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# Career education requires learners to be reflexive to understand how they make sense of the world around them



**Interview with Ronald G. Sultana,**

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### Is it meaningful today to speak about careers or it is better speak about jobs?

A number of authors, such as Zygmunt Bauman and Richard Sennett, have argued that the nature of work has changed so much that the notion of 'career' has been largely lost, except in the case of an elite few. For most people, they argue, work has become a 'job' rather than a 'career', in that it is no longer an activity in which one invests one's personal and social identity, where one commits the self to express its creative and productive urges, subsuming these to the service of the larger community. Rather, for many citizens, work is now merely a 'job' that one does to earn a living, where the sense of dignity and even pride in doing something that is worthwhile and meaningful, and which makes a useful contribution to the well-being of other citizens, even if it is in a modest way, is largely lost.

'Career', whose etymological roots take us to a notion of a pathway that is followed purposefully and consistently, harkens back to a past that is no longer with us. What we now have is an unstable economy with fragmentary institutions, where the 'new capitalism' demands "an ideal self oriented to the short term, focused on potential ability rather than accomplishment, willing to discount or abandon past experience". What matters now is the ability of the corporate world to re-engineer itself in the face of constant and cut-throat competition, in which individuals are expected to be able to take risks, to be flexible, to take on short-term commitments and to constantly reinvent themselves. In such contexts, the sense of sustained purpose, integrity of self, and trust in others is eroded. In such contexts too, the very notion of 'career guidance' may actually seem anachronistic unless its meaning and practice is radically changed to connect with the transformations in the economy, in culture, and in the sense of self that we are able to develop in the current contexts.

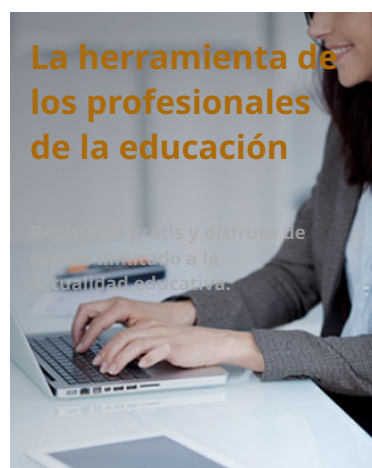
### Do we need to plan our careers in a continuously changing society in which people often change jobs?

If the analysis of scholars like Bauman and Sennett are correct, then the idea of 'career planning' takes on very different meanings to the ones attributed to it in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when career guidance formally developed as a service, first in the United States, then elsewhere. 'Planning' requires some form of stability and security: if jobs are increasingly temporary and pathways non-linear and transient, then the scope of 'planning' is very much reduced. This does not mean, however, that career planning is 'useless'. One way of looking at this is to use the metaphor of a 'quilt', and to talk of 'quilting one's career' whereby different strands of the fabric of one's life—the various jobs and occupations that one manages to get—nevertheless do form a meaningful pattern of sorts. That 'meaning' can be derived in all sorts of different ways. For instance, if one's main or regular 'job' is seen mainly as a source of income, one can 'plan' to have a past time or even a secondary job where the self-fulfilment aspect is more pronounced.

Many of the latter jobs actually depend on self-employment, releasing an entrepreneurial spirit that, ironically, is denied in regular occupations. One can 'plan' to increase one's time and energy in one, while reducing that invested in the other. Some try to have so-called 'portfolio careers' whereby different aspects of their personality and different aspirations are attained—sometimes in parallel, sometimes simultaneously—in different occupational and leisure-oriented engagements throughout the life span. Needless to say, one's class and gender, among other social ascriptions, make such 'quilting' more or less possible. Much of the discourse around the 'new economy' and new forms of career planning and career guidance do not take social inequalities seriously into account, and this is a major problem because large groups of citizens are systematically and systemically excluded from the possibility of 'quilting' meaningful lives where the expression of the creative and productive self, and connectedness with community, is

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attained through work.

### How does the notion of 'flexicurity' apply to all this, and what is its link to career guidance?

'Flexicurity' is a 'portmanteau' term that brings together the two contradictory words 'flexibility' and 'security'. A number of countries—notably Denmark and Holland, but in a number of other EU member states as well—an effort has been made to respond to the 'needs' of the neo-liberal economy while safeguarding security for employees. These dual goals seem to be incompatible, at least at face value. Flexibility for employers is short hand for increased freedom to hire and fire at will, unrestrained by trade union 'protectionism' and employment contracts, thus responding immediately to changes in economic opportunities in order to remain competitive. Security for workers is obviously and precisely the opposite.

