy implications and two generic policy implications are identified.
- Implications for career practice are briefly reviewed.

7.1 Introduction

This final section presents an overall summary of the report. Specifically, it reviews the various benefits of career adaptability for individuals and notes how this research study has indicated that a competency approach represents a useful framework both for raising individual aspirations and for up-skilling and re-skilling the workforce. The role of careers adaptability for workplace learning is also highlighted, together with the ways in which it can support individual participation in skill development – particularly up-skilling and re-skilling. In an era when there is an increasing emphasis on individuals taking more responsibility for their own career progression, ways in which career adaptability can support the development of individual autonomy are also indicated. Finally, potential

policy implications are identified, as well as some implications for careers practice.

7.2 Benefits of career adaptability

Career adaptability is associated with a range of benefits. It increases life satisfaction (Hirschi, 2009) and commitment to organisations (Ito and Brotheridge, 2005). It also helps individuals find quality employment (Koen, *et al.*, 2010; Zikic and Klehe, 2006) and achieve career success (Grote and Raeder, 2009; Heslin, 2005; O'Connell *et al.*, 2007; Pearse, 2000). For unemployed adults, career adaptability helps individuals get back into employment and then being in work can actually trigger individuals to become more career adaptable and a virtuous circle can be created (Ebberwein, *et al.*, 2004; Zikic and Klehe, 2006). Finally, it can help individuals: deal more effectively with job loss (Fugate *et al.*, 2004) and prepare for the unknown and overcome barriers (Blustein, 1997; Creed *et al.*, 2009; Morrison, 1977; Ebberwein, *et al.*, 2004).

Findings from the current study support existing evidence. For example, it has shown how career adaptability can: improve understanding of skills and competences, particularly those that are commonly overlooked (Blustein, 1997; Duarte, 1995) and support vocational and competence development, as well as the motivation for individuals to develop intellectually and personally (Creed *et al.*, 2009; Duarte, 1995; Hall and Mirvis, 1995). Being career adaptable also encourages career exploration and search strategies (Creed *et al.*, 2009; Zikic and Klehe, 2006) and helps develop skills for employability (McArdle, *et al.*, 2007), career decisiveness and career planning skills (Gunkel, *et al.*, 2010; Verbruggen and Sels, 2008). A key challenge is, therefore, how best to inform and support individuals to invest time and effort in honing their adaptability skills.

7.3 Career adaptive competences

The concept of career adaptability emerges from this study as a potentially useful construct for raising individual aspiration and for individuals to re-skill and up-skill. The framework of five career adaptive competencies (control, curiosity, commitment, confidence, concern), identified from an on-going international study, has been used to evaluate narrative accounts of adults at different stages of their career development in the UK and Norway. This approach has utility in helping make sense of the behaviours and key transition points in the career trajectories of adults in a variety of different employment contexts and across two different countries. Certain pre-requisites and associated behaviours of career adaptability have also been identified as relevant for

encouraging adults to develop a more adaptive approach to their employment situations.

Variables that are persistently associated with social disadvantage, like gender, age, ethnicity and socio-economic class, clearly affect the number and the nature of opportunities to which individuals have access. However, it does appear that adopting a competency approach to developing career adaptive behaviour could provide a useful framework to promote the need for individuals to adopt certain behaviours to help them to realise their career aspirations. Additionally, this approach may offer a potentially constructive framework for raising awareness of self-defeating behaviours in which some individuals may be inclined to engage.

Going beyond scrutiny of individual behaviours and the contexts in which individuals are operating, to a broad examination of the general orientations of participants in this study to their career progression has supported growing criticisms of the matching approach to skills supply. Most participants in this study have not always been rational, logical or linear in the pursuit of their career goals – yet have nevertheless achieved success. Many have been opportunistic in their approach, trusting (or learning to trust) their intuition in progressing their careers and ‘going with the flow’. Others have adopted a more reflective, evaluative stance, ready to allow a broad range of influences (including those with an emotional dimension) to impact on their vocational aspirations, choices and direction. Irrespective of the particular orientation guiding behaviour, career adaptive competencies are evident in the behaviour of many individuals who have enjoyed success. Maximising economic advantage has not always been the guiding principle. These different orientations to managing career progression represent a challenge for policies operating from within a technical matching paradigm, within which there are deep rooted, but questionable, assumptions about the rationality of humans. A range of other factors, influences and predispositions need to be taken into account where the ultimate aim is to motivate and incentivise individuals to increase their aspirations to achieve more and better in the labour market.

