

Access and partnership: How schools in England responded to changes in career guidance services in the first two decades of the 21st century

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Over the past 20 years career guidance services for young people in England have undergone two major changes: from privatised careers companies to Connexions, followed by the dismantling of the national service. This article examines how schools responded to these changes. It argues that, while schools have been given more responsibility for making sure pupils have access to career guidance, the range of provision has become wider, in terms of type of provider, level of support and quality. The article concludes with an analysis of the impact on the partnership between schools and providers of career guidance services, and poses questions about the lack of support for young people not in school.



Before Connexions: a national careers service delivered locally and available to all young people

The 1973 Employment and Training Act established, for the first time in England and Wales, a truly national career guidance service, delivered through local education authorities (LEAs) and available to all young people. It is important to remember that the service was set up as a service for young people, not a service to educational institutions. In practice almost all the LEAs chose to operate through schools and colleges, basing their staff in offices in town centres and other community settings but conducting careers interviews with young people on school and college premises.

Most services adopted the approach of careers officers visiting schools for one or two days each week while also remaining available to young people in their careers offices, including out of school hours and in the holidays. The professional staff in the service included not only mainstream careers officers but also specialist roles such as older leaver careers officers, special needs careers officers and unemployment specialist careers officers.

This era is often characterised as the time when the partnership approach to careers education and guidance was established in England, with schools and colleges setting up careers libraries and developing programmes of careers education and the careers service being principally responsible for providing individual career guidance. A study by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), commissioned by the Department of Employment in 1995, identified three levels of partnership working between the Careers Service and schools. In the first, *parallel* model there was little joint planning between the school and the Careers Service: the two elements of the careers education and guidance programme ran alongside each other with limited interaction. In the second, *pyramidal* model the guidance interview was seen as the culmination of the process and the role of the school was to prepare pupils for this 'event'. In turn the Careers Service would provide some support to schools with planning and delivering the careers education programme. In the third level of partnership, referred to as the *guidance community* model, the interview was viewed as an integral part of the overall provision and the outcomes were used to inform the future development of the careers education programme (Morris et al., 1995).

These approaches and working practices remained fundamentally the same throughout the twenty or so years of the LEA-based service and continued when the Careers Service was privatised in the 1990s. The 66 private careers companies that delivered the career guidance service for young people were still funded by the Department of Employment and their duties were set nationally by the Secretary of State. At the local level the working arrangements between the schools and the Careers Service were formalised in, firstly, service level agreements (SLAs) and, later, partnership agreements. The Careers Service Unit in the Employment Department published detailed annual planning guidance, which set out the requirements and standards for the service, and the local services were inspected by the Unit's Careers Service Inspectorate.

In summary the situation that existed in England at the end of the 20th century was that young people had access to a national career guidance service, delivered primarily through their school but which they could also access through local careers offices. The service was specified and funded by national government and available to all young people. Schools and colleges worked in partnership to ensure that young people could gain access to the support they needed, at the time they needed it. Before going on to look at what happened in response to replacing the Careers Service with Connexions, and subsequently closing the service, it is necessary to explore further the principles and practice of universal access.

Throughout the 1970s and for most of the 1980s schools could be confident that the local careers service was sufficiently well resourced to meet the guidance needs of their pupils. All fifth year pupils [now Year 11] could have an interview as could all sixth form students who requested one, and there was usually enough capacity for the careers officers to also see some younger aged pupils. This was the era of what some have called 'blanket interviews', when careers officers simply worked through the lists of pupils, sometimes by form or alphabetically. However practice soon evolved to determining the interview schedule by guidance need, while still retaining access for all. Towards the end of the 1980s this more targeted approach to interviewing became more common. A reduction in LEA budgets for the careers service may have been a factor, but adopting a more

differentiated approach was seen mainly as better professional practice, recognising that some young people needed more help than others.

This approach continued into the 1990s and privatisation, but this decade eventually saw the return of blanket interviewing, now termed entitlement interviews. It came about because of the need of central government to find a straightforward means of determining the budgets for the private careers companies and monitoring their contracts to deliver the service. The Treasury settled on the simple approach of counting interviews: each company was set the target of interviewing every Year 11 pupil in their area and the contract was monitored by scrutinising the number of action plans produced as a result of the interviews. Thus, by the mid-1990s, schools had become accustomed to all their Year 11 pupils being entitled to a careers interview, but the schedule of interviews was determined by priorities of need.

