



Edge Research Conference

Information, advice and guidance – guiding post-14 choices, with particular reference to technical, practical and vocational courses

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Introduction

Young people face a bewildering array of choices in a fast-changing education and training landscape. These choices are critical to their future and to their ultimate contribution as citizens to the economy and society. But how can we make sure that young people make informed decisions about which post-14 courses to take? Furthermore, what information do young people who are interested in taking technical, practical and vocational courses require to enable them to find the right type of course in an appropriate learning environment? These are important questions which all stakeholders need to think about carefully and have a say in developing suitable solutions.

This paper presents the findings, conclusions and recommendations from a range of research which throws light on how young people make decisions, what type of information they value and use and how the information could be improved to facilitate effective transitions to further and higher education, apprenticeship training or employment. We discuss the evidence-based messages from our research into careers education and information, advice and guidance (CE/IAG) provision, our studies of barriers to participation in education and training, and our evaluations of policy interventions. We conclude the paper by discussing the implications of all the research evidence in the evolving policy context and the new duty on schools to provide impartial and independent careers guidance.

Background

The education reform agenda which is reshaping teaching and learning, organisational structures and delivery systems has extensive implications for the realisation of young people's ambitions, their decision-making about the future, their progression to further and higher education, training and employment and ultimately their wellbeing. The wide-ranging reforms throw into sharp relief the need for effective CE/IAG to help young people, supported by their parents/carers, to make appropriate decisions.

The central thrust of the reforms announced in the Coalition Government's Schools White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching' (Department of Education, 2010) is the creation of a culture where institutions take more responsibility for making decisions about the use of resources, the design of provision and the development and

implementation of performance improvement strategies. The growth of academies and the introduction of free schools exemplify this drive to achieve a locally-led, self-improvement culture.

This devolved approach has also initiated statutory guidance for schools regarding careers guidance. Schools now have a duty to secure access to independent careers guidance for young people aged 14 to 16 which 'must be presented in an impartial manner; include information on the full range of post-16 education or training options, including Apprenticeships; and promote the best interests of the pupils to whom it is given' (England and Wales. Statutes (2012). Education Act 2011). It is worth noting that schools have been given this duty without the allocation of additional resources. This raises the issue of whether schools have the capacity and expertise to provide this type of service and support, especially given the scale and complexity of the reforms being implemented.

Raising of the participation age means that from the summer of 2013 all young people will be required to participate in education or training until the end of the academic year in which they turn 17 and from summer 2015 onwards until their eighteenth birthday. In their review of the benefits and challenges of raising the participation age, Spielhofer et al. (2007) noted that 'evidence suggests it will be necessary to offer a range of suitable post-16 pathways; to ensure the availability of high-quality guidance and support; and to offer good, alternative pre-16 provision which will engage young people and encourage them to want to continue learning post-16'. (p.2). The 16-19 Bursary Fund provides financial support to help young people continue in education. It offers bursaries of £1,200 a year to the most vulnerable young people and a discretionary fund for schools, colleges, academies, training providers and local authorities (providers) to distribute.

The Coalition Government is driving forward with system-level reform to secure opportunities for growth through the education and skills system. Investment to transform the skills infrastructure is central to achieving the strategic aims of increasing and sustaining economic growth, promoting social mobility and building stronger communities. Although there was a 63 per cent increase in apprenticeship starts from 2009-10 to 2010-11, do enough young people, parents/carers and teachers know what apprenticeships are and the related career progressions? The Education and Skills Growth Review (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011a) states that there is a clear message from business that employers want school and college leavers to have better literacy and numeracy skills, to have appropriate employability skills and to be more work-ready.

Vocational education is being reformed through the Government's implementation of the recommendations of the Wolf Review of Vocational Education (2011) which aim 'to create a system which is far more flexible, innovative and cost-effective ... and which consistently promotes good vocational education and progression for all young people across the country' (p.106). Wolf recommended changes to work experience provision: withdrawal of the statutory requirement on schools to offer work experience at Key Stage

4 and the provision of high-quality work placements for post-16 students. Another key recommendation was that English and mathematics be integral components of post-16 study programmes for those young people without good GCSEs in these subjects. The attempts to reform vocational education and extend its offer through the development of University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools have implications for young people's decision-making. For example, young people will have to make decisions earlier about what, when and where to study given that University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools provide applied learning courses for 14 to 19 year olds.

