

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's experiences of careers support: A UK-wide and youth-centred analysis

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Young people have been among the hardest hit groups during the COVID-19 pandemic, experiencing disruptions to their education and facing challenging transitions to the labour market (Wilson & Papoutsaki, 2021). This paper analyses data from research conducted by the Institute of Employment Studies (IES) during the pandemic involving 1,345 young people aged 16-25, both in education, employment and not in education, training or employment across the UK, at different points in time (April-September 2021). The mixed-method research adopted a youth-centred approach to explore the impact of the pandemic on young people's experience of careers support. The analysis gives young people a voice and highlights three key ways in which access to careers support can be improved. These findings have implications for leaders across government and education around the development young people's careers support following the pandemic.



Introduction

Addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people is a pressing issue across policy, research and practice. Young people were among the hardest hit groups: experiencing disruptions to their education, facing challenging transitions to the labour market, and reporting worsened wellbeing and confidence (Learning & Work, 2021). These three elements raise serious concerns about how they could adversely affect young people's health, aspirations and prospects

in the longer term (Hicks et al., 2020; Wilson & Papoutsaki, 2021; Youth Employment UK, 2021).

During the pandemic policy efforts concentrated on mitigating these impacts, particularly the provision of employment and educational support to ensure every young person had access to a work or study opportunity of their choice (Plan for Jobs, 2020; YEG, 2020; YEG, 2021). Similarly, research has focused on understanding the impact of recent youth employment measures and how educational institutions, including careers services, have responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic, although predominately from the perspective of policy advisers and service providers.

In contrast, this paper based on the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) research involving 1,345 young people across the four UK nations, regarding the careers support available to them during the pandemic, gives a voice to these young people. It explores how this unique insight from the users' perspective, can be drawn on to inform the development of career services for young people post-pandemic.

Setting the scene: careers support infrastructures in the four nations and the impact of Covid-19

Careers guidance and support provision in the UK differs across the four nations. In England, the

responsibility for providing careers guidance and support rests mainly with education providers and is reflected in a set of eight Gatsby benchmarks (DfE, 2021). The implementation of these benchmarks is driven by statutory guidance (ibid) and supported by the Careers and Enterprise Company (a national agency funded by the Department for Education, which works separately from the National Careers Service).

In contrast to England, careers services in the other UK nations are managed by one or more than one department of their respective devolved governments to provide all-age, multi-platform support, in a range of educational and community spaces.

- In Scotland, careers support for young people is driven by the strategy *Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)*, which has a strong focus on local partnerships and school-employer engagement (Scottish Government, 2014).
- In Northern Ireland, the Department for the Economy's (DfE) national Careers Service is responsible for providing career information, advice and guidance on an all-age basis, while the Department of Education (DE) sets the national curriculum and provides guidance on the delivery of careers education in schools.
- Careers Wales is the provider of the national careers service in Wales. Through close collaboration with the Welsh Government, the service provides visible and accessible support both online and in local communities, placing a strong focus on employer engagement and strengthening school-to-business links.

While career support infrastructures vary across the four UK nations, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic was felt heavily across the country. At the onset of the pandemic careers services needed to quickly reinvent their provision. This included adapting to remote provision, introducing or scaling up digital services, delivering virtual events (such as careers fairs) and facilitating virtual work experience. In many instances the transition worked well and sped up innovation. For example, improvements to online job hubs, better use of social media platforms, and increased use of previously under-explored resources (such as podcasts), all featured as welcome innovations. However, careers services also faced notable challenges.

A UK-wide survey led in April 2020 investigated how career professionals found the impact of Covid-19. Responses revealed that a majority (54%, n= 136) experienced access to careers support resulting from closures to educational spaces as either 'highly problematic' or 'problematic' (Hughes, 2020). Another study (Pye Tait Consulting, 2020) conducted with 369 senior leaders of colleges, secondary schools, and special schools in England looked at the impact of COVID-19 on the provision of careers guidance and support. It found that, although careers services' budgets were largely unaltered, 49% of institutions had reduced the time learners were spending on careers guidance activities. The challenges posed by the sudden shift to remote learning and loss of face-to-face contact, combined with limited experience and resources on which educational institutions could draw, all contributed to this reduction.