This situation changed at the end of the decade, after the 1997 General Election saw the Conservative government replaced by New Labour. The new administration made tackling social exclusion a policy priority and, having inherited a privatised careers service whose duties it could direct, the government required the service to refocus its work on the disadvantaged. An updated version of the annual planning guidance required the Careers Service to focus its interviews on those young people with greatest need and, at the same time, to help schools build their capacity to support pupils (DfEE, 1998). While schools understood the principle behind this move they became concerned that decisions about which pupils would fall into the priority groups were made on the basis of factors set for the Careers Service by the Department of Employment, and that a consequence of the change would be that some pupils who needed guidance might not be able to gain access to a careers interview. This presaged not only the change from the Careers Service to Connexions, but also the schools' further concerns about access to career guidance for all young people.

It should also be noted that schools did not all respond to what became known as 'the focusing agenda' in the same way. Research commissioned by

the DfEE from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in 2000-01 found that, while many schools with good provision of careers education and guidance improved their support further as the Careers Service focused on a small number of pupils, several that had weaker provision reduced their support as the Careers Service lowered its level of interviews (Morris et al., 2001). As reported later, this tendency for a change in the external provision to trigger different responses within schools continues to the present day.

Connexions: a universal career guidance service and a targeted youth support service

At the turn of the century the Careers Service for young people in England was replaced by the Connexions service. The intention of the New Labour government was to establish a youth support service that could provide information, advice and guidance (IAG) on the full range of issues faced by young people and thereby make a major contribution to tackling the problems of social exclusion. The former Careers Service was required to work closely with other services such as the youth and community service, social services and various health agencies, to provide joined up support for young people, particularly those identified as disadvantaged, disengaged and disaffected. The former careers advisers became personal advisers and worked alongside personal advisers from other partner organisations to provide the new service.

The duty on central government to provide career guidance support for young people, set out in the 1973 Employment and Training Act, remained in place and the Secretary of State for Education and Skills moved responsibility from the former privatised careers companies to the 47 Connexions partnerships covering England. The role of Connexions was therefore twofold: to provide both a targeted youth support service and the universal careers guidance service (Connexions Service National Unit, 2001). The former Careers Service had always recognised that some young people needed more support than others, and that there were a significant minority who

faced various personal, social and economic issues that required attention before they were ready to think about their futures in learning and work. Consequently, the service had already worked with other agencies to provide support to young people. Moving into Connexions the concern was not providing the wider support service but whether it could continue to provide the universal career guidance service alongside the more targeted support.

This concern was shared by the schools. Many schools, particularly those with higher proportions of pupils in the priority groups for the targeted support, welcomed the new service but questions remained about whether Connexions would be able to provide the level of career guidance support they had previously received. The original intention was that staffing levels of personal advisers in the new service would be sufficient to provide both arms of the service but once the partnerships were established it became clear that the budgets would not be adequate. A further cause for concern was the headline target that the service was given and how this determined the priorities for its work. The main target that the Connexions partnerships were held accountable for was reducing the number of young people who were NEET (not engaged in education, employment or training). Understandably this led to Connexions focussing its resources on the targeted youth support service, and moving young people off the NEET register, despite the argument that investing in a universal career guidance service could help prevent young people falling into the NEET category in the first place. Some personal adviser time was taken out of schools, to provide support for young people disengaged from the education system, and the allocation of adviser time to schools was determined by the level of potentially NEET young people in the school.

In several respects schools welcomed the wider, more integrated support provided by Connexions and set up mechanisms for pastoral staff to work together to determine how best to work with the new service. But counter to this many schools, particularly those with lower numbers of disadvantaged and disaffected pupils, were concerned about the reduction in the volume of career guidance interviews available, and feared that not all young people would be able to access support

when they needed it. To compensate for the lack of access to careers advisers, schools invested more of their own staff time in providing career guidance to their pupils, often with staff who were not qualified in career guidance. A few schools also purchased additional careers adviser time from private providers. These concerns did not go away and eventually the Connexions partnerships were dissolved. In 2008 responsibility for providing the service was transferred to local authorities (LAs). The LAs were still expected to provide both the targeted service and career guidance, and encouraged to retain the Connexions brand, but they were left to determine the appropriate balance between the two parts of the service at the local level. In some areas this change led to what schools perceived as an improved career guidance service but not necessarily at the level they wanted for their pupils.

