



Briefing Note . University of Southampton
Research on Career Guidance for Young
People

THE SOUTHAMPTON RESEARCH ON CAREER GUIDANCE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE: A BRIEFING NOTE

1. Background

- 1.1 In recent discussions on the future of Connexions, senior civil servants have referred to recent research undertaken at the University of Southampton which, they suggest, demonstrates that the learning-choice and career guidance young people need could be provided as effectively (and more cost-efficiently) by teachers or other in-school staff given limited training. The view apparently is that young people get their career advice mainly from teachers and parents, with no strong evidence of value for money or effectiveness of advice from independent expert career guidance. The Southampton evidence is being invoked to support the proposal to divide the Connexions Service into 'universal' and 'targeted' services, and to pass the funding for the former to schools and colleges.
- 1.2 It is assumed that the research being referred to here is that conducted by Professor Nick Fosskett (School of Education, University of Southampton) and his colleagues (including Professor Jacky Lumby at the University of Lincoln). Their two most recent reports in this area of work are:
- Lumby, J., Fosskett, N. & Maringe, F. (2003). *Choice, Pathways and Progression for Young People in London West*. A report to London West Learning and Skills Council. Lincoln: University of Lincoln in association with University of Southampton.
 - Fosskett, N., Dyke, M. & Maringe, F. (2004). *The Influence of the School in the Decision to Participate in Learning Post-16*. RR538. London: Department for Education and Skills.

The key findings from these reports that are relevant to the statements in para.1.1 are analysed below.

2. The London West report

- 2.1 **Methodology.** The report for London West LSC (Lumby, Fosskett & Maringe, 2003) focuses on the choice processes of 16-year-olds in west London. It was based on 5 focus groups with year 11 students (from one school in each of the 5 LEAs within the London West LSC region), plus interviews with tutors, Careers/Connexions Service providers, and heads of student guidance in local FE colleges.
- 2.2 **School-based guidance.** The report indicates that the advice and guidance within schools:
- Focuses on educational choices as ends in themselves. Focus group members suggested that schools were helpful in 'offering advice about subject choices for A level', 'providing guidance about possible university courses', and 'offering realistic advice based on perceptions of academic potential and competence' (p.19). Concerns raised included 'the limited range of ideas about post-16 choices, which generally focus on staying on in school and taking A-levels'; and 'the perception of limited careers knowledge amongst those offering careers advice in schools' (p.20).
 - Is not equitable. Some young people felt that it 'tended to benefit the more able pupils more than it did the less able and disaffected' (p.20).
 - Is not impartial. Some young people felt that it 'was not sufficiently comprehensive and that it was biased towards the pathway of staying on in school and pursuing A-level study'. This was echoed by FE and Connexions/Careers personnel, who 'distinguished two impediments to young people receiving full and impartial advice': 'firstly, teachers may genuinely believe that staying on at school is the best option for many

young people'; and 'secondly, they may be responding to market pressure to retain as many pupils as they can' (p.21).

- Is inconsistent in quality. 'Focus group comments suggest some schools, and not just 11-16 schools, work hard and effectively to offer support and their efforts are appreciated by pupils. In others, advice and guidance is given low priority and does not meet young people's expectations' (p.21).

2.3 Connexions. In most cases, Connexions had only begun to work in the area in the preceding six months. Year 11 pupils 'were generally very appreciative of the role of Connexions' (p.23). There was however concern about 'resource levels which would not allow every young person to have access to an advisor': 'though in theory every young person can come into a Connexions centre and see an advisor, many are unlikely to do so and need to have easier access through schools and other centres' (p.28). One of the recommendations in the report is that the LSC should 'work with schools and advice and guidance services to agree an entitlement statement of what a young person may expect in terms of support' (p.30).