The majority of young people make a successful transition from school to education, training or employment. However, there remains a notable minority of young people who do not. Currently, youth unemployment and the scale of young people aged 16-24 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) is a major social and economic challenge. Indeed, between April and June 2012 16 per cent of young people aged 16 to 24 were NEET while 10.3 per cent of 16 to 18 year olds were NEET (Department for Education, 2012). The Government introduced the Youth Contract in 2011 which will provide £1 billion of funding over the next three years to support unemployed 16–24 year olds. The support will include wage initiatives, work experience, sector-based work academies and more Apprenticeships. In addition, the Youth Contract is committing £126 million to equip 16 and 17 year olds who are NEET with the skills to make a successful transition. The focus of this support will be on those young people who are at greater risk of longer-term disengagement, namely those with low levels of attainment. Within three years the Government hopes to have provided support for at least 55,000 NEET young people aged 16 and 17 years old. As some of these young people are vulnerable and lead especially challenging lives, they require particularly responsive IAG to help them navigate the options available to them.

Several witnesses who gave evidence to the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee's examination of youth unemployment and the Youth Contract highlighted the importance of IAG for young people who are at a disadvantage in the labour market during the current recession. For example, New Economy reported that: 'Good IAG and work experience opportunities help a young person understand the labour market and what qualifications lead to sustained employment. There is an issue of understanding of labour market choices among young people and a subsequent need to develop a greater knowledge of opportunities in different businesses, and the reality of what working in certain sectors/businesses is like, as well as information on the growing employment sectors'. (p.36). Similarly, Learndirect stated that: 'A holistic approach to skills development, qualifications, careers advice and work experience, with employers at its heart could help to ensure young people succeed on their chosen career path'. (p33). Some witnesses were critical of the quality of IAG provided. The Association of Employers and Learning Providers averred that: 'IAG responsibility has now been divided out between various bodies, organisations and institutions, including local authorities, schools and providers, which has only resulted in the patchiness of the previous arrangements being exacerbated ... many schools remain fixated on ensuring academic progression for their pupils rather than ensuring that they get the right range of

information to make the right choices and decisions for their futures'(Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. Work and Pensions Committee (2012), Vol II). This point was also made by Chapman (2012) who wrote: 'To make informed decisions at each stage of their education, students need to know what is available, not just what their current school provides'.

There are significant changes taking place in the higher education sector which may affect young people's decisions and their parents'/carers' views on appropriate post-18 pathways for their children. The Higher Education White Paper (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011b) stated that: 'Our student funding reforms recognise the problems faced by people from poorer backgrounds with no history of participating in higher education. We are increasing maintenance grants and loans for nearly all students' (p.7). The National Scholarship Programme was introduced to provide financial support to enable students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter higher education. However, some students embarking on higher education in 2012 have faced higher tuition fees now that higher education institutions are able to charge up to £9,000 a year providing they meet access criteria. In reporting a decline in university applicants, Bolton (2012) observed that: 'This data is entirely consistent with the assumption that the increase in fees will put some potential students off' (p.7). Perceptions that higher education study is an expensive option appear to be influencing some young people's choices.

How do young people make decisions?

Before considering the types of IAG young people need in order to make informed decisions, in such a vast and changing landscape, it is important to consider how young people make decisions. Armed with this knowledge, schools will be better able to ensure that their young people receive an appropriate programme of career-related education and guidance.

When making decisions about what courses and qualifications to take, young people are influenced by personal agency (for example personal enjoyment of a subject and its perceived usefulness or motivation to pursue a particular career path) (McCrone et al., 2005). Young people approach decision-making in different ways according to their mindsets and their decisions fluctuate over time (Blenkinsop et al., 2006); indicating the complexity and individuality inherent in decision making. For example, the research highlighted that different young people need diverse sources of support when making decisions about what courses to take. Some need one-to-one support (and, if appropriate, guidance) while those who have more developed decision-making skills may have sufficient confidence so that group sessions to deliver careers guidance will be sufficient.