An examination of whether the concept of career adaptability can impact positively on learning and skills development and supply in the UK was also a particular focus of this study.

7.4 Career adaptability and learning

The role of learning in developing career adaptive behaviours in the workplace has four

dimensions. The first dimension is learning through challenging work: mastering an integrated set of practical, cognitive and communicative demands linked with particular work roles and work processes⁷. Achieving such mastery could increase self-confidence and lead to new opportunities by equipping an individual with skills, knowledge and understanding which could be transferred to other contexts. The next two dimensions also have either a primary cognitive or communicative orientation, but go beyond engagement with current work roles and work processes.

The second dimension to learning to adapt involves updating a substantive knowledge base (or mastering a new additional substantive knowledge base). Updating a knowledge base gives a spur to the individual having to handle issues of re-contextualisation – how can the new forms of knowledge be adapted to current ways of thinking, practising and acting that are associated with effective performance of her or his current role. The knowledge updating process (whether up-skilling or re-skilling) gets learners thinking, both explicitly and implicitly, about what constitutes effective performance in a changing context. Many of the participants in this study have learned (or had reinforced) how to apply their skills, knowledge and understanding in a range of contexts, facilitating transitions. In so doing, they have become more career adaptive.

The third dimension to learning to adapt has a primary communicative orientation and involves learning through (and beyond) interactions at work. Relationships and interactions at work present opportunities to learn and adapt in ways which affect how people subsequently act, behave, think and feel both at work and in other areas of their life. Learning through interactions can be facilitated by engaging in work activities which are particularly challenging in the communicative demands they place upon individuals; through formal support activities such as case reviews, mentoring and peer support; through interactions associated with participation in broader communities and networks

⁷ We have drawn attention above to the importance for career adaptability to the development of practical, cognitive and communicative demands linked first to particular work roles and work processes and then more broadly in a range of contexts. However, this approach could also be mapped against Pantzar and Shove's (2010) idea that innovations in practice involve changing combinations of symbolic and material ingredients and of competence or know-how.

which help individuals make sense of work processes in a wider context; and interactions based around supporting the learning and development of others at work. All these activities can help individuals become more reflexive and adaptable.

The fourth dimension to learning to adapt at work involves individuals becoming more self-directed and reflexive, thereby taking control of their own learning and development, including identifying an individual's current skill set and how this might be enhanced and extended. If individuals can become more self-directed in their own development, learning to adapt and continue to develop in their current job, then this provides a basis for making successful transitions in future, even in less than ideal circumstances. Another aspect of being self-directed lies in people learning from their lives through the stories they tell about them. Being in charge of your own career story is itself an important component of adaptability.

7.5 Career adaptability facilitating participation in skill development

Career adaptability can also be used to empower individuals to take positive decisions and actions regarding their skills development. Lifelong learning has different dimensions including skill growth, personal development and collaborative learning, with interventions often targeted to achieve different ends. Much policy has been concerned with skill development, especially up-skilling, but some emphasis is now being given to re-skilling – developing new skills and updating existing ones in order to apply them in new contexts. This shift of emphasis could be further strengthened by a policy focus upon promoting career adaptability that builds upon and complements employability and policy linked to strengthening individual and organisational learning through networks and other collaborative forms of knowledge creation and sharing. Brinkley (2008) emphasises how many organisations recognise that they cannot function alone, with the exploitation of knowledge and building sustainable networks reshaping the UK economy and elsewhere. This same organisational principle applies to individuals, with attention needing to be given to new formations of learning-sets, inter-organisational and peer-support networks that could yield benefits and savings to the individual, employers and government.

