



**The Case for Careers Education and Guidance
for 14-19 Year Olds**

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An overview of NFER's research findings on careers education and guidance

The recent interim report by the Working Group on 14-19 Reform (DfES, 2004) brought into sharp focus the need for a coherent, integrated and well planned careers education and guidance programme in schools and colleges. In order for young people to make the most of the opportunities in the proposed 14-19 curriculum, Tomlinson argued that young people *'must be prepared with the skills and self-awareness to exercise their choices effectively'*. What are these skills? How compelling is the evidence that such skills can support young people in making effective choices about their future? How well prepared are schools and colleges to support their students' career development?

This briefing paper explores some of the summarised findings from a number of large-scale research studies conducted at NFER (mostly on behalf of the DfES and its predecessor Departments, but also on behalf of a number of different careers services) over the last decade. It argues that it is possible to identify the skills that promote successful transition and traces some of the links between successful transition and programmes of careers education and guidance. It also suggests that, in the light of the Tomlinson Report (2004), the recent National Audit Office report (2004) and the findings from current research on transition from schools engaged in Excellence in Cities and Aimhigher (Morris and Rutt, 2003); the conclusions from this earlier research are equally pertinent today.

The Context for Careers Education and Guidance

Young people access careers education and guidance within an educational and support system that has been undergoing significant and often radical changes. Preceding the curriculum reforms proposed by Tomlinson, schools and colleges have seen the introduction of major changes in the qualifications structure, both post-16 with the advent of Curriculum 2000, and pre-16 with the introduction of extended work-related learning. More recently, the Increased Flexibility Programme has promoted vocational courses and GCSEs in vocational subjects for 14-16 year-olds. Over the past seven years and following the publication of *'Bridging the Gap'* (1997), there has been a raft of initiatives promoting social and educational inclusion and wider participation: for many young people the encouragement to continue into further and higher education has been a significant break with family history or expectations. Finally, there have been some radical changes to the structure and nature of the support systems available to young people. Financial support schemes like the Education Maintenance Allowance have been introduced for those entering further education. Additional funds have also been provided for Further Education colleges to augment student support systems. The Connexions Service for those aged 13-19 has been implemented – a change of major importance for those engaged in providing careers education and guidance.

This briefing goes on to pose a series of policy- and practitioner-focused questions about careers education and guidance and seeks to provide some insights into them based on DfES statistics and evidence culled from a number of NFER's research studies.

Question 1:

Given these changes, is there any indication that the characteristics of those who stay in learning post-16 have changed over the past few years?

The most recent figures from the DfES suggest that:

- § There has indeed been a reduction (of just fewer than two per cent, from 8.7% to 7%) in the proportion of young people aged 16-19 who are not in education, training or employment (Hodge, 2004).

- § Data about trends indicates that lower achieving white males were (and remain) the least likely group to stay in education.
- § Patterns of differential participation in learning post-16 continue to be evident in terms of young people's socio-economic backgrounds and prior attainment (Payne, 2000).
- § Participation remains highest amongst high achievers at 16 and 18, amongst those of Indian background, those with at least one parent in employment, with at least one parent in a professional occupation and with at least one parent as an owner-occupier.
- § Young people who are low achievers at 16 are also more likely to remain in education if they have attended a grammar or independent school pre-16. Payne's data indicates that 82% of young people in this group stayed in education post-16, compared to 40% of low achievers from secondary modern and comprehensive schools, and 46% of low achievers from comprehensives with sixth forms.

Question 2:

What is the scope for intervention?

What can be done to change the attitudes to post-16 education of lower achieving young white males, for example? It needs to be acknowledged that young people may not be aware of all of the policy and strategy changes that impinge on them. However, they are very much influenced by the messages about those policies that are conveyed by teachers, parents, employers, the media sources and by friends. For instance, how many young people decided that they could not consider higher education because of fears of debt engendered by debates about university fees? If young people are to take advantage of the new learning and development opportunities that have been introduced since 1997, they need to be equipped with the skills to navigate the array of information sources that impinge upon their worlds. What are these skills and how can they best be developed? The remainder of this briefing paper examines some of the research evidence related to the association between careers education and guidance interventions and post-16 participation.