3. The DfES report

3.1 Methodology. The report for DfES (Foskett, Dyke & Maringe, 2004) focuses more specifically on the influence of the school in the decision to participate in learning post-16. It is based on a series of focus groups and interviews in 24 schools within 8 LEAs. The schools were selected to include a mix of schools with and without a sixth form, with high and low proportion of parents of high socio-economic status, with rising and stable/declining post-16 participation rates, and in a mix of metropolitan, urban and shire-county LEAs. Focus groups were undertaken with pupils in years 10, 11 and 12; follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with some pupils; interviews were conducted with head teachers, heads of year and heads of careers; and some parents were contacted by post.

3.2 Connexions. Next to work experience (see para.4.5 below), the study found that 'Connexions services were the second most important intervening agency for the majority of pupils'. There were, however, school differences in this respect: Connexions services 'were only regarded as moderately important by pupils in schools with sixth forms, but were considered very important by pupils in schools with no sixth form'. Moreover, 'the relative importance of Connexions was highest in schools in low SES localities without sixth forms and with falling or stable participation rates' (p.30). This could be linked to the fact that low SES schools 'receive a higher level of unit resource from the Connexions service' (p.45).

3.3 School-based guidance. By contrast, careers advice and guidance offered by schools was rated as 'not important' in all types of school (p.31). 'Only a very small minority of pupils felt that school career guidance and support had helped them sufficiently in their choices and post 16 decisions'. Such career guidance and support 'was described variously, but mostly negatively, by pupils' (p.35).

3.4 School pressures. There was, though, considerable evidence in schools with sixth forms of school pressures on pupils' choices:

- A majority (74%) of parents with children in schools with sixth forms considered these schools as openly encouraging pupils to stay within the same schools; almost a quarter of parents (23%) considered that the schools did not always help those who wanted to go away to other schools (p.39).
- Two-thirds of schools with sixth forms were perceived by pupils as not providing impartial advice on post-16 options. The schools which were perceived as providing impartial advice were those which either had no sixth form provision themselves or had no significant local competition for their own sixth form. Many pupils perceived schools with their own sixth form as actively encouraging them into staying on at that sixth form

rather than pursuing other options. They 'frequently suggested that the school treated them as a potential customer as a source of income' (p.47).

- Head teachers in school without sixth forms tended to emphasise a 'student focused' approach of seeking to meet the individual needs of students. Those in schools with sixth forms, by contrast, were much more likely to adopt 'school centred' approaches, emphasising what was best for the school and its students and being more likely to direct the students (p.44). This was mirrored in the interviews with heads of year in schools with sixth forms, which emphasised the schools' interests (p.46).
- Such pressures were reflected in the schools' guidance programmes. Pupils in schools with a sixth form expressed more negative views about the careers education they have received, and viewed the advice and guidance provided as being limited largely to staying on into the sixth form (p.54). Knowledge of provision in the training sector and in particular about apprenticeships was weakest in schools with a sixth form (p.55).

3.5 School orientations. The report concluded that the influence of the school's culture, ethos and leadership could be analysed in terms of three broad orientations¹:

- School/image-oriented schools, focused strongly on academic achievement. In such schools, which typically have their own sixth form, 'there are minimal connections with mediating agencies or school inputs that provide information, advice or guidance on options other than staying on at the school' (p.58). Students recognise that their school's advice is not impartial (p.59). Connexions has a 'flying-stop presence': 'careers interviews are often not compulsory and are reserved for those needing them' (p.64).
- Student-centred schools, focused strongly on meeting the individual needs of pupils. In such schools, which typically do not have their own sixth form, 'there are many mediating agencies, and students are exposed to a rich network of information, guidance and advice from diverse sources... The students perceive the school as impartial and focused on what is best for them as an individual. Students in these schools were very positive about their school and the learning activities, advice, guidance and support that is provided' (p.60). In such schools, Connexions 'carries the greatest burden of the careers guidance/education' (p.62).
- Functional/administrative-focused schools. In these schools, which typically do not have their own sixth form and are more likely to be in low SES areas, careers support and advice tends to be 'more routine and low key', limited to a small number of pathways such as PSHE lessons or an interview conducted through the Connexions Service. There is little involvement of senior management, and the availability of career guidance is largely determined by Connexions priorities. Pupils in these schools were particularly vociferous in their recommendations for improving the school's support with their post-16 decision-making (pp.60-61). Many reported not having had Connexions interviews, or having them late, after they had already made up their mind about post-16 directions (p.66).

