

Foundations for Lifelong Learning and Guidance

Ken Roberts

Youth: still the priority group

The case for lifelong learning (and guidance) is convincing but easily over-hyped. Our priority must still be to get the foundations right. There has been a modest decline in the mean length of time that men spend in each of their jobs, partly compensated by an increase among women (Denny, 1999). There was never a time when most people held jobs for life. In the 1970s, Paul Willis's lads mocked careers advisers who were urging them to think carefully about their career choices when the time came for them to leave school. The lads knew full well that if they did not fancy their first jobs they would simply move on. On the other hand, there are still plenty of long-term careers in education, medicine, the law, car repairs, house building and so on.

There has certainly been a cultural shift. This will be partly a response to the sheer pace of de-industrialisation since the 1970s and the simultaneous advent of ICT. The historical parallels are the agricultural revolution that swept labour from the land 200 years ago, and the advent of electricity a century later. Latterly globalisation has forced firms, even multi-nationals, and national governments, to acknowledge that they can be helpless in the face of economic tides. Even so, employees worry not so much about the likelihood that they will lose their own jobs as the consequences should this occur (Burchell *et al.*, 1999). Inequalities have widened. Pressure on employees has increased. So have the costs of failure.

However, it is young people's, not older workers', career situations that have changed most dramatically. Transitions from education into employment have been extended. Biographies have been individualised. Outcomes from all routes through education and training have become less predictable. Hence the growth in demand for guidance - recurrent guidance. Families and teachers, as ever, are usually the first ports of call. Families and friends remain the strongest influences, but they do not necessarily have answers to young people's queries. Older workers who change their jobs may

have employers, trade unions, professional associations and informal networks through which to obtain advice. Moreover, they have the experience to understand the labour market and how to go about unearthing relevant job information. It is young people who are most likely to seek professional assistance. And their short-term choices still have long-term consequences. Labour market flexibility has not changed this. The opportunities for further education and training that individuals are likely to be offered continue to depend on the use that they made of their earlier opportunities. Job mobility is usually within occupational class boundaries. So the expansion of adult education and training does not squash demand for childhood and youth training and education. These foundations are as influential as ever. Youth remains the priority group for education and for career guidance.

Joined-up guidance

There is a persuasive case for seamless guidance which Connexions, if properly implemented in England, should deliver. I will leave aside exactly how and why Connexions was imagined then implemented in government apparatuses. The case for joined-up guidance is this: it is not just the transition from education to

employment, but the entire transition to adulthood, that has lengthened and become more complicated than in the past. So more young people have problems on which they seek guidance - about housing, health, legal and lifestyle matters.

When asked, young people 'vote' for one-stop guidance. They would, wouldn't they? What they have in mind is not just a common nameplate, but a single place, maybe just one person, who will do everything. A hard fact is that such arrangements are unlikely to deliver the quality service that young people expect. It is more realistic to think in terms of access to all kinds of advice, then actual assistance, being through, rather than directly from, a generic personal adviser. That said, Connexions can be a step forward provided three conditions are met.

First, career guidance must be the professionals' generic skill. Why? This is the type of advice that all young people need recurrently, and all the other problems that young people present usually have career implications. Second, the service should be flexible as regards age limits. This is simply because there is now so much variety in the ages at which youth transitions are made. Indeed, while youth should be the priority group, and while there may well be priority groups among young people, the service, like higher education, could be available to all ages. Third, the service should be for all young people, and seen to be so. Those at risk of becoming status zero - dropping-out of education, training and employment - can be the priority group. They always were the recipients of most attention from career advisers until someone else decided that the priority was to have everyone action-planned. But we know that the best way to help the vulnerable

is to keep them in the mainstream - to treat offenders in the community rather than institutions, and to keep slow learners in ordinary schools. Connexions will be stigmatised rapidly if it operates as a specialist referral point for especially difficult cases. The service will be best-placed to assist the disadvantaged if it is well-used by advantaged young people. In any case, all categories of young people need, and seek, career guidance.

Building on strengths

Things could be worse than now. Britain does not have the world's worst youth transition regime. There are weaknesses, structural weaknesses, that guidance cannot cure. There is still high unemployment in some regions. Around a fifth of young people still leave school deficient in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. This is serious handicap in the labour market, and in life in general. Around a quarter of all jobs require little in the way of skill, training or formal qualifications, though they may demand tacit social skills. There is still plenty of donkey work in this high-tech age. Young people will take such jobs on a part-time basis while continuing to study. They may also do the jobs as temporary stop-gaps. But they are unwilling to spend lifetimes in them. Some young people believe, not without cause, that they are able to retain more security and respect from a combination of welfare and the second economies. Another structural problem is that recent changes in the financial support system for students have transformed our universities into purveyors of de facto part-time higher education. A further problem is that the NVQs that were introduced in the 1980s are not working satisfactorily. They have joined the long stream of failed initiatives: YOP in the 1970s, YTS in the 1980s, and TECs and Youth Credits in the 1990s. At no time during the last 30 years has there been a shortage of policy initiatives aimed at young people. This stream is still flowing strongly. We need fewer but better initiatives, aimed at curing weakness and building on our strengths.

Academic education is one strength. The qualifications have clout in the labour market at home and are respected internationally. We have widened access to the academic mainstream, and GNVQs are being assimilated into it. Excellent! But it is not in the best interests of every young person to attempt university. We need, and we have, a parallel employment-based route into the workforce. Britain's employers are rather good at training, albeit not for the general good but strictly for their own purposes. The leading firms have training centres that are better-staffed and better-equipped than further education colleges, even universities. These are the foundations for an effective twenty-first century youth transition regime.

Ours is superior to the opportunities available in North America where ambitious young people have no real alternative but to graduate high school then college, however meaningless they find the curricula. The British system is likely to prove superior to Germany's in twenty-first century conditions. Germany's corporatist system is less flexible than Britain's. It over-trains, which is costly for young people, their families and businesses (Roberts & Foti, 2000).

A third strength is Britain's vocational guidance. This enables the other parts of the system to operate effectively. Where is the evidence? Transitions are completed faster, at less expense, than in any other economically advanced country (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2000). Serious unemployment is concentrated among the least qualified, and even in the difficult labour market conditions of the 1980s it was not a major problem for other groups of young people. Things are different in other countries.

Connexions is not required to remedy weaknesses in Britain's career education and advice, but to extend the same quality of support to other parts of young people's lives. These are the foundations from which lifelong learning and guidance can follow.

References

- Burchell, B.L., Day, D., Hudson, M., Lapido, D., Mankelow, R., Nolan, J.P., Reed, H., Wichert, I.C. & Wilkinson, F. (1999). *Job Insecurity and Work Intensification*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Denny, C. (1999). 'You're only as insecure as you feel'. *Guardian*, 2 November, 27.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2000). *From Initial Education to Working Life: Making Transitions Work*. Paris: OECD.
- Roberts, K. & Foti, K. (2000). 'Europe's choice: regulation or deregulation of youth labour markets? Old alternatives and new test cases'. In Bynner, J. & Silbereisen, R. (Eds.) *Adversity and Challenge in Life in the New Germany and in England*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to Labour*, Farnborough: Saxon House.

For correspondence

Professor Ken Roberts,
Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work Studies,
The University of Liverpool, Eleanor Rathbone Building,
Bedford Street South, Liverpool L69 3BX.
Tel: 0151 794 2971. Fax: 0151 794 3001