

Further education learners' prior experience of career education and guidance: A case study of Chesterfield College

Amy Woolley and Tristram Hooley

This article explores further education (FE) students' prior experiences of careers education. The research draws on and extends the limited literature that exists around career support in further education. A mixed methods case study was used to explore students' experience of careers work prior to attending Chesterfield College and to examine the implications of this for the college's provision of career support. Findings indicate that the majority of students had limited contact with careers workers prior to their arrival at the college and, in instances when they had contact, often had a negative preconception of this contact. These findings are discussed with reference to the college's careers education provision and the wider implications for the sector.



Introduction

Further education (FE) is a varied and complex aspect of the English education system (Hillier, 2015). The sector includes private, voluntary and public institutions and covers both vocational and academic subjects from a basic level to postgraduate study. FE is a key progression route for school students. Students typically enter FE at either 16 or 18 although FE colleges also serve as the backbone of England's lifelong learning system. Consequently FE competes both with school sixth forms and with universities for students.

Schools have a vested interest in retaining students at 16 for reasons of funding. It is also frequently alleged that schools give greater prominence to higher

education (university) progression routes than to FE. Because of this the Association of Colleges (Fresh Minds, 2014) has stressed both the value of career guidance and the importance of this guidance being well appraised of the range of opportunities that exist within the FE sector. This article will explore these issues through a case study of Chesterfield College.

Recent policy in England

Policy support and funding for career education and guidance in schools has always been fragile and uncertain (Peck, 2004). However, since the election of the coalition government in 2010 there has been a considerable erosion of provision with the loss of Connexions as a national service (Hooley and Watts, 2011) and the transfer of the responsibility for career guidance to schools. This has resulted in the fragmentation of young people's opportunity to access career guidance with some schools maintaining or even improving services while others have allowed provision to decline (Langley, Hooley and Bertuchi, 2014; Hooley, Matheson and Watts, 2014). One of the key questions that the research presented in this paper will address is how far this shifting policy environment has impacted on the experience of young people who are progressing to further education.

Policy has also shifted for the provision of careers work in FE. In June 2013 new guidelines for securing independent careers advice for FE colleges were announced. This was subsequently updated in 2015 (DBIS and DFE, 2015) with a new version which built on the earlier version. The guidelines sought to ensure that students from Year 8 (ages 12-13) to the age of 18

receive careers advice. These guidelines are similar to those set out for schools albeit with some important differences. The main difference is that the guidelines for colleges, unlike those for schools, are only advisory. Furthermore, while schools have to secure access to independent careers advice (with 'independent' defined explicitly as 'external to the school'), colleges do not have to do this unless there are no existing advisers who can deliver the provision. This recognises the fact that many FE institutions have student support services which often hold the Matrix Standard (Watts, 2013) and that as a consequence have the internal capability to deliver high quality careers work.

Careers work in the case study college

Chesterfield College is a large FE college in Derbyshire. The college has around 3000 full time 16-18 students and 250 full time HE students. The college also has 5000 apprentices based across the county. Careers work is well established in the college and takes forms which are recognisable from other parts of the sector.

There has been limited research on careers work in FE (e.g. Hawthorn, 1996; Sadler and Atkinson, 1998; Watts, 2001; Mulvey, 2010). However, much of this work is increasingly out of date in a sector that has changed radically as a result of the policy of the previous government (Lupton, Unwin and Thomson, 2015). There is a desperate need to renew research interest in careers work in further education as it has received scant attention over recent years in comparison to schools. The consideration of this case study of careers work within Chesterfield College will hopefully provide a useful stimulus for wider research on the sector.

Mulvey (2010) characterises career education and guidance in FE as taking three main forms: (1) pre-entry guidance; (2) guidance delivered during the period of study; and (3) guidance delivered at the point of exit from the learning programme. This summary is echoed by Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) (2010) which states that careers provision in FE colleges:

Helps learners to reach their potential by ensuring placement on correct programmes, addressing barriers, supporting them on programmes to reach their learning goals and increase their employability, and facilitating next steps and progression. It also improves their ability to manage their career and pathway throughout life.

This model of provision is in evidence in the case study college with the principal writing that quality careers advice should be provided 'before and during their time at college' and that students should be helped to 'find the right route for success' (Culforth, 2015). The case study college also followed Watts' (2001) observation that career education in FE tends to be built into either a scheme of work or tutorial programme.

Careers provision in Chesterfield College has been judged to be of a high quality. The college's 2013 Ofsted report stated that throughout the college, 'particularly good information, advice and guidance ensure learners are on the appropriate programmes' (Ofsted, 2013a).