Young people are also influenced by structural factors (such as a school's ethos and careers provision) when making decisions about which courses and qualifications to take. Moreover the complex dimensions of structural factors further complicate the decision-making process for young people. For example, they are more satisfied with

their choices when they are in schools that provide impartial advice about options and courses, sufficient time to make decisions and when they are offered one-to-one support from informed teachers who know them. Provision characterised in this way is linked with schools for 11-16 year olds in contrast to those for young people aged 11-18 (Blenkinsop et al., 2006). This has implications for the extent to which schools with their own sixth forms can truly provide impartial careers guidance to young people in a competitive environment when student numbers affect sixth forms' viability.

Effective careers guidance is also characterised by delivery from fully trained and qualified staff. There is a need for senior leaders in schools, careers coordinators, form tutors and other staff to be trained in current careers guidance policy and how it relates, in particular, to 14-19 pathways and beyond (McCrone et al., 2010). Young people from schools where all these elements are in place will be better equipped to make informed decisions about whether to pursue academic or vocational education or training.

Crucially, effective careers guidance is also underpinned by a programme of thorough careers education. In recent years a programme of careers education has commonly been embedded in schools' personal, health and social education (PHSE) and has been delivered from Year 7 onwards. Typically, activities in Years 7 and 8 have included, for example, topics such as decision-making, discussions around personal qualities, skills, strengths and weaknesses, financial management and 'the world of work'. In Year 9, the focus in careers lessons in all schools has tended to be Key Stage 4 options, although some schools have also broadened the programme to look at areas like teamwork and skills in the workplace. Work experience for students at the end of Year 10 or beginning of Year 11 has been a focus for careers lessons in Year 10 (although this is likely to change in light of Wolf's recommendations¹ and the Raising the Participation Agenda²), so typically topics such as CV writing, job applications and interview skills would be covered. In Year 11, schools' careers programmes have been devoted to post-16 choices, with an emphasis on IAG (McCrone et al., 2009).

Careers education can be considered to be a structural factor which is exceptionally important in enabling young people to make successful decisions in Years 9 and 11. There is an established relationship between young people who make effective and successful transitions, and those who have good careers exploration skills and a sound factual knowledge of the course and routes open to them (Morris, 2004; Morris et al., 1999a and b).

Young people need to develop their self-awareness (including an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and preferred learning styles), decision-making skills and broader awareness of the world of work before they receive careers guidance. Where young people have been supported, through careers education at an earlier stage of

¹ <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00031-2011>)

² [Raising the participation age](#)

their education, they can subsequently make better use of careers guidance. For example, evidence from the NFER Key Stage 2 careers-related learning pathfinder evaluation shows that where young people in Year 6 were made more aware of the world of work, they developed an increased understanding of the link between education, qualifications and careers and had a more positive attitude towards school and education (Wade et al., 2011).

Additionally parents also exert an influence over how young people's make decisions (Marson-Smith, H et al., 2009; Haynes, G et al., 2012). For example, they can act as role models, they can provide access to information and networks, they can enhance or limit a young person's opportunities through providing social, economic and cultural capital and they can shape aspirations through expectations.

Furthermore, CE/IAG, in terms of guiding young people between academic and technical, practical and vocational education or training courses, is particularly important for all young people and their parents/carers currently as the 14 –19 landscape has changed significantly in recent times. It is likely that not all parents/carers are up-to-date with courses and employment opportunities in the 21st century. Moreover, it is the young people from families with the lower social capital that are in need of most support (Haynes, G et al., 2012).

In terms of how young people make decisions, the evidence points to key factors being personal agency, parental influence and importantly, structural factors such as the careers information provided in schools.

What types of information do young people value and use?

The national evaluation of Diplomas revealed that the Diploma-related IAG that were valued by young people included clear information on the content of the Diploma, the best people placed to provide that information and the mechanisms needed to provide the information (Wade, P., et al 2011). It is suggested that these elements are equally applicable to technical, practical and vocational education or training courses. Each of these elements is discussed below.

Firstly, young people indicated that they wanted information on the content of each element of the Diploma, the applied learning style needed to study a Diploma, the equivalence and progression routes and the location of study. Secondly, they also valued receiving information from well-informed teachers who they trusted and who knew them, well-informed careers professionals (such as the equivalent of Connexions personal advisers) and well-informed parents. Thirdly, they valued written information, taster days and, if possible more extended experiences of the applied nature of the Diploma. They also welcomed guided direction to the qualification from professionals who knew the student and qualification content. This evidence is supported by Marson-Smith, H et al (2009) who said that young people like advice from teachers in their school who know them well (provided that their information is up-to-date), information on the content, structure and practical issues (such as travel) and the opportunity to visit

other institutions where the vocational or applied course will be delivered. Additionally, they also valued information from professionals from industry and young people who have already studied and experienced the course.