Also, where individuals have had one or more episodes of substantive learning mid-career and these episodes have been used as a platform for career change, then they often feel reinvigorated and remain longer in the labour market. A focus on, and commitment of, resources to support, re-skilling and adaptability may actually be self-funding if as a consequence people continue working for longer.

The complementarity of different forms of learning in support of skill development at work needs to be recognised. Learning through engaging with challenging work and formal learning which is able to help individuals look beyond their immediate context are both valuable. Such complementary learning can be applied across the life course as a whole: that is, where learning was predominantly work-based but with periods of formal learning interspersed. Learning through challenging work alone may be insufficient and other forms of learning may be necessary to help the employee make a quantum leap in their broader understanding of a particular field and career adaptability.

Low skilled work, however, is not a problem *per se* (and because of high replacement demand many people may 'pass through' such employment), it is staying in work which lacks challenge or opportunities for development of adaptability which can erode an individual's broader employment prospects over the long term. It is important to encourage and support people in seeking more challenging work, especially as this is rated as the most effective form of skill development by low skilled people in almost every country in Europe (Brynin and Longhi, 2007).

A major challenge for skills development and employability policies and practices is to take account of current and possible future, patterns of individual skills development and their transferability across the life course. An effective way to do this would be to promote the concept of career adaptability as a key policy objective to inform and support individuals' choices, decision-making and contribute to economic and societal well-being. For example, this could be applied to help reduce levels of stress and anxiety for individuals navigating their way successfully through unpredictable and often turbulent cross-sectoral labour markets. Also, the development of mindsets and behaviours that deal with the reality of individuals' constraints and circumstances offers scope for releasing ambition and individuals' potential in new and challenging situations.

Major initiatives such as 'Investors in People' which focus advice and assessment linked to organisations' needs could be further enhanced by consideration of how individual career adaptability contributes to key organisational as well as personal development goals. By so doing, employer involvement in the skills system can be strengthened through greater alignment of individuals' competencies and willingness to be more flexible and adaptable. A critical success factor would include closer examination of appropriate strategies to ensure at least some degree of compatibility and comparability between individuals and organisational goals. Employers also have an enabling role to play in stimulating skill demand through, for example, developing more expansive

learning environments which utilise a fuller range of employees' skills (Fuller and Unwin, 2006; Felstead *et al.*, 2011).

Although many individuals learn in adaptive ways through challenging work, networking and interactions experienced in differing settings, it is clear from this research that learning and development is often episodic and linked to voluntary as well as unexpected transitions at work. The latter poses real challenges for government policy makers keen to motivate and inspire individuals to 'take action' and contribute to the greater well-being of society. Adaptive learning and transformation development are key 'anchor points' for individuals to embrace in a more reflective and meaningful way.

The rhetoric of lifelong learning should reflect these two different forms of development: whilst adaptive learning at work may occur more or less continuously, individuals' transformative learning (promoting a broader career adaptability) is most likely to follow an irregular rhythm and tempo across the life course. From a policy-maker perspective, the smooth functioning of education and labour markets requires both clarity of purpose and coherent pathways for success. Clearly, there are tangible benefits to be gained from individuals being encouraged to make more effective use of their talents and skills, not least in helping to inculcate self-reliance, resilience and reduced dependency on state support systems. Therefore, finding new ways of stimulating individuals' curiosity, control, commitment, confidence and concern for self and/or organisational improvement specifically linked to adaptability would be a positive step forward. The extent to which current policy initiatives can be aligned to these five key competencies is worthy of further analysis.

7.6 Career adaptability supporting autonomy

Career adaptability is essentially about helping individuals to become autonomous, so has the potential to empower individuals to take positive decisions and actions regarding their skills. Continuing vocational training (CVT) could be linked to the notion developed by Sen (1999) of the importance of developing individual capabilities in a broader sense. Applying this idea to adaptability, the ultimate goal is to increase the freedom for individuals to exercise greater control over their own lives (in relation to what they value being or doing): this includes expanding opportunities to access knowledge, meaningful work, significant relationships and networks and exercise self-direction.