When the Ofsted inspection took place the college was about to roll out a new admissions process which included the provision of a careers interview for all full time courses and some part time course. Subsequently this pre-entry guidance has been deepened with more use being made of local labour market information. This is done via an online tool called careers coach that links careers with labour market information, to enable applicants to link the course with future careers. The increased prominence for pre-entry guidance is in response to the change in careers provision in schools. The focus on pre-entry guidance in FE was also supported by LSIS (Bowes, Bysshe, Neat and Howe, 2012) which found that good quality and timely pre-entry careers advice supported students to 'address diverse and complex needs and helps overcome barriers to accessing FE'.

Chesterfield College evidenced well developed and popular on-programme careers support for students. The guidance team offer one-to-one careers interviews to students, deliver group career learning sessions within the curriculum, and support curriculum

staff to use careers data gathered in the admission process and support students to develop their career researching skills and employability.

Finally, the case study college also provides a range of exit career support. When students are coming to the end of their course tutors support students with their options. If students are unsure, want to go into higher education or get a job or an apprenticeship then they are encouraged to access additional support from the college's guidance team. This kind of proactive approach has been developed in part because although many FE students intend to access career support many fail to actually do so (observed by Bowes et al, 2012). Consequently the college's proactive approach seeks to ensure that support is provided and employability is maximised.

The need for career support in relation to progression to further education

Many young people's career building is strongly influenced by their parents (Witherspoon, 1995; Foskett, Dyke and Maringe, 2004). However, by the age of sixteen, students are increasingly making their own decisions albeit often within the boundaries that are set explicitly or implicitly by parents. Around this point they are presented with a wide array of choices at both 16 and 18 including the possibility of studying in FE.

Many students indicate that they would like more help with career decision-making (Bowes et al 2005). Rather than drawing on written sources of information, students typically value the involvement of people who are involved in employment or have been in similar positions to themselves (Munro and Elsom, 2000; Blenkinsop, McCrone, Wade and Morris, 2006). Both Foskett et al (2004) and White, Rolfe and Killeen (1996) suggest that 'official' advice, often from teachers or other school staff is more influential than that of family and friends. Given this, the changes in the availability of career support in English schools offers a cause for concern.

There is considerable evidence that career education and guidance can support effective transition from school to further learning (Hooley et al, 2014). As well as supporting positive transitions career education can also support people to make more purposeful and sustainable choices. Kidd and Wardman (1999) found that students who had received a careers education at school were less likely to switch courses in post-16 education.

In addition there is evidence that there is a considerable student demand for career education and guidance. Demand can be difficult to measure in relation to careers guidance (Sullivan, 1999) as students may be aware of a need for help, but unaware that career guidance could potentially help them. However, recent research from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and Life Skills (2013) surveyed over 2000 14-25 year olds: 93% felt they were not provided with the information they needed to make informed choices on their future career; moreover, they were particularly badly advised about further education and other vocational routes. Around two-thirds of those surveyed had received guidance on more traditional routes, A-Level choices (62%) and university (65%); only a quarter (26%) had information on starting an apprenticeship; even fewer (17%) had guidance on which vocational qualifications might be available. Many young people felt that they wanted more information with respondents highlighting that they would like more information: on subject choices for GCSEs and A Levels (10%); on the educational pathways available (20%); from employers (16%); on work experience and internships; and on the value and relevance of qualifications (13%). Some of these findings were echoed by Ofsted (2013b) which found that many students wanted more career education and guidance and work experience.

The Association of Colleges (2014) examined some of these issues from the perspective of further education. In a survey of 341 sixth form schools and colleges the AoC found that less than half of these organisations identified that schools in their areas are providing students with independent careers advice about post 16 choices. Most respondents (74%) felt that careers advice in schools had got worse. The decline of career support in schools raises important strategic and moral questions for the FE sector about how to

ensure that school students are aware of FE, appraised of its value, and clear about how to transition from school to this sector.

Findings from the case study

This research project examined the experience of career education and guidance reported by college students who had left school the previous year. It also explored the careers support they would like whilst studying at the case study college. The research used a mixed methods approach which included a semi-structured focus group of 20 students, a survey of college students and the experiences of one of the authors of working within the college.

