

# The Partnership Model for Careers Education and Guidance in Schools and Colleges: Rise, Decline – and Fall?

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In this article, I outline the rise of the partnership between schools and an external careers service which has underpinned the delivery of careers education and guidance in schools in the UK. I then describe the recent decline of the model in England, under the Connexions Service. Finally, I outline the new arrangements for integrated youth support services, with particular attention to the Children's Plan, and the potential within these arrangements for the model to fall – or perhaps leave scope for future regeneration.

## Rise

Since the advent of careers education in schools in the early 1970s (Schools Council, 1972), the dominant model for the delivery of careers education and guidance in schools has been based on a partnership between these institutions and an external service. Schools have provided information libraries, run careers education programmes within the curriculum, provided some ongoing support through the tutor system, and made available information about individual students to the external service. The external service has provided professional career guidance interviews, helped in organising work experience and the like for students, and run staff development programmes for relevant school staff.

In the 1980s, the nature of the partnership came to take more varied forms (Watts, 1986). Morris *et al.* (1995; 1999) identified three ascending levels of collaboration and cross-fertilisation: parallel provision, pyramidal provision, and the guidance community. The guidance community was characterised by close involvement of careers advisers in curriculum planning, review and development; by strong systems for information flow and feedback; by clear identification and appropriate use of the respective skills of teachers and career advisers; and by the guidance interview being viewed as just one element of an ongoing strategy for careers education and guidance. There was evidence that in such schools, students developed greater opportunity awareness, decision-making skills and transition skills.

Government policy in the mid/late-1990s was accordingly based on strengthening the relationships between

institutions and the external service. In particular, there was encouragement to form service-level agreements based upon greater interaction, clearer frameworks for working together, and closer monitoring of progress.

The partnership model was formally enshrined in the Education Act 1997. This mandated schools to provide careers education in Years 9-11 (subsequently extended to Years 7-8 too); it also required schools to co-operate with careers advisers, and in particular to provide access for them to interview students on the institution's premises. Such access was particularly designed to ensure that all students had access to impartial guidance from a neutral base.

Internationally, in the OECD Career Guidance Policy Review (OECD, 2004), the partnership model emerged as potentially the strongest model for the delivery of careers education and guidance in schools. It was noted that some countries had school-based guidance systems: these tended to be characterised by lack of strong specialised services, by weak links with the labour market, and by a tendency to place the institutional needs of the school before the needs of the student. Others had externally-based systems: these tended to have a weak relationship with the curriculum. Partnership models potentially combined the benefits of both.

## Decline

In recent years, however, the partnership model in England has been significantly weakened. The subsuming of the Careers Service within the Connexions Service, addressed primarily to providing holistic services to young people at risk, resulted in a dilution of its attention to careers matters and in a substantial reduction in the extent of services to other young people. The number of young people receiving even a single careers interview from an external adviser was significantly reduced (Ofsted, 2005). Whereas in the mid-1990s almost all young people were seen at least once by a professional careers adviser, this is now far from the case. Data provided to me by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in January 2008, drawing from the National Client Caseload Information System, indicated that only 40% of young people in England now receive an individual (i.e. one-to-one) interview with a Connexions personal adviser (who might or might not be a professional careers adviser).

The same decline has not occurred elsewhere in the UK. In contrast to the policy of 'horizontal' integration of services for young people pursued in England, the policy in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has been based on 'vertical' integration, with a specialist careers service remaining in place but now on an all-age basis (Watts, 2006a). Information provided to me in January 2008 indicated the current penetration levels of the service for young people. In Scotland, all school-leavers are at present guaranteed a career guidance consultation with a Careers Scotland adviser. In Wales, Careers Wales is aiming for 90% of young people in 2007/08 to receive a careers interview during Key Stage 4. In Northern Ireland, a 'Getting Connected' assessment tool is being used to determine whether a young person is 'decision-ready', with responses being classified as red, amber or green: the expectation is that 50% of the cohort will fall into the first two categories and will automatically receive a one-to-one interview; those in the green category may also receive this service, but where this is not possible will be involved in group work as a minimum; the percentage receiving an interview in 2006/07 was just over 70%.

A single careers interview is not of course the sole measure of the partnership model in action. There has long been a professional debate about the pros and cons of 'blanket' interviewing. But there is a strong argument for all young people to be seen at least once by a professional careers adviser, not least as a quality-control measure. Young people can find it convenient to claim a career direction, which may be very weakly grounded. Moreover, if access to an independent adviser is one of the assurances of impartiality, as enshrined in the Education Act 1997, then such access would seem a minimum entitlement.