The five career adaptability competences, examined in this project, all align with this goal.

Control emphasises the need for individuals to exert a degree of influence on their situations. Curiosity also supports the development of autonomy through broadening horizons by enabling individuals to explore opportunities and possibilities for themselves. Commitment too encourages individuals to experiment with new and different activities and projects, rather than being narrowly focused on a particular job so that new possibilities are overlooked. Confidence and believing in yourself and your ability to achieve what is necessary to achieve your career goal has a direct impact on the development of the capability for autonomous action, as does concern which relates to stimulating or developing a positive and optimistic attitude to the future. However, strengthening individuals' career adaptability and autonomous action does have a social dimension and individuals in the study welcomed support and guidance to develop coherent career narratives of where they have been; what they are doing now and where they are going.

Promoting autonomy and career adaptability is not only valuable for young people early in their career. If policy makers want greater numbers of older people to remain engaged in the labour market – and one of Europe's key future challenges is an improved integration of older employees into the labour market – there is a need to promote support for the development of adaptability, so that individuals consider up-skilling and re-skilling in ways which maximise the opportunities open to them. Individuals need to be encouraged to consider mid-career change and to engage in some form of reflective appraisal about their future career direction.

In addition to providing development and progression within single industry sectors, there is a growing need to provide support for individuals moving amongst these sectors. Individuals will also require support in shifting between and amongst public and private, private and voluntary/community, public and voluntary/community sectors. Even where the new and different job is itself at a similar overall skill level, moving between and amongst different sectors can promote adaptability.

Building sustainable support networks and being willing to learn new attitudes and behaviours, as and when necessary, are both vital for individuals in developing their career adaptability.

7.7 Implications for policy

Six key areas for action in building a more robust policy framework can be identified from

this study. These are as follows:

- The design and development of contemporary careers support services, both within and outside of the workplace, must take full account of individuals' 'state of readiness' to manage and implement effective decision-making in relation to learning and work. This means finding new ways of personalising services for the individual and developing innovative strategies so that careers professionals, teachers and employers can make more effective use of 'careers stories and trajectories' within education and employment settings. The working relationship between careers professionals and human resource professionals merits more detailed attention given this is currently under-researched within public, private and voluntary/community sector contexts and these contrasting, yet complementary, professional roles bridge the education and employment divide.
- There is a new requirement to move beyond traditional and static concepts of 'employability' so that individuals are better equipped to be more resilient and to manage risk and uncertainty in fast changing education and labour markets. A critical issue is how best individuals can learn to develop and apply career adaptive competencies most effectively in unpredictable and fast changing education and labour markets. Learners, teachers, employers and others involved in the education and employment sector have a wide range of perspectives; given current and future demographic trends, it is crucial that young people and older adults in particular are 'ready' to continue their development in more demanding employment, education or training contexts.
- The term 'opportunity structures' itself contains the tension between openness and flexibility on the one hand and structured pathways on the other. Both are valuable and it is finding an accommodation which works well for most members of a society but also provides opportunities for those who do not fit initially which should be the goal of a Continuing Vocational Training policy informed by concerns for individual career development. The principles of flexicurity can be helpful in this respect, but it is extending the breadth and quality of the opportunity structures which should be the goal of policy in this area.
- The focus on formal qualifications as a proxy for learning and development does not do justice to the range, depth and variety of different forms of learning while working which contributes to the acquisition of career adaptive competencies. The latter should be promoted and the most appropriate timing for validation of different forms of

learning and the use of qualifications in this process be considered.