The significance of careers-related skills

'The key factor that seemed to underpin successful transition at 16 was the level of young people's career-exploration skills. Those who demonstrated such skills by the end of Year 11 were the least likely to have made significant changes to their courses, post-16, and were more likely to have made a transition that indicated progression.' (Morris *et al.*, 1999)

In 1996, the DfES commissioned NFER to undertake a comprehensive study of two cohorts of young people (over 7,000 who had recently completed Year 9 or 10 in 40 selected schools) to establish a baseline of guidance provision and careers-related skills prior to the implementation of enhanced guidance provision for 13 to 14 year olds. The Year 9 cohort was followed up two years later (in 1998), when they were in Year 12 (or equivalent) to assess the longer-term impact of such interventions on young people's careers-related skills and on their current and planned progression. This cohort completed two questionnaires in the follow-up study, the first (sent to their home addresses) some six months after the completion of compulsory education and the second five months further on into their post-16 education, training, employment or other destinations. In addition, two further cohorts of young people (again over 7,000 of those who had recently completed Years 9 or 10) were surveyed in 30 of the 40 original schools in the study.

In addition to the questionnaire data from the 14,666 young people, the study incorporated background information on each of the pupils (including their individual level of attainment at GCSE) and on the careers education and guidance and other provision available to them in their schools (this was obtained from nearly 300 teaching and careers service staff across the 40 schools and the 15 careers service areas). This data enabled some sophisticated statistical analysis, using a technique known as multilevel modelling, to explore the relationship between careers education and guidance inputs and outcomes such as successful transition at 16 and satisfaction with that transition. In conducting this analysis, the research team was able to control for a range of background factors at pupil level, such as young people's sex, attainment levels and prior level of careers-related skills, and at school level (including type and location of school and model of careers education and guidance delivery).

The analysis of this longitudinal data particularly highlighted the importance of **careers exploration skills**: the skills that young people needed to use computerised databases, paper sources or people, for example, in order to find out about their future career or the courses they needed to follow. Within the surveyed cohort:

- § The young people with a high level of such skills were the least likely to switch courses or drop-out of courses, post-16, and were the most likely to be on a course that would lead to a higher level of qualification than they had already achieved at 16. This was true for *all* young people, whatever their level of attainment at GCSE.
- § There was a significant relationship between young people's satisfaction with their post-16 destinations and their understanding of themselves, their strengths and weaknesses (their **self-awareness**) and their ability to examine these in the light of the skills and abilities they would require on their chosen courses and in their potential career.
- § Those who, in their post-16 destinations were most positive, felt that they had definitely made the right choice and were happy on their course (whether academic or vocational, in school, college or the workplace) had demonstrated high levels of careers-exploration skills when they were in Year 11 and had shown that they were able to **apply their self-awareness**.
- § The relevance of other careers-related skills was evident in a second group of young people who felt that they had made the right choice even though they were not always content with the day-to-day reality of the work they were doing. These young people, all of whom demonstrated an ability to apply their self-awareness and a range of decision-making skills, indicated that it was worth coping with their current dissatisfactions in order to achieve their longer-term goals.

Question 3:

What does this mean for the provision of careers education and guidance?

The implications of these findings are clear. Schools and colleges need to find ways in which to inculcate appropriate careers-related skills if they are to support young people's progression at 16. As indicated above, and among the survey cohorts, effective and successful transitions in which progression was evident were most apparent in young people with good careers exploration skills and a sound factual knowledge of the courses and routes open to them. This does not mean that they had to have a detailed knowledge of every one of the wider opportunities open to them. In a qualitative study of young people's views of careers education and guidance (Stoney *et al.* 1998) they were often critical of programmes that tried to cover too many options: '*knowing everything... knowing you can go and do this course, you can go and do that...this is the same as this, but it's not got that...this is the same as that but it has a little bit extra...it's just confusing!*'). However, it does mean that they need the opportunity to explore potential routes and potential post-16 destinations and to learn about job requirements in relation to their own skills (*'I thought I*

wanted to be a veterinary nurse...and then I found out that you need quite high grades in science and I could never, you know, do science³).

The longitudinal study found that:

- § Young people who lacked the ability to apply their self-awareness (however good or poor it was) to their course selection, were significantly more likely to switch courses or even drop-out of post-16 education or training altogether.
- § However, not all young people with the ability to apply their self-awareness had necessarily made a good transition. Some young people, who appeared to be consistent in applying their self-awareness nevertheless made no progression, choosing post-16 courses with qualifications at the same level (or even at a lower level) as those which they had already achieved. In looking at this group more closely it became apparent that young people in this group had very poor self-images, believing that they had limited or no skills.

These findings suggest that there are some specific things that can be done to promote good transitions and progression at 16. Schools and other support agencies need to:

- § help young people develop a clear and realistic self-image that emphasises their abilities, rather than one which leaves them uncertain of their strengths or potential strengths;
- § help young people to relate their strengths and skills realistically to the requirements of the post-16/post 18 world;
- § facilitate the development of research skills, through structured and supported exercises that actively engage young people in the research process;
- § facilitate young people's acquisition of accurate factual knowledge about opportunities at 16, 17 and 18 rather than simply providing them with access to information.

Question 4:

Are these skills still necessary?