## Fall?

The decline in the delivery of the partnership model has been reflected in, and exacerbated by, recent policy statements. The 'end-to-end review' of careers education and guidance in schools and colleges (DfES, 2005) concluded that 'schools are best-placed to bring about improvement in CEG provision'. This conclusion did not emerge from any clear argument or considered rejection of alternatives; indeed, it was undermined by much evidence within the review itself. Alternatives such as strengthening the partnership model were not rejected: they were not even considered. It was clear that this stemmed from preconceived views within DfES itself (Watts, 2006b).

In the subsequent *Youth Matters* Green Paper (HM Government, 2005), and more particularly in the *Next Steps* document which followed it (DfES, 2006), the notion that impartiality of career guidance was assured by access to a careers adviser independent of the school was effectively abandoned. Career guidance was now subsumed within a generic concept of information, advice and guidance (IAG), with emphasis on this being provided by the learning provider 'as an integral part of the learning

experience'. There was a recognition that 'young people may still have issues that they would prefer to discuss with someone unconnected to the school or college', but this was weakly framed, implicitly focused on confidentiality rather than impartiality, and left to such young people to seek out. Impartiality was now to be secured in relation to the internal provision through new quality standards and 'progression measures' (DfES, 2006, 6.5-6.6). Both IAG and targeted support for young people at risk are now viewed as part of integrated youth support services, responsibility for the delivery of these services is to rest with local authorities, funding for them is no longer to be ring-fenced, and Connexions is to remain as a brand but not as a service.

This process has been extended further in the *Children's Plan* White Paper, published in late 2007 (DCSF, 2007a). The responsibility for delivery of the plan, and of IAG within it, is seen as resting with local authorities. While there is a recognition that residual responsibility lies with central government, the basis for surveillance is to be not inputs but outcomes. This is strongly reflected in DCSF's recent *Good Practice Guide to Commissioning Connexions*, which encourages local authorities to:

**'Adopt an outcome focused approach, specifying the outcomes required for young people. This approach generally means having a short specification with relatively few prescriptive requirements, and inviting bidders to respond with their proposals about how the service will be delivered to achieve those outcomes (i.e. the service outputs). This will allow for innovation and creativity from bidders in planning their pattern of services.'**

Such an outcomes-focused approach makes it likely that very different models will develop in different areas. It accordingly potentially risks further erosion of the partnership model, which may remain in place in some areas but not in others. In effect, there is nothing to impede a local authority which wishes to move towards a school-based model of delivery.

This risk is exacerbated by confirmation of the shift in the basis for assuring the impartiality of career guidance provision. No direct reference is made to such impartiality being assured by access to an external careers adviser based outside the institution. Instead, it is now seen as being assured in three ways.

The first is through 14-19 partnerships, which will be expected to take responsibility for inter-institutional agreements for the impartiality of IAG provision. These partnerships are viewed as 'one of the most significant reshapings of the education systems of recent years' (7.11). They are given a key role in relation to IAG provision:

**'The partnership will provide the forum in which schools, colleges and other providers can agree how between them, they will ensure that all learners within their institutions... receive impartial advice and guidance, including the opportunity to understand the courses and other provision which is available at other institutions in their area... The 14-19 partnership is convened by the local authority and will include the local authority's provider of Connexions services. Schools and colleges should agree through the partnership how the independent service they provide will be used to supplement what is available within the school – and can be used to inform and support the staff delivering guidance on careers and future learning opportunities' (5.17).**

This leaves open the nature of the 'independent service'. In principle, it could be confined to a quality-assurance and support-services role rather than a service-delivery role – as envisaged by three Connexions Chief Executives in a recent NICEC survey (Watts & McGowan, 2007, 23-24).

The Gateway process for the approval of these partnerships, supported by the new quality standards (DCSF, 2007b), is seen as playing an important role in assuring the quality and impartiality of the IAG offered within the 14-19 partnerships and in addressing the deficiencies of current provision:

**'The 14-19 consortia that will be delivering Diplomas in 2008 have had to pass through a rigorous process in order to ensure they will deliver high quality, comprehensive and impartial information, advice and guidance. In future, there will be an annual report back from the Diploma Gateway process summarising the progress made in establishing effective provision' (5.18).**

It is important in this respect to note that the 14-19 partnerships still have patchy coverage across the country, that they are uneven in quality, that their future is highly dependent on the success of the new Diplomas (which is by no means assured), and that there remain significant tensions between the emphasis on partnership and the persistent policy adherence to league tables based on institutional performance.