Methods

This paper critically analyses data collected as part of the IES 'Better Quality Youth Employment' research programme for the Health Foundation Young People's Future Health Inquiry, running over three years from 2020 to 2023. The programme adopted a mixed methods approach (Orlando, 2021a) and the research was conducted through a large-scale online survey of 1,275 young people, and interviews and focus groups (fieldwork) with 70 more young people. Young people were defined as those aged 16-25. The research captured the views of participants across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Participants for both the survey and fieldwork were identified and selected based on a combination of sociodemographic factors (location, age, gender, ethnicity, disability, employment and education status) with the aim of maximising representation and inclusion from across the four nations and particularly of young people from disadvantaged groups (Orlando, 2021a). To achieve this, an external youth panel (YouthSight) was used to recruit participants to the research, and sampling quotas were adopted to ensure inclusion from across the population, particularly from under-represented groups. Consequently, there was a higher representation of minority groups such as disabled young people, young people from minority

ethnic backgrounds, and those not in education or employment compared with the wider population for these groups. The inclusion of a larger sample of under-represented young people is viewed as giving the research added value because including the voice of under-represented young people in a representative way is often a challenge in research given these young people are often harder to reach.

The sociodemographic breakdown for participants in the research is presented in Table 1: Sociodemographic breakdown of research participants.

The survey took place in two waves; the first wave was in April 2021 and the second in September 2021, with two different groups of participants to capture

young people's views at two distinct points in time: first as lockdown rules eased and in a second stage as transitions from education to work or further study took place. The interviews and focus groups took place between July and September 2021.

Young people from two youth advocacy organisations engaged in workshops to contribute to the design of the survey questionnaire and of the discussion guides for interviews and focus groups. For example, participants were asked what they viewed as the most useful types of support in helping them fulfil their study and career aspirations. Options included support with accessing an apprenticeship or traineeship, careers advice (e.g. information sharing, signposting, one-to-one consultations with a careers adviser),



Table 1: Sociodemographic breakdown of research participants

Age		Gender		Nation		Ethnicity		Disability	
16-18	21%	Male	50%	England	40%	White ethnic group	78%	No	74%
19-21	39%	Female	48%	Scotland	21%	Minority ethnic group	20%	Yes	26%
22-25	40%	Non-binary	1%	Wales	20%	Other ethnic group	1%		
		Other	1%	N. Ireland	18%				
Employment Status									
College, further education, or training					30%				
Higher education					31%				
Not working nor studying					20%				
Only in employment					19%				

informal support (e.g. family and friends), other forms of support from school and college (e.g. mentoring), online information and guidance and a range of employment support interventions. Young people answered using a four-point scale going from 'very useful' to 'not useful at all', with an additional answer option if they did not know about the support type. Data from the survey were analysed using descriptive analysis and data from interviews and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis (Boudah, 2011).

Research findings

The analysis of data collected as part of the Institute for Employment Studies 'Better Quality Youth Employment' sheds a unique light on the impact of COVID-19 on careers support from the perspective of the young people and their experiences during the pandemic. While the young people who participated in the research were from different nations, and hence experienced different careers support infrastructures, consensus emerged regarding the services and how they might be improved post-pandemic surfaced. A key theme was access to and quality of careers support during the pandemic:

'With COVID, I haven't had opportunity to branch out as much to teachers to explore my options for after. Now I'm thinking ok I've done these two subjects, this is what I'll go on to do.'

(GCSE student, England)

All young people who participated in the research experienced some form of careers support, although it is not known whether those who participated in the survey based their answers on experience of the different types of support or an assumption of how useful they might be. This notwithstanding, the analysis of data from the survey revealed there was no single form of support that the majority (i.e. more than half) of young people found to be very useful. However, over a third said 'support from apprenticeships' (42%) and 'traineeships' (33%) were 'very useful', while support found to be 'a little useful' included: 'online information and guidance' (56%), 'informal support' (55%) and 'careers advice' (54%). Only 24% found careers advice to be 'very useful', placing this option in fifth place after apprenticeships, traineeships, informal support, and other forms of support from school.

Data from the fieldwork with young people, which included both interviews and focus groups, was based on their direct experiences and supported this finding:

'They don't tell you much more than you could learn by looking things up yourself. Like applying to post grad studies – they don't tell you more than the application page itself. (...) Sometimes I'm reluctant to access it [university careers service] because I don't want to waste my time.'

(University student, Scotland)

Unlike the survey, where young people were presented with pre-defined categories of support from which they had to choose, during the fieldwork they were asked to discuss freely the support they had accessed. Common themes emerged across participants' accounts. These highlighted that the support young people most often accessed, particularly since the start of the pandemic, was 'family and friends with experience in their sector of interest' (47%), followed by 'autonomous research using online resources', such as Indeed and Prospects (37%).

The reason given for preferring this form of informal support by almost a third of young people (30%) was that peers and family with experience in their preferred sector provided better-tailored and more up-to-date support, as well as networking and connection opportunities, than the support accessed through careers services. This was because they found careers support was less tailored to their individual needs and aspirations. In addition, many felt the disconnect between their needs and the support they received from careers services had increased since the start of the pandemic:

'When I discuss careers areas I like with advisers – they are very general and don't know as much as me (...) Why should I take advice from someone who doesn't work in that industry or graduated 15 years ago – they don't know what the standards are.'