- The existing progression measures within schools, colleges and higher education settings that capture individuals' learning and work destinations must operate beyond a one-off 'snapshot approach' in order to build and extend the body of knowledge of individuals' career trajectories and career adaptability competencies. In this context, there is scope to further review how government plans⁸ to incorporate new 'destination measures', will assess impact and individuals' progression in learning and work. By doing so, greater emphasis on capturing career adaptive competencies and the lessons learned can be disseminated more effectively within and across professional networks. Also, greater use can be made of information communications technologies (ICT) developments as a potentially more effective (and lower cost) tool for capturing data and tracking individuals' career trajectories over time. However, both these proposals have staff training and workforce development implications.
- The concept of exploring a 'career clusters' approach to support individual progression at a local level, as recently outlined by The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (April 2011), could be further extended to include the use of career adaptive competencies designed to enhance individuals' understanding of the structure of jobs, job requirements and advancement pathways. There is scope to consider how this might link and further enhance relevant government initiatives such as 'Investors in People', 'Lifelong Learning Accounts', the Work Programme and the emerging new 'National Careers Service' in England.
- In addition to these six key areas, two more general policy implications relating to careers support and employability can be identified, as follows.

7.7.1 Career adaptability and careers support services

New strategies for supporting individuals to manage and adapt their career development to changing and sometimes difficult circumstances are required. For example, there is

⁸ DBIS (2011). *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, Norwich: The Stationery Office.

considerable scope for all-age Careers Services to act as ‘agents for change’ in supporting individuals to build their own career narratives for enhanced learning and development linked to improved social and economic well-being.

Groups that could benefit from improved access to information, advice and guidance, include, for example:

- workers in undemanding jobs (low skilled employment);
- those wishing to change sectors or seeking to change intensity of work because of changed circumstances;
- unemployed young people and adults; and
- older workers seeking a career change.

Additionally, policy could give greater emphasis to the value of careers professionals in helping individuals articulate and possibly align goals, expectations, development strategies and outcomes in relation to learning and career development. In England, the government’s intention is to create the conditions for establishing a quality standard, which will assure users that providers of careers guidance are delivering a high quality service. Organisations in the new National Careers Service will be required to:

‘establish a quality standard, which will assure users that providers of careers guidance are delivering a high quality service. Organisations in the National Careers Service will be required to hold the standard; and

provide a focus on expert, professional careers guidance, through common professional standards and codes of ethics, supported by appropriate initial training and continuing professional development. Organisations in the National Careers Service will be expected to support their staff to achieve these standards’. (April 2011)⁹.

There is considerable scope to embed knowledge and understanding of career adaptive competencies and the potential effects on individuals’ behaviour patterns into initial training and continuing professional development (CPD) programmes for career

⁹See ‘National Careers Service for England. Statement by John Hayes: <http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/further-education-skills/john-hayes-national-careers-service-for-england>

practitioners, facilitated through higher education and work-based learning programmes. The work of the UK Careers Professional Alliance also provides a useful monitoring and support mechanism in this regard.

For workers feeling they need a new challenge after fifteen or twenty years working in the same occupation the economic case for giving them access to online and face-to-face careers guidance is very strong: many of the survey participants who wanted a new challenge and changed careers in their forties and fifties felt as a consequence they were likely to remain in the labour market for longer. It often seemed to give people a new lease of life. Further research is required into the concept of 'employability' and its inter-relationship to 'career adaptability' in order to develop a stronger policy framework that helps motivate and inspire individuals to take action at different ages and stages in the life course (that is, new ways of combined learning and/or earning).

At the level of career service practise, adaptive competencies provide a potentially valuable framework for supporting and encouraging adults in transition develop strategies and approaches that would support individuals to navigate traumas and face developmental challenges. The five C's - curiosity, control, commitment, confidence and concern - provide key anchor points for reflection and dialogue linked specifically to individuals achieving successful transitions in fast changing education and labour markets.

7.7.2 Career adaptability and employability

This study has focused primarily on the concept and application of career adaptability, together with its relevance to improvements in policy developments. It is evident that there is potential for 'read across' into employability policies. Career adaptability can be used as a new policy lever or 'driver' that complements and extends current employability policies. Whilst 'employability' often refers to 'the relative chances of getting and maintaining different kinds of employment' (Brown and Hesketh, 2004), the complexities of how this particular end-goal can be achieved most effectively requires career adaptable competencies and differing mindsets for learning and personal development.