Second, impartiality is seen as being secured by the content of careers education programmes:

**'To drive up the quality of careers education in schools, the Education and Skills Bill will require schools to provide impartial information and advice on learning and careers options. We will help schools by developing guidance for the new personal, social, health and economic curriculum' (5.20).**

Finally, impartiality is seen as being secured by information provision (also mentioned in the Bill), and particularly by area prospectuses:

**'Another important source of information for young people about learning opportunities is 14-19 area prospectuses. These allow young people, supported by their parents or a trusted adult, to make informed choices about where and how they would like to undertake their learning' (5.21).**

In terms of access to individual guidance, a central position is given to the role of tutors. A key feature of the Children's Plan is 'personal support for every pupil':

**'The Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group recommended that all secondary school pupils should have at least one person in school who knows them in the round – a personal tutor – both about their academic progress across all subjects, and their personal development – in the same way that a primary school teacher would for children in his or her class.**

**'To support our Children's Plan vision, we want every secondary school pupil to have access to a single member of staff to play this role. The personal tutor will be familiar with each pupil's progress across all of their subject areas, agree learning targets across the curriculum, help children make subject choices, support them through transitions between stages of learning, and identify children's barriers to success beyond the classroom. The personal tutor will also have a key role in communicating with parents to report on their child's progress and discuss the support they need at home and at school' (3.74-3.75).**

The tutor is also viewed explicitly as having a role in relation to career development:

**'They will work with young people to identify their long-term aspirations and guide them on the best choice of subjects at age 14 and 16. As we roll out personal tutors, we will test how they can help young people to find out more about activities available through extended schools and to look to future education, training and careers choices' (5.19).**

This emphasis on the role of tutors is somewhat ironic. When Connexions was set up, I pointed out that, for students in schools and colleges, the job description attached by the Social Exclusion Unit's *Bridging the Gap* report to the role of the Personal Tutor – 'to provide a single point of contact for each young person and ensure that someone has an overview of each person's ambitions and needs' (SEU, 1999, 81) – was met more credibly by tutors than by Personal Advisers with caseloads of several

hundred. But because the design of Connexions was based on a report addressing the needs of young people who had dropped out of school or college, virtually no attention was paid to pastoral-care structures within such institutions. Had it been, the model of delivery could have been based on tutors playing broadly similar roles to Personal Advisers for young people who had dropped out, with both groups referring individual young people to professional Careers Advisers where such specialist help was needed. Instead, however, the role of Careers Adviser was subsumed within the role of Personal Adviser, with resulting confusion and loss of professional identity (Watts, 2001).

It is significant to note in this respect that the Children's Plan at no point refers to professional Careers Advisers. Indeed, it does not refer to Personal Advisers either. The relevant statement is very general in nature:

**'The 21st century school can only fulfil its potential if it can rely on other, often specialist, services for children being there when needed – including health (for example mental health and speech and language therapy), early years and childcare, behaviour, youth, and crime prevention services' (Box 7.1).**

Certainly the report recognises the role of specialists:

**'These services need to be delivered by skilled and motivated staff, who achieve excellence in their specialism and work to a shared ambition for the success of every child' (7.5).**

**'... we need to ensure that the children's workforce unites around a common purpose, language and identity, while keeping the strong and distinctive professional ethos of different practitioners in the workforce' (7.37).**

It also, however, states that for the parents, children and young people using services, 'professional boundaries can appear arbitrary and frustrating' (7.1). At times, therefore, it talks about *integration* of services. But at other times, it talks about *co-location* – 'locating services under one roof in the places people visit frequently' – and about inter-professional *collaboration* based on teamwork – 'building capacity to work across professional boundaries' (7.1): both of which acknowledge the continuation of separate specialisms.

This raises, though, the issue of *which* specialisms are to be recognised. The recent NICEC survey of Connexions services (Watts & McGowan, 2007) suggested that, in a careers/Connexions context, professional specialism could in principle be recognised at one or more of at least four ascending levels of specificity:

Generic Youth Support Worker (presumably the goal of a fully integrated youth support service).

Connexions Personal Adviser (PA) (the core professional role within Connexions).

Careers Adviser (the core professional role within the former Careers Service, and sometimes maintained within Connexions under an alias like 'Careers PA' or 'Universal PA').

Careers Adviser with particular expertise in, for example, higher education entry (as 'older leaver specialist' – a common specialist role within the former Careers Service), or in work with young people with special educational needs (SEN) or learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD).

The simple reference to 'youth' in the statement from the White Paper quoted above could be read as leaning towards the first of these options. Alternatively, however, it could be read as leaving the door open to any of the others. In principle, it would seem open to each local authority to adopt its own position on these matters.

## Conclusion

The partnership model is not yet dead. But it has been seriously eroded, and is now exposed to further erosion and possible termination at local-authority level. Much now depends on local advocacy.

The risk is that England is moving, step by step, towards a school-based career guidance system, without admitting that it is doing so. If this is to be the model for the future, then careful thought is needed to ensure how to make it work, and how to ensure access to professional career guidance within it.

But it is the weaker model. At present it is still possible to revive the partnership model and get it to work, on a reconstructed basis. If the present government will not do this, the hope must be that a critical mass of local authorities will keep sufficient partnership infrastructure in place to leave this as an option for a future incoming government.

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