



**Evidence for
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Education**

NFER Thinks

What the evidence tells us

Careers guidance: If not an annual careers plan – then what?



The importance of effective careers guidance for young people is considerable, especially at a time when there are nearly one million young people not in work or education.

This paper argues that there is an urgent need to significantly enhance the quality and consistency of careers guidance for all young people, and to have a clear method in place for ensuring that this goal is achieved.

It calls on the Government, careers professionals, schools and employers to work together to find an effective and workable solution.

A recent OECD (2013) report observed that unemployment in OECD countries will remain high through 2014, with young people and the low-skilled hit hardest. Currently the UK has approximately one million young people¹ not in education, employment or training (NEET) (DfE, 2013). At the same time, 55 per cent of firms surveyed, as part of the CBI and Pearson education and skills survey (CBI, 2013), say school leavers lack the right work experience and key attributes that set them up for success.

The policy context

Since 2012, schools have been required to secure access to 'independent and impartial' careers guidance for young people in their schools from years 9 to 11 (extended to years 8 to 13 from September 2013). Simultaneously, schools are no longer required to provide careers education or work-related learning.

In autumn 2012 the education select committee carried out an inquiry into careers guidance to review the extent to which schools were meeting their new duty. The report concluded: "The Government's decision to transfer responsibility for careers guidance to schools is regrettable" (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education Committee, 2013a, p.12). It made various recommendations to improve the quality of careers guidance and the mechanisms by which schools are held accountable for their provision. These included: that schools should be required to work towards quality awards; that all young people should be entitled to a minimum of one personal careers interview with an independent adviser; and that "[...] all schools are required to publish an annual careers plan, which would provide transparency about what could be expected in terms of careers work and would set out the resources allocated to these activities" (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education Committee, 2013a, p.4). It suggested that such a plan would enhance accountability beyond the Ofsted inspection framework and destination data.

In the Government's response to the select committee's report (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education Committee, 2013b), it defended its decision to devolve responsibility to schools but supported strengthening the remit of the National Careers Service particularly in order to bring businesses, schools and colleges together and to promote local opportunities. In terms of accountability, it did not support the annual careers plan (ACP) on the basis that a combination of Ofsted inspections (which do not explicitly regulate the new careers guidance duty) and destination data (which currently refer to the destinations of young people in the year after they leave compulsory schooling) was sufficient.

On 10 September 2013, Ofsted published the findings from a survey carried out to explore the extent to which young people are receiving comprehensive impartial careers guidance (Ofsted, 2013) and the Government has said it will make improvements to the destination measures. It believes that the requirement for an ACP is too bureaucratic, suggesting that it would be a distraction from teaching and learning.

The Government is "[...] confident in head teachers' ability to plan their [careers] provision in a way that works best for them" (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education Committee, 2013b, p.8).

¹ Number of NEET young people (aged 16-24) from DfE quarterly survey. The first quarter 2013 puts the figure at 909,000 (NB the Labour Force Survey has not been reweighted to reflect the Census 2011 population so the numbers should be used with caution).

Achieving quality and consistency

The Government's response poses some outstanding questions. How will the quality and consistency of careers guidance be ensured in the newly devolved structure? Who will oversee and support developments? How will young people, parents and other providers know what the offer is, and be confident that it is of good quality? NFER is concerned that without the right balance of support and accountability, there is a danger that careers guidance will be delivered in an inconsistent and unsystematic way across institutions. Ofsted believes that "the new statutory duty to provide careers guidance is not working well enough". Its report states that provision "is not sufficiently well coordinated or reviewed to ensure that each student received appropriate guidance".

The National Careers Council (NCC), established in May 2012 to provide advice on careers provision for young people and adults, published a report in June (NCC, 2013) and made seven recommendations, which if implemented, it argues will make a considerable impact on young people's employment prospects, working lives and the economy. These include the need for a culture change in careers provision; greater employer involvement in schools; greater understanding of the need for building resilience in young people; and the need to 'create a movement' (NCC, 2013, p.5), supported by the Government, to drive through the transformational change needed in the provision of careers guidance.