'Flexicurity' tries to accommodate the conflict of interests by allowing employers a high degree of flexibility, but also providing income security rather than job security to employees. This is achieved through levels of taxation that ensure that dismissed workers who have lost their job do not lose their income while they are actively looking for other employment, on condition that they participate in re-training in order to remain 'employable'. Different models of flexicurity have been developed in different countries, with the EU also promoting it as a way of attaining its dual goals of competitiveness and social inclusion. Member states have been reluctant to go this way because of the high taxation costs it involves. Where it has been adopted, the role of career guidance becomes particularly pronounced as workers of all ages find themselves needing the information, advice and guidance required to plan their engagement with training and re-training programmes, in relation to both employment opportunities and their effort to find a balance between work lives, family commitments, and leisure pursuits.

### Do we need to offer Career Education at Primary School?

By 'career education' I mean providing citizens of all ages with the knowledge and wisdom necessary to de-code what is happening around them in the world of work, and to understand themselves in relation to that world as it is being shaped by different forces. I have already noted some of the meanings of 'career'. By 'education' I usually refer to three inter-related components: '*savoir*' or knowledge; '*savoir faire*' or skills and competences; and '*savoir être*' or knowing how to be. All three are important in all our educational efforts, unless we are to confuse 'information' with 'wisdom'. Work is very much a central part of our lives. Major world philosophies have seen it as divine punishment for evil committed (as in the biblical narrative), or as a channel for expressing one's creative impulses, almost, as it were, participating with the divine in co-creating the world.

Whichever way we look at it, work is fundamental to our lives as a human species, and any education worth its salt needs to engage with it. Here, however, I would make the important distinction between 'learning *about* work' and 'learning *for* work'. Our task as educators is not to present the world of work in a reified manner, as if the current state of affairs has always been so, and will remain so. Rather, it is to provide learners of all ages with the tools to interpret the world they live in, in order to imagine a world as it could and should be, seen from the perspective of such values as dignity and social justice for all. There is also much that can be done to help learners understand who they are, as persons and as members of communities, and how they can express their uniqueness and sociability through participating in work, for their own benefit and that of society.

Such an education can clearly start as early as in primary where, rather than orienting individuals towards specific occupational groups—something which to me is anathema—pupils are encouraged to critically reflect on themselves, and on their vicarious experiences with different types of work (e.g. through talking about the work that their parents and other members in the family do), in order to develop the thinking skills needed to make sense of the world around them. We need to keep in mind that even if we do not formally offer career education in primary schools, we are nevertheless socializing pupils into particular understandings of what it means to work. There are some very interesting ethnographic case studies of how teachers reproduce work orientations in the kindergarten classrooms through the way they behave. When a teacher encourages pupils to "work hard and then we will have a break together to have fun", there is already here a powerful message, one that reifies the distinction and bifurcation between 'work' and 'leisure', with the former representing self-denial, effort, and possibly boredom, and the latter self-expression, freedom, and enjoyment. Indeed, school breaks are often referred to as 'recreation' – as if work first suppresses the self, and students can then 're-create' themselves through play.

### What are metacognitive skills and how we could develop them?

Career education as understood above requires learners to be reflexive, i.e. to understand how they make sense of the world around them, and how they relate to it. Metacognitive skills are precisely those skills that we can build up in learners through observing how they make decisions, for instance, or how they process knowledge. By becoming aware of the way we think, we decide, we act and react, we enhance our abilities to orient our thinking, decision-making, and actions in relation to broader goals, pursued more purposefully.

The development of metacognition is quite a central pillar of modern education. Indeed, the Finnish 'miracle' in the PISA results has at least partly been explained by the emphasis that is placed on the planned inculcation of metacognitive skills, where reflective inquiry and engagement with knowledge is stressed over and above transmission. The same applies to career education. Luckily for teachers, there are now several great resources that teach meta-cognitive skills that relate to life skills generally, including those competences that connect with working lives. Many of these resources



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use games (both board- and IT-based), group dynamics, and all sorts of experiential learning strategies such as role play, theatre, scripting, and so on. Research tells us that primary school children have already started narrowing down their options for the future, a process which interacts in complex ways with messages and socialisation received at home and in other social sites, and which often reproduce prejudices regarding class, gender and ethnic 'destinies'. Bringing these assumptions and prejudices to the fore, and engaging with them in challenging and critical ways, helps career education to fulfil a central aspect of its *raison d'être*: opening up options and opportunities.

**Articles written by the author that explore these themes in greater detail:**

Sultana, R.G. (2014). Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will? Troubling the relationship between career guidance and social justice. *International Journal of Educational and Vocational Guidance*, Vol.14(1), pp.5-19.

Sultana, R.G. (2012) 'Career education: past, present...but what prospects?' *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, Vol.41, No.1, pp.69-80.

Sultana, R.G. (2012) 'Flexibility and security? The implications of 'flexicurity' for career guidance.' *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, Vol.45(2), 145-163.

Those interested in these papers can contact the author: [ronald.sultana@um.edu.mt](mailto:ronald.sultana@um.edu.mt)

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