By the end of the first decade of the 21st century responsibility for career guidance had been returned to local authorities but as part of a wider IAG service. Schools continued to work in partnership with the service but had concerns about the level of career guidance support available and sometimes supplemented the service provided by the local authority from their own resources. However, because the amount of careers adviser time available was limited, schools had put in place better mechanisms for identifying pupils' guidance needs, through establishing guidance forums comprising the key members of staff involved, including the careers coordinator, pastoral managers and the SENCO, and by developing more integrated approaches to tutoring, mentoring and guidance. This was to prove to be good preparation for the next change in the national service – its dismantling.

The closure of the national service: responsibility for career guidance transferred to schools and colleges

In 2010 the New Labour government was replaced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition. In the very early days the new administration set out proposals to introduce an all-age, national careers

service similar to that which Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had each established following devolution in the 1990s, and building on the best of the Connexions service for young people and the Next Steps service for adults. However, this failed to materialise as the Department for Education (DfE) decided not to fund the new National Careers Service to provide face-to-face career guidance for young people. Instead the Connexions/IAG service provided by local authorities was reduced to the targeted youth support service only and the Secretary of State's responsibility for ensuring access to career guidance for young people was transferred to individual schools and colleges with effect from 2012. While responsibility for providing the service was transferred to schools, none of the funding that local authorities had spent on the career guidance part of Connexions was passported to schools. For almost 40 years young people in England had had access to career guidance from a national service, locally delivered and funded by central government. From 2012 this access would only continue if schools met their new statutory duty 'to secure access to independent careers guidance' (Education Act 2011) and found the money to pay for this service from within their existing budgets.

The legislation that introduced this change in provision defined independent as delivered by services external to the school (DfE, 2012). This was viewed as a means of ensuring impartiality, and required schools to buy in career guidance services. By the early 2010s schools had had almost 30 years' experience of devolved budgets and purchasing resources and services, but they had never before had to commission career guidance support. Furthermore, careers services had only limited experience of selling their services. The market for career guidance for young people was under-developed, from the perspective of both parties. Nevertheless, schools had to put something in place from September 2012, not just because they had a legal requirement to do so but also because they wanted to make sure their pupils continued to have access to career guidance.

The arrangements that schools set up were determined in part by the providers that were available in the local area. Some LAs continued to provide the universal career guidance service, alongside the targeted youth support service that

they were required to provide, but now on a traded basis and a few more enterprising LAs also offered their services to schools in neighbouring authorities. Many LAs, however, simply closed down their career guidance service and schools were forced to look elsewhere. Similarly, some of the careers companies that had provided the career guidance service to LAs under a commissioning arrangement moved to selling their services to individual schools, while others opted out of the careers guidance business, or went into administration when they found they were unable to maintain a viable business model.

A range of models emerged. Schools bought in services from the following different external sources:

- local authority traded services
- private careers companies
- sole traders (mainly qualified career advisers made redundant following the closure of Connexions)
- education business partnerships (some EBPs recruited careers advisers and extended their services beyond support for work-related learning and enterprise, to include the provision of career guidance)
- new social enterprises, set up by groups of careers advisers

(Andrews, 2012).

A few FE colleges and universities also made their careers services available to schools and in at least one area of the country with 11-16 schools and sixth form colleges the headteachers and principals got together to set up an arrangement whereby careers advisers employed by the sixth form colleges provided the career guidance service in the 11-16 schools.

This patchwork of provision emerged from 2012 onwards. An early survey found that in the first year of the new policy only one in five schools were effective in ensuring that all pupils in Years 9, 10 and 11 were receiving the level guidance they needed, (Ofsted, 2013). Two years later research commissioned by the DfE found that although the situation had improved, one in three schools were not meeting their statutory duty to secure access to independent career guidance for all pupils who needed it (Gibson et al., 2015).

Some schools chose not to buy in services from an external source but decided instead to provide career guidance support internally, using their own staff. Although the legislation stated that guidance should be provided by an external source, the subsequent statutory guidance for schools offered more flexibility by indicating that schools could continue with internal arrangements as long as these were supplemented by access to an external source as well. Schools either recruited a qualified careers adviser on to the staff or trained a member of staff in career guidance. Later versions of the statutory guidance became more permissive of this arrangement and by the time the Gatsby benchmarks (Gatsby, 2014) were endorsed by the DfE there was a clear statement that career guidance interviews could be provided by a career adviser who was internal or external (DfE 2018).

The statutory guidance to schools sets out the legal duties placed on the governing body to provide independent careers guidance but it does not go into anything like the level of detail found within the former Requirements & Guidance for Providers planning guidance for careers services. Schools are not provided with a set of standards to follow and have been left to determine for themselves how to meet the statutory duty. Consequently the level and quality of career guidance provided to pupils continues to vary from school to school and this situation is likely to persist while there remains no detailed specification of the service nor any rigorous monitoring to schools' adherence to the statutory duty.