The survey sought to ascertain what careers advice and support students had received prior to applying to college and what students wanted from the careers service in order to develop it further. It gathered 452 responses. 40% of respondents were aged 16 with a further 56% being between the ages of 17-20. 55% were female and 45% were male.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (82%) reported that they had not seen a careers adviser prior to coming to college. A majority (72%) stated that they had never seen a careers adviser. Respondents gave a range of reasons for not accessing career support including: 'didn't get much info on who to talk to'; 'spoke about [careers] to tutors'; and 'because I already knew what I wanted to do'. Some respondents stated that they were not given the option to see a careers adviser, that they did not get enough information about who to speak to, that they did not think they had access to a careers adviser at school or that 'no one at school was bothered'. To compensate for this lack of career support at school, many respondents reported seeking advice at college open days or from advisers at the college. Despite this mixed set of experiences the majority of respondents (59%) stated that they would be interested in accessing career support at college.

Students were asked what careers support they had accessed. The most common answers are given in table 1.

Table 1:
Before you came to college, what careers help did you have? (Most common answers)

None	37%
Connexions	20%
Tutors	2%
Parents	2%

When students were asked in the questionnaire how they would rate the career support they had at school less than half rated it as good or excellent.

The majority of those that had received no careers advice prior to attending college stated that they would like to see a careers adviser in the future. One respondent stated that 'I have never seen a careers adviser so I would like to see one to see what information they give out' another respondent felt that it would be helpful to see someone about their career rather than having to make all of their choices on their own. A minority of respondents (19%) had already taken up this kind of support since arriving at the college. Of the rest 31% stated that they wanted 'support with job search', with a small minority of respondents also asking for support with UCAS or CV writing.

The survey therefore suggested that many college students had limited experience of accessing career support prior to entry in the college. It also suggested that many were keen to access more support now they were enrolled in the college. The focus group discussions then explored these findings in more depth.

The first discussion centred around previous careers education experience. Several of the students commented on the quality of external careers providers which the school had. One student claimed, 'We had to "do everything ourselves" in terms of researching their own careers options. One found that careers advisers in school had 'placed them on the wrong course' so opted to ask family members or teachers for advice. Several students suggested that more one-to-one support would have been more useful. Careers lessons in school were criticised as

they were not a formal part of the curriculum as one respondent explained 'At our school it was an additional lesson. It wasn't a part of the curriculum. You chose whether you did it or not.'

The second discussion concerned the students' ideas about what careers support they would like to see in the college. Some students stressed the importance of one-on-one support and a 'bigger presence' from the careers team. Many also wanted their course tutors to give them clear advice on careers linked to their course.

Conclusions

Recent policy has resulted in a decline in the quality and quantity of career support that is available in the school system. Given this, it is likely to be important for FE colleges to monitor new students' experience with careers education and guidance to better understand how the changes in schools are impacting on students' educational and career decision making as well as on their understanding of career education and guidance.

The case study demonstrates that respondents have had a mixed experience of careers guidance and support at school. In developing provision within FE it is important that colleges recognise this mixed experience and put in place measures to support applicants. This may include the delivery of key services such as pre course career support, as well as the college seeking to inform students' understanding of the value of career support and what to expect from this.

This case study does not claim to be representative of wider experience in the FE sector. However the findings chime with wider research and suggest that the cuts to school based career support may require a creative response from FE colleges. Mulvey's description of FE careers provision is useful in creating a structure against which this activity can be organised.

In the case study institution the following strategies have been adopted to try and address this.

Pre-entry provision. Allowing applicants to access one-to-one advice and group

sessions prior to enrolment to ensure that they are on the correct path for their career and that they are aware of their progression options. The college has also been evaluating the new admissions process to explore its impact on students and ascertain how it influences students' use of career support services within the college. The College has also begun to deliver an impartial career service with a local school and is looking to expand this into other schools as part of becoming a careers hub (as described by AoC and LSIS, 2012) for the area.

On-programme provision. Ensuring that students have access to high quality guidance whilst on-programme particularly where they need advice on how any choices, such as dropping out or switching programme, might impact on their careers.

Exit provision. Providing high quality careers programmes informed by labour market information. This includes both provision delivered through the central guidance team and that provided by tutors within subject areas.

It is evident from the literature and this current study that colleges have an important role with respect to offering careers support to potential and existing students. This article has explored how this role is discharged by one college, but it is evident that more needs to be done with regard to careers research in FE to ensure that students in FE are not forgotten and practice within the sector continues to develop.

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For correspondence

Amy Woolley,
Guidance and Admissions Manager,
Student Services, Chesterfield College

woolleya@chesterfield.ac.uk

Tristram Hooley,
Professor of Career Education,
International Centre for Guidance Studies, University
of Derby

t.hooley@derby.ac.uk