Although this detailed analysis of careers-related skills took place nearly six years ago, there is evidence to suggest that the findings are still pertinent, both for young people and for their schools. In an NFER study conducted during 1999 (Morris *et al.*, 2000), one case-study school, a girls' grammar school, produced hard evidence of the impact of a comprehensive careers education and guidance programme, introduced in the mid-1990s, on pupil outcomes, pointing to improved GCSE results, the virtual elimination of switching and drop-out from post-16 study and minimal drop-out from higher education (no more than – and often less than – one or two students a year). A more recent analysis of longitudinal pupil data (Morris and Rutt, 2003) highlighted the importance of good careers education and guidance programmes on young people's aspirations. The data was collected from some 2,280 young people from schools involved in the Excellence in Cities initiative, firstly in Year 11 in 2001 and later when they were in their post-16 destinations. One of the key factors that appeared to be significantly related to the development of a positive attitude to higher education, for example, was the quality and extent of the provision of information, advice and guidance that young people had received pre-16, about higher education and higher education courses. Of particular import were the opportunities that young people had to visit a university or HEI during their time in compulsory education and the chances they had been given to talk about further education with staff from school and from colleges and about higher education with staff from universities. Post-16, it was clear that there was also scope for the provision of information (about possible financial support, the range of courses open to them, and student life) that would allay fears and encourage participation.

Question 5:

How can careers-related skills best be developed?

The research undertaken for the NFER studies in 1996 and 1998/1999 suggested that, while some activities were significantly associated with the development of particular skills (for example, individual research exercises were essential in helping young people refine their careers exploration skills) no one activity or input was sufficient to promote the skills that young people needed to make the most of post-16 or post-18 opportunities. As Figure A suggests, the development of any one such skill required a range of different activities.

Figure A: The development of careers-related skills

Activities and contexts	Self-awareness	Careers exploration skills	Opportunity awareness	Factual knowledge	Transition skills	Decision-making skills
Range of CEG activities		*	*		**	*
Individual discussions	**	**	**	**	*	**
Work with teachers	*	*	*		*	*
Work with careers advisers		*	*	*	*	
Individual research activities	*	***	*	*	*	*
Specialist input				*	*	

* important; ** very important; *** essential

Question 6:

What kind of programme or provision needs to be in place in order to facilitate the development of these skills?

The research suggested that careers-related skills were best developed:

- § where young people had access to individual discussions (either formal or informal) about their future;
- § where they had access to ICT guidance materials mediated by a professional (whether a teacher trained in guidance support or other professional);
- § where careers-related activities were provided by trained staff, whether teachers with guidance qualifications or careers advisers;
- § when such provision was begun at a relatively early stage in secondary education;
- § where there was a close integration between schools and the providers of professional careers support, not just in terms of partnership agreements and meetings, but in a genuine two-way sharing of information, with a high priority placed on careers education, in order to equip young people with the skills needed to make best use of guidance opportunities.

Young people in the longitudinal study who demonstrated careers-related skills by the time they had completed Year 9 retained that 'head start' over their peers, whatever their level of attainment.

Question 7:

To what extent are we in a position where young people can be given the best opportunity to develop these skills?

At present:

- § the responsibility for careers education is firmly placed (as one might argue it should be) on schools;
- § there is an emphasis on the use of ICT strategies (though this is not always accompanied by provision for mediation);
- § there is a Personal Adviser for those deemed most in need of such support (though the definition of need is, perhaps, open to question);
- § young people have many sources of information on post-16 and post-18 opportunities.

However, there is a danger that many of these sources of information may simply perpetuate the current pattern of post-16 destinations, with all of the trend data confirming the traditional patterns of entry into further and higher education that various policy initiatives are seeking to break. While the input of family and friends can be helpful in promoting self-awareness and opportunity awareness, they may also simply maintain the *status quo ante*. Children from families in professional occupations, for example, may continue to be more fully represented amongst those entering further and higher education compared with those from other backgrounds. Boys and low achievers may continue to be less likely to take up further education places than girls and high achievers.

Teachers, learning mentors, further education tutors, undergraduates, higher education staff and support staff from the voluntary sector can be highly influential in raising aspirations, helping young people overcome barriers to learning and providing information on the opportunities available in their institutions and in others. However, NFER's research (and that of other organisations) has found that it can often be difficult for providers of information in schools with sixth forms to be entirely impartial (*'They're a bit biased...you don't really get any information about going to other colleges because they want you to stay here'* quoted in Morris *et al.*, 2001). The Association of Colleges poll in 2003, for example, found that one in three of the 550 young people in the survey felt that their school had not given them enough information about their post-16 options, and that one in four believed that they had not been given enough information about courses in their local college. Moreover, without specialist training, many of the people given the task of providing information are unlikely to be aware of the range of opportunities available outside their own areas of expertise, or of the skills required to follow such courses. Employers and training providers can, of course, provide detailed and specific information about their areas of expertise, but they often lack the information about the young people to be able to help them apply their self-awareness to the requirements of the workplace.