The professional institute for careers professionals, the Career Development Institute (CDI), has played an important role in helping to support schools and to promote professional standards by publishing a guide to commissioning career guidance services (CDI, 2014), which recommends that schools should work with services that meet the matrix standard, and establishing both a Code of Ethics and a Professional Register of Career Development Professionals. The Institute also lobbied both the DfE and the Gatsby Foundation about the need for career guidance interviews to be provided by appropriately trained and qualified careers advisers. The benchmark schools are now expected to follow states that while the careers adviser can be internal or external, they should be qualified to at least Level 6 in career guidance.

It is worth noting that the arrangement for career guidance for young people in state schools in England is now the same as it has been for independent schools for many years. The original LEA-based careers services, and later the privatised services, did provide a service in partnership with independent schools, because the service was for young people not for schools, but it was at a significantly lower level than in state schools. Consequently independent schools had for some time recruited their own careers advisers or purchased a service from private providers such as the Independent Schools Careers Organisation (ISCO, later to become Inspiring Futures). The provision is now the same in both the public and private sectors. Schools buy in services from their own budgets, with no additional resource, or provide career guidance using their own staff. The only difference is that state schools are required to make the service available to pupils.

The range of delivery models continues, although schools keep their programmes under review and some have changed their approach over the years. Another more recent development is that more schools are now commissioning services as a group, often as a multi-academy trust (MAT), rather than individually. This brings economies of scale and enables careers advisers to move between schools to meet peaks and troughs in demand, and cover for absences.

Access

This article has described how schools have responded to changes in the provision of career guidance for young people in England over the past 20 years. In essence the national service, delivered locally, has been replaced by a patchwork of several thousand different services based on individual schools. With no designated funding allocated to schools and limited monitoring of provision access for young people is patchy. The Careers Strategy (DfE, 2017) expects all schools to adopt the Gatsby benchmarks and benchmark 8 states that every pupil should have at least one interview by the age of 16, and the opportunity for another by the age of 18, but the most recent analysis of data, based on a sample of 3,296 schools and colleges, shows that by March 2020 only 63% of institutions had managed to fully achieve that

benchmark (The Careers & Enterprise Company, 2020). Work is underway to research best practice in relation to the delivery of career guidance and identifying pupils' guidance needs, but it remains questionable whether all pupils will have access to career guidance without an increase in funding to schools.

The Careers Service that was established in the 1970s was for all young people, and delivery was through a combination of work in schools and access to high street careers offices. The current policy assumes that all young people are in a school or college, but this is not the case. A significant minority of young people are not in school, for a variety of reasons including the tens of thousands who are home-educated. These young people have no access to career guidance. The problem has been highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and while the budget for the National Careers Service has been increased to provide additional support to adults affected by the health crisis, the remit of the service has not been extended to cover young people not able to access a school-based service.

Partnership

Some commentators have referred to the introduction of the school-based model of career guidance in England as the end of a partnership approach, but schools cannot deliver a comprehensive careers programme in isolation. As the Gatsby benchmarks illustrate, to provide young people with the full range of experiences necessitates the school working with several different external partners, including employers, colleges, universities, apprenticeship providers and, indeed, guidance providers. In this sense, the partnership with careers services continues but in a different form. It takes on a client-contractor arrangement, with the school commissioning a provider to deliver the personal career guidance element of the programme, and replacing the former SLA or partnership agreement with a contract.

The introduction of a new statutory duty to provide access to independent careers guidance passed responsibility direct to schools. The careers strategy built on this approach by requiring all schools to have a named careers leader, responsible for leading and managing the whole careers programme but

orchestrating the contributions of all players, including external partners. Reference was made earlier to three levels of partnership working. The current approach can be viewed as a further development of the *guidance community* model, with the school leading the community of partners and managing all the elements into a coherent programme of support for young people.

The Future?

The challenges for the immediate future are to find ways of resourcing the provision of career guidance at a level sufficient to meet the needs of all pupils and to make provision for young people who are not in school. In January 2021 the DfE published outline details of the next phase of its strategy for improving the provision of career guidance in England and tackling the fragmentation of the service (DfE, 2021, pp. 44-47). The proposals include a longer-term review of the delivery system but it remains to be seen if this will lead to the changes needed to ensure that all young people have access to career guidance when they need it.



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