These recommendations illustrate the importance accorded to improving the quality and consistency of careers guidance. NFER's own research (which deals specifically with careers guidance for young people at school) complements many of the conclusions of the NCC report, as illustrated below:

- **A culture change in careers provision.** Our research (Filmer-Sankey and McCrone, 2012) demonstrates that there is room for change in some schools. Careers guidance thrives and has highest profile within schools where senior leadership supports and endorses careers provision. Additionally, careers guidance needs to be independent and impartial. The same research demonstrated that teachers in some schools were uncertain about the meaning of 'independent and impartial'. There is evidence that some schools for 11 to 18-year-olds encouraged students to stay on in their sixth forms rather than providing sufficient information about alternative pathways (Blenkinsop et al., 2005). This suggests a need, particularly at a time of high youth unemployment and skills shortages, for greater impartiality and transparency in some schools.
- **Greater employer involvement in schools.** A study carried out by NFER (Burge et al., 2012) provides evidence that employer involvement in schools has a positive impact on students' wellbeing and readiness for the world of work. Additionally, we have found that partnership working in general aids successful delivery of careers guidance (McCrone et al., 2010; McCrone and Filmer-Sankey, 2012). School links with partners such as other educational institutions in the area, training providers, local authorities, academy chains, local enterprise partnerships, careers agencies, the voluntary sector, youth workers, and youth offending teams are critical to the delivery of effective careers guidance. The value in having collaborative partnerships lies in a mutual understanding of local provision and clarity about roles, expectations and responsibilities.

- **Resilience building.** NFER research (Spielhofer et al., 2009; McCrone and Filmer-Sankey, 2012) shows that there are a large number of young people who are not in education, employment and training (NEET) who do not face multiple and complex barriers to learning. Effective collaborative working between informed stakeholders in schools and outside agencies, as part of careers guidance, is particularly effective in building resilience in such ‘at risk’ young people. Recent research by Barnardo’s (Evans and Rallings, 2013) draws attention to the importance of catering for this group (which they term the ‘inbetweeners’). These are young people who are just above the most vulnerable NEET group in terms of attainment, but who may be disengaged from school. The authors are concerned that this group is currently most likely to be missing out on careers guidance.

These findings illustrate some essential ingredients in high-quality, consistent careers guidance. Additionally, there is a clear need for transparency, accountability and scrutiny of careers provision.

The importance of transparency and accountability

We believe that transparency and accountability have an important part to play if consistently high-quality careers provision is to receive the attention it deserves alongside the many other competing pressures schools face. Ofsted can provide external accountability: its recent study observed that, while there was evidence of good practice (12 out of the 60 schools surveyed “ensured that all students received sufficient information to consider a wide breadth of career possibilities), provision is not yet consistent. It made a series of recommendations including that the National Careers Service should “market its services more effectively to young people aged 13 to 19” and that schools should “develop and implement a clear strategy for careers guidance” (Ofsted, 2013, p.7).

Destination data also has a role to play, and should receive closer scrutiny by school senior leadership teams, governing bodies and parents. It is therefore crucial that this data is made as straightforward to access and understand as possible. In addition, we believe that the data should track young people’s destinations for more than just one year after leaving school,² given that effective careers provision should support young people in choosing a sustainable, long-term-path.

It is also important that transparent information is provided for young people, parents and other stakeholders about each school’s provision. Ofsted observed that the “overwhelming influence” on young people was “their family and friends” (Ofsted, 2013, p.19). NFER evidence on the way in which Diplomas were introduced (Wade et al., 2011; Haynes et al., 2012) shows the important role that parents play in their children’s decision-making processes, and that parents want to understand about available qualification types and pathways.