Through the use of ICT, there is also far more accessible information on courses, training and careers than at any time in the past. However, NFER's research has shown that, without mediation such information can be at best confusing and at worst completely misleading.

Question 8:

What is the level of access to informed specialist support?

By April 2003, there were some 5,780 Personal Advisers employed by Connexions Services, some 80% (4,645) of whom were trained to skill level 4/NVQ level 4 (though not all of these would be in a careers-related discipline). In that same year, over half a million young people were identified as in need of intensive support (358,056 in compulsory education and 173,639, post-16), suggesting an average case-load, per adviser, of some 92 young people in need of such support. This case-load would be nearer 114 if the support was to be provided solely by those with level 4 qualifications. By September 2003, the number of Personal Advisers had risen to 7,722, 70% of whom were former careers advisers and 50% of whom had achieved or were working towards the Diploma for Personal Advisers as well as being trained to level 4. However, as the NAO report (2004) commented, *'if Connexions operated to the caseloads that were deemed to be manageable at the pilot stage, they would require in excess of 15,000 Personal Advisers... Connexions does not have the financial resources to employ this number of Personal Advisers.'* Clearly, for the majority of young people without intensive needs, the extent to which Personal Adviser support can be accessed is going to be limited. As the NAO concluded: *'This places more pressure on schools and colleges to play their role in providing good quality advice to young people who are still in education.'*

Question 9:

What is the capacity of schools to provide high quality careers education and guidance?

At the time of the 1998/99 study, schools appeared to have a clearer rationale for their careers education and guidance provision than in the past, although an ambivalent attitude to such programmes was still relatively widespread. Following the so-called 'focusing agenda' in 1998 however, there appeared to have been a significant downturn in provision. Research undertaken by NFER for the DfES in 2000/01 (prior to the expansion of Connexions outside the pilot areas) suggested that the majority of schools did not then have the capacity (whether in terms of expertise, time, or in some cases, willingness) to provide high quality careers education and guidance (Morris *et al.* 2001). In a subsequent study of post-16 financial and non-financial support (again for the DfES and completed in 2002) interviewees in schools and colleges reported that the level of pre-16 careers education and guidance provision was insufficient to ensure that all young people were making the most appropriate choices about their post-16 destinations and choices. In the worst cases, there was an increasing level of drop-out among students who would previously have been expected to continue in further education and/or progress to higher education.

The recent report by the National Audit Office (2004) suggested that this situation has continued. They reported that *'many schools do not have the capacity to play their part in providing good quality, impartial careers advice that will enable [young people] to make learning and career choices'*. In nearly two thirds of the 580 schools that took part in the survey commissioned by the NAO in 2003, advice and guidance was coordinated or delivered by staff without any formal qualification in the field. Over half of the schools indicated that they did not have sufficient time to incorporate careers education into the school's curriculum. .

Question 10:

What are the implications for the future of careers education and guidance?

Tomlinson (2004) emphasised that young people need access to *'personal planning, review and guidance to underpin their programme, consolidate their learning and inform their choices'*. The findings from these various NFER studies suggest that, at present, neither schools nor Connexions Services are in a position to provide the extent and quality of

careers education and guidance that is necessary to promote positive student transitions for all young people at 16. This view is echoed in the National Audit Office's finding that '*Not all 13-19 year olds may have access to the good quality advice they need to make informed decisions on career and further education options*' (NAO, 2004).

Tomlinson's recognition of the need to ensure that '*teachers, trainers, advisory services and others are provided with the knowledge and training necessary to help young people make the choices that are right for them,*' therefore, is to be welcomed. However, as the report also acknowledged, '*Extending the availability of support, particularly from school and college staff, has **significant workload and resource implications** which would have to be tackled before advice and guidance could approach the levels of quality needed to underpin the new framework*'. Moreover, it concluded, '*While the Connexions service has succeeded in meeting the objectives it was set, it is likely that the objectives themselves will need to be revisited if the demand for more and better guidance is to be met*'. This call for a systems solution is effectively endorsed by the NAO in their recommendation that the DfES needs to develop performance indicators for the full range of services provided by Connexions partnerships as well as ensuring that schools have the capacity (through training and clarification of roles, for example) to work with Connexions to provide support, particularly careers education, advice and guidance, for all young people. In schools and colleges, the opportunity exists to take advantage of this growing recognition of the need for guidance and to focus on the development of careers education programmes that can have a significant impact on young people's progression and participation at 16.

Further reading

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