The distance between an individual and their relationship to the labour market depends upon differing circumstances and prevailing factors (see section 4, above). For employability, individuals' assets and presentation of these assets in an appropriate range of settings are paramount. However, this needs to be further extended within a

knowledge-based economy, to explore in more detail the potential to shift the focus from employability to adaptability as a simpler and more meaningful construct towards 'known' and 'unknown' end-goals. The extent to which new policy drivers linked to career adaptability and/or employability can be designed to push the boundaries of existing knowledge merits greater attention. In particular, consideration could be given to the appropriate use of language and new meanings that can be applied in a learning, earning and work context.

Research into factors that influence the engagement of the individual in skills development is already well underway within the UK Commission. This incorporates a broad range of formal and informal learning activities, delivered in a range of institutional settings and through different media, including work-based, classroom-based, distance learning and community based learning. Earlier findings (Johnson *et al.*, 2009) suggest that barriers and factors affecting access to skills development opportunities among lower skilled and lower qualified people include: a lack of advice; information or guidance; negative influences from family or peers; a legacy of negative experiences of education alongside limited awareness of the potential benefits of skills development; and perceived poor quality or lack of access to relevant provision. Findings from this study indicate that policies to promote the added-value returns on career adaptability, from an individual as well as organisational perspective, would have a positive impact on skills development in the UK. All-age careers services have an important role to play in this regard.

Finally, individuals' expectations of the fluidity of learning and work, in particular the extent to which they can adapt and develop, is under-researched. In the absence of having clearer insights to individuals' general expectations of learning and work in a new market-led economy, it will be difficult for policy-makers to develop and implement effective and sustainable strategies that empower individuals to take responsibility and greater control of their lives. The vision of active citizenship linked to achieving smart growth, sustainable growth and inclusive growth (Europe 2020) is likely to prove challenging. Career adaptability as a facilitating conceptual and practical tool embedded within policy formation and implementation plans could be low cost and effective in achieving greater social equity and prosperity for all.

7.8 Implications for practice

- The findings from this study indicate there are a number of implications for professionals and allied workers who have responsibility for supporting young people

and adults' career adaptive needs. These include:

- Greater investment is required in CPD for careers professionals, to widen strategies for helping to motivate and encourage individuals to learn using careers narratives and the application of career adaptability competencies. Theory, research and practice in this area should be embedded within both accredited and non-accredited learning programmes.
- New opportunities for joint professional training and development between careers professionals, careers educators and other allied workers including HR, Job Centre Plus workers and the wider welfare to work provider base are needed. This could potentially yield closer co-operation, collaboration and communication on what works best with clients, learning more about career trajectories and outcomes in fast changing education and labour markets, as well as improvement in service design and delivery.
- A market in careers work has been stimulated by government in England, which is likely to result in an increase in more sole traders, mutuals and new consortia formations. There is significant scope to make openly available research findings on career adaptability linked to skills supply and to build upon this by fostering innovative approaches to build career narratives that can be shared as part of an ongoing learning process with young people and adults.
- Use of ICT can make career adaptive competencies and how these translate into everyday lives more visible. For example, the link between the individual and the world of work can be evaluated to help determine the level of engagement or disengagement so that career adaptive competencies can be filtered into the process of online and offline learning. To support this, practitioner competencies in the use of ICT and Labour Market Information needs to be enhanced.

Education and employer links could be significantly strengthened by drawing upon lessons learned from careers adaptive competencies that have been applied

successfully. The Speakers4Schools¹⁰ initiative recently launched in England is a very good example of this; however, further work is required for innovative curriculum design and development in schools, colleges and universities to ensure individuals' aspirations and social mobility factors are addressed. This has implications for teacher training and improved partnership working between careers educators and careers professionals.

¹⁰ See <http://www.speakers4schools.org/>

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under 'Publications'

ISBN 978-1-906597-82-5

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