It was thus clear that the orientation in which the Connexions contribution was strongest, and most strongly connected with the guidance activities within the school – the student-centred orientation – was the one which led to the richest support for the individual's choices and the highest levels of pupil satisfaction with the help provided to them.

4. Commentary

4.1 Context. It is important to note that the studies reported here were carried out after a number of policy changes that had refocused the external career guidance services available to schools. These included:

¹ A fourth one, 'strategic/policy orientation' was defined as a secondary rather than primary orientation, in that it cross-cut the three other orientations.

- The 'focusing agenda' of 1997-99, which sought to reorient the Careers Service's resources to target them more strongly on young people who had dropped out of education, training and employment, or were at risk of doing so.
- The merging of the Careers Service into the Connexions Service, the design of which was focused primarily on the needs of 'at risk' young people².

These policy changes significantly reduced the external career guidance services available to pupils in some schools.³ Such erosion seems particularly likely to have taken place in more academically oriented schools with sixth forms (see also paras.2.3 and 3.5 above).

- 4.2 Prior to these policy changes, steps were being taken to ensure that all pupils should have access to external career guidance services, and that such services should be available in years 9 and 10 as well as in year 11⁴ (cf. the need for earlier interventions, noted in para.3.5⁵). The Education Act 1997 required that schools should provide access to careers services, to enable them to fulfil their contracted duties on behalf of the Secretary of State⁶: this was designed to assure their access to impartial advice. This Act remains on the Statute Book.
- 4.3 Research carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), when the Careers Service was still operating as an entity, found that pupils' career-related skills were best developed where there was a close integration of programme delivery between schools and the providers of professional careers support.⁷ These findings correspond closely to the findings of the Southampton research on the strengths of the partnership model, as reflected in 'student-centred' schools (see para.3.5 above).
- 4.4 The Southampton research thus provides evidence based on what is, from a career guidance perspective, an eroded model of partnership between schools and external services. Since Connexions with its policy priorities has now been fully rolled out, this will be even more the case in relation to the new research which DfES has recently commissioned from NFER on how young people make choices at 14 and 16.
- 4.5 Experiential learning. The Southampton reports make a number of other comments on good practice in relation to careers education and guidance provision. One relates to the need for an experiential careers curriculum:

'The tendency to place a greater premium on visits to post 16 providers and on concrete experience gained from interacting with outside visitors including the prominence given to work experience, highlight the need for an

² See Watts, A.G. (2001). Career guidance and social exclusion: a cautionary tale. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 29(2), 157-176.

³ For evidence on this, see Morris, M., Rickinson, M. & Davies, D. (2001). *The Delivery of Career Guidance in Schools*. RR 296. London: Department for Education and Skills. Also National Audit Office (2004). *Connexions Service: Advice and Guidance for All Young People*. London: Stationery Office. For a commentary on the latter, see Watts, A.G. (2004). Advice and guidance for all young people? *Newscheck*, September, 14-16.

⁴ For evidence of the positive benefits of this enhanced provision, see Morris, M. (1996). *Careers Education and Guidance Provision for 13 and 14 Year Olds*. QADU/RD 10. London: Department for Education and Employment. Morris, M., Lines, A. & Golden, S. (1999). *The Impact of Careers Education and Guidance on Young People in Years 9 and 10: a Follow Up Study*. RD 20. London: Department for Education and Employment. Morris, M., Golden, S. & Lines, A. (1999). *The Impact of Careers Education and Guidance on Transition at 16*. RD 21. London: Department for Education and Employment.

⁵ See also Foskett, N. (2004). IAG (information, advice and guidance) and young people's participation decisions 14-19. Working paper produced for the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training (www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk).