Transparent information will encourage a sense of local accountability, and give parents and young people a clear understanding about, and confidence in, the ways in which their school is:

- working with local partners to coordinate provision and inform young people and parents;
- engaging with employers;
- taking into account the views of young people and their parents;
- supporting teachers to embed careers information into lessons and subjects;
- providing careers education and guidance from year 7. Young people should be supported to learn about their strengths, weaknesses, and how to develop realistic careers aspirations and decision-making skills, as well as being provided with information about career pathways;
- actively encouraging young people to consider all options at 14 and 16 so that they select the best options for their interest, motivation, learning style, ability and aspirations;
- allocating resources to the provision of careers guidance;
- providing all young people with face-to-face, impartial and independent guidance;
- working towards quality awards nationally validated by the Quality in Careers Standards;
- utilising advisers trained and qualified in delivering careers education and guidance;
- using online technology where possible for the collection, interactive analysis and reporting of careers data in order to reduce ‘bureaucracy’ and enable schools to carry out analysis instantly.

² Currently the data refers to the destinations of young people in the first two terms of the year after the young person leaves key stage 4.

What is the best means of ensuring that this happens?

The question then remains, what is the best way to ensure that good careers provision is available to every young person; that the details of that provision are reported in a transparent, accessible and systematic fashion to all stakeholders; and that there is a sound basis for judging quality of provision? Producing an ACP is one way a school could develop its approach, demonstrate that it is taking its responsibilities seriously, and be held to account. Each and every young person, and their parents, would have access to this so they could become confident that their school was guiding them towards the best possible option. School leaders and governing bodies would also be confident that they had shown their commitment to delivering high-quality, impartial and independent careers education and guidance.

On the other hand, imposing the requirement for an ACP on schools will not by itself guarantee high-quality provision, and in some cases may even be counter-productive. There is a risk that it could simply become a box-ticking exercise, and an additional administrative burden, rather than a genuine tool for improvement. However, the current pressures on schools; the lack of ring-fenced funding for careers guidance; and the fact that the duty for providing access to careers guidance has been imposed on them, suggest that the current arrangements alone (little support and little accountability) will not guarantee the provision our young people deserve.

NFER is therefore calling for all parties (the Government, careers professionals, employers, further education providers, governors and schools) to come together to formulate a clear understanding of what good careers guidance in schools looks like; how it can be achieved and maintained; and how information about provision can be shared in an accessible and informative manner that is open to scrutiny. We need all parties to debate, design and implement a solution that provides transparent, accountable and consistent provision to all young people.

Conclusions

We endorse the NCC's call for a culture change in careers provision (NCC, 2013). We also recognise the challenges that Ofsted has highlighted in its recommendations to the Government; employers and employer networks; the NCS; local authorities; schools and Ofsted. In the current economic climate, and the global market place, it is vital, for the sake of our young people and the economy, that we invest in careers guidance, and support and encourage schools, and those that work with them, to embrace the transformational change that is needed to ensure that *all* young people have a sense of purpose while they are in education; have a clear understanding about the decisions they need to make to get to where they want to go; and are equipped to successfully make the transition to the workplace.

We know that some schools are already providing access to high-quality, independent and impartial careers guidance; and note that Ofsted also recognises this (Ofsted,2013) by providing good practice examples in its report, but we need consistency – **we need all schools and their partners to do so**. A coherent strategy for careers provision; for transparency of information about provision; and for scrutiny of that information, developed collectively by all parties, would facilitate consistency, transparency and clarity for schools, collaborative partners, parents and young people. The risk we take in not striving for a workable approach is to carry on as we are with too many young people disengaging from learning, growing numbers unemployed and employers not being able to find the skilled workers they need – that would indeed be 'regrettable'.

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NFER

NFER is a charity with a reputation worldwide for providing independent and robust evidence for excellence in education and children's services. Our aim is to improve education and learning, and hence the lives of learners, by researching what is happening now. Our authoritative insights inform policy and practice, offering a unique perspective on today's educational challenges.

We work with an extensive network of organisations, all genuinely interested in making a difference to education and learners. Any surplus generated is reinvested in research projects to continue our work to improve the life chances of all learners from early years through to higher education.



Tami McCrone

Tami McCrone is a member of a new team that is leading efforts to ensure that NFER's research engages effectively with policymakers, teachers, and others involved in the education sector, and leads them to do things differently as a result.

She previously worked as a senior research manager in the Centre for Evaluation and Evidence in the Research Department at NFER.

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