Furthermore, the evaluation of Diplomas revealed that when young people were satisfied with the IAG they had received prior to starting the course, they were more likely to be positive about the Diploma a year later (Lynch, S et al., 2010). This clearly indicates the value of effective careers guidance to support engagement and progression.

A review of careers professionals' involvement in schools, carried out as part of the strand of NFER's Programme of Research From Education to Employment, supports the findings from the national evaluation of Diplomas. The review revealed that the broad determinants of successful careers education and IAG that overarch approaches used include: the provision of high quality, consistent and impartial information, tailored to need and delivered at appropriate times such as key transition points. The review also supported the finding that careers education and IAG should be provided by well-informed teachers, careers coordinators, external advisers and supported by informed parents and employers working in collaborative partnerships (McCrone and Filmer-Sankey 2012).

A further review of the curriculum and qualification needs of young people at risk of disengagement provides more insight into the types of information young people consider important. Courses such as the Increased Flexibilities Programme and the Young Apprenticeship Programme were reviewed. The evaluation of these programmes concluded that as well as providing an appropriate learning environment, a wide variety of good-quality vocational, applied and practical courses to suit learning styles and interests and teaching-related approaches to enhance engagement, young people also valued well-informed, impartial IAG and taster sessions of courses (Bielby, G et al., 2012).

Clearly, young people need detailed information on the content of courses, the method and location of learning and progression routes. Moreover they need this information to be accessible in different formats and from well-informed people.

How information could be improved to facilitate effective transitions to further and higher education, apprenticeship training or employment.

It is perhaps the case that some young people could currently be viewed to be making decisions in varying degrees of ignorance about themselves, for example their own strengths and weaknesses, the options open to them, such as institutions they could attend and courses they could take, and the careers ultimately open to them.

Young people in the first cohorts to take the Diploma indicated that they wanted more information about the Diploma and they wanted the information earlier (Wade, P et al., 2010). Furthermore, the fragmentation of the school system, through, for example the introduction of University Technical Colleges, Studio Schools and free schools, means

that young people will need to be better informed about alternative qualifications, school specialisms and pathways at an earlier stage. In addition to the provision of a comprehensive careers education programme and the different types of IAG outlined above, we believe it is important for young people and parents to receive IAG at an earlier stage in a young person's educational journey in order to facilitate effective transitions.

IAG can also be improved by schools adopting a partnership approach to its provision. A review of IAG commissioned by the Local Government Association identified the fundamentals of 'good' IAG and suggested that key to further improvements was the need for institutions to work more collaboratively together (McCrone, T et al., 2010). For young people to make informed decisions, and for their chances of fully engaging in and completing their selected courses, it is important that they are fully aware of all courses and qualifications at their current place of study as well as those at other institutions.

Finally, since September 2012 schools are required to provide independent and impartial careers guidance to young people in Years 10 and 11. Working collaboratively with careers professionals and other educational providers, for example inviting all local alternative providers to present to a school's young people and referring young people and their parents/carers to independent sources of IAG such as the National Careers Service and local authority area prospectuses, can go some way to providing impartial IAG in a competitive environment.

Conclusion

Schools can make a difference to the content and types of careers information available to young people, the mechanisms and stages of delivery of guidance and to further informing the people from whom young people receive careers guidance. As young people are aware of the content, learning styles, location of learning and subsequent progression routes from A Levels, so they are entitled to have this information about technical, practical and vocational education and training courses, such as apprenticeships.

Furthermore, schools can do much to dissipate the inherent tension in the requirement to provide impartial careers guidance in a competitive environment by working collaboratively with other local providers in the best interests of young people. Only by doing so can young people make informed decisions and successful transitions to technical, practical and vocational education or training courses. Moreover, this would result in more young people being engaged in learning and acquiring the skills necessary to grow and shape their future as envisaged by Barber et al. (2012)

'We need to ensure that students everywhere leave school ready to continue to learn and adapt, ready to take responsibility for their own future learning and careers, ready to innovate with and for others, and to live in turbulent, diverse cities. We need perhaps the first truly global generation ...'

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