⁶ Education Act 1997, section 44.

⁷ Morris, M., Lines, A. & Golden, S. (1999). *The Impact of Careers Education and Guidance on Young People in Years 9 and 10: a Follow Up Study*. RD 20. London: Department for Education and Employment.

experiential careers curriculum rather than a text or information transmission based guidance and advice programme as currently obtains in many schools' (Foskett et al., 2004, pp.40-41).

This needs, however, to be complemented by impartial individual guidance which offers opportunities for reflection on such experiences in the context of personal decision-making. The evidence of the studies is that such guidance is valued, and needs to be made more widely available, from an earlier stage.

4.6 Locating Connexions. The second Southampton report appears to favour locating Connexions within schools:

'The Connexions model seems to be working where it has been properly established. However, its role has often been reported to be piecemeal, where staff make flying visits in and out of schools. Where Connexions has a permanent residential status in schools, pupils express satisfaction with its role' (ibid, p.75).

This conclusion, however, relates specifically to schools without sixth forms. In schools with sixth forms – especially school/image-oriented schools (see para.3.5 above) – there would seem to be a strong risk that basing Connexions within the school would lead to it being influenced by the culture of the school, at the expense of its impartiality. This risk would be even greater if the funding and management of the service was made the responsibility of the school – which would follow if the proposal to transfer the funding for career guidance to schools (para.1.1) was implemented.

4.7 Equality of opportunity. The second Southampton report concludes that 'the socio economic environment of schools influences schools to reproduce inequalities of inputs and experiences which directly influence pupils' ultimate destinations in life' (ibid, p.76). The two reports indicate that the influences of parents and teachers tend to reinforce such inequalities. Access to impartial guidance from outside the school is a potentially significant counterweight to these influences, which can extend the range of options that pupils are prepared to consider. Far from passing the funding for guidance provision to schools, attention should focus on how to strengthen the expert and impartial career guidance available from outside the school, and make it available to all pupils in all schools.

5. Conclusions

5.1 The Southampton research provides no evidence to support the assertions reported in para.1.1 above. On the contrary, the reports provide extensive evidence of:

- the limitations and weaknesses of the career advice and support received by school pupils from teachers and parents;
- the importance of continuing to supplement this advice and support with more impartial and more expert guidance from a service external to schools;
- the need to increase the extent and accessibility of this external service.

5.2 The Southampton research is an evaluation of an eroded partnership model (see paras.4.1-4.4 above). It shows that the benefits of the partnership model remain evident, particularly in schools where the partnership between schools and the external service is strongest. The key policy issue raised by the Southampton research is how to apply the partnership model effectively to all schools, drawing from earlier as well as current practice, and implementing the spirit as well as the letter of the Education Act 1997 (see para.4.2). There is no evidence whatever to support the abandonment of the partnership model.

5.3 The evidence from the Southampton research strongly reinforces the international findings from the recent OECD Career Guidance Policy Review⁸. This indicated the limitations of an exclusively school-based model of career guidance delivery, in three respects:

- (a) Its weak links with the labour market, and its tendency to view educational choices as ends in themselves without attention to their longer-term career implications.
- (b) Its lack of impartiality, and the tendency for schools to promote their own provision rather than college- or work-based routes.
- (c) Its lack of consistency: the policy levers on schools and colleges to deliver services in this area tend to be weak, and services to be patchy both in extent and in quality.

All three of these points are mirrored in the Southampton research. OECD accordingly strongly favoured a delivery model based on a partnership between schools and colleges on the one hand, and on the other an external service that is closer to the labour market and is able to provide impartial guidance at a consistent standard. This is precisely the model that the UK has had in the past. It is also the model that the rest of the UK is committed to retain.

5.4 The research evidence from both national and international studies is thus unequivocal in refuting current proposals for passing career guidance funding to schools and colleges. If the Government retains any commitment to evidence-based policy, it will reject this option.

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⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004). *Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap*. Paris: OECD.