(University student, England).

The majority of young people in the consultation (67%) reported that many challenges they encountered when accessing support from careers services pre-pandemic - such as generic advice, feeling pushed

towards pathways which were not their first choice, sessions that felt short and rushed, and having a limited number of advisers for a large number of young people - had been compounded during the pandemic by the additional challenges of remote interaction.

A notable minority of young people in the consultation (37%) reported there had been a poor, or altogether missing, transition to providing careers advice remotely. This ranged from advisers not being easily accessible (either because the remote service was poorly advertised or because it was not present), to an expectation for young people to be proactive about engaging with careers staff without previous knowledge of the support provided.

Some young people (22%) felt that opportunities for work experience and study were limited and not broadcast adequately, which left them unsure about how they could access them:

'I don't know the careers person in my school. She sends emails to us and keeps us updated but we cannot speak to her. Not sure whether she's located in my school, didn't know if could get one to one support remotely.'

(GCSE student, Northern Ireland)

Improving access to careers support after the pandemic

Young people participating in the research were asked how they thought access to, and quality of, careers support could be improved following the pandemic. The main solutions they identified included:

- Providing better tailored and more inclusive support, to ensure equality of opportunity (46%). Recommendations included targeted schemes to support early school leavers or those who did not achieve high qualifications, and increased investment to provide a higher number of specialised careers advisors in schools and colleges. They also included complementary resources such as personalised newsletters and access to multiple forms of support in school (e.g. mentors alongside careers advisers).
- Improving access to career-related information (39%), particularly through online platforms

and tools, including youth-friendly job search portals, with accessible information and vetted opportunities tailored to young people, supported by youth-friendly modes of communication to share information and guidance, such as social media and chat apps. This was thought to be of key importance, especially following the challenges young people experienced over the course of multiple lockdowns when trying to access information without guidance, and feeling overwhelmed and disoriented as a result.

- Increasing mentoring schemes within educational settings (25%), providing young people with person-centred and one-to-one support beyond the standard support offered by careers services (e.g. information sharing, signposting, brief and high-level consultations). When asked what additional support they might benefit from, young people suggested mentoring could be particularly beneficial to help them improve their confidence and motivation following the pandemic, through the expert help of an experienced person studying or working in their field of choice.

Discussion

Research has revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic may have a lasting detrimental impact on young people's prospects (Wilson & Papoutsaki, 2021). Disruptions to studies have affected young people's confidence and motivation, adversely affecting their ambitions for study and work (Learning & Work, 2021). These findings indicate the key role that enhanced careers support can play in moving forward. Helping young people build back their confidence and change their perceptions of work after lockdown may take time and dedicated and specialised support.

Alongside these challenges, the responses of the young people participating in this research highlight that the majority did not find the career-related support they know of, or to which they have access, to be very useful in helping them meet or take the next step towards their career aspirations. In particular, careers support was viewed by many as under-resourced and out-of-touch with their needs. However, these challenges are not new and research from before the

pandemic highlighted similar issues. Recent research found that many pupils did not know where to turn to for careers advice beyond parents, teachers and friends (Hughes, 2021). Similarly, the 2019 Youth Voice Census, a major UK-wide yearly survey of young people's experiences of education, training, employment and support, found that a mere 25% of all young people aged 16-24 went to careers advisors for employability support, while only 38% cent of all young people felt careers advisors could help them grow their employability skills (Youth Employment UK, 2019).

Findings from this and other recent research (Hughes, 2020) indicate a disconcerting sense among young people of being left to their own devices to navigate an increasingly competitive labour market. A difficulty which is compounded by the lack of professional assistance in making this journey, as evidenced above. These findings resonate with pre-pandemic evidence which shows that in 2019 53% of those aged 16 and 50% of those aged 22 had never had an interview with a careers adviser, with just over a third rating information accessed through careers and employability websites as useful in their careers search (Youth Employment UK, 2019).

Quality support pathways, which use dedicated resources and person-centred approaches, are key to young people's journeys towards good quality training and work opportunities (Orlando, 2021b) but the pandemic has highlighted just how many young people do not have access to such support. Young people in the research have identified key areas for improvement, ranging from tailored and inclusive support, to improved quality of, and access to, career-related information, and the provision of additional resources within educational settings.

Based on these young people's views and experiences, there is a strong case to encourage educational institutions, national careers services, and government to work in collaboration and move beyond the existing requirement to provide more tailored careers information, advice and guidance, and increase investment in the provision of high-quality support.

The findings of this research support the need for improved access to career professionals with clear signposting of how and where to access them. This

supports and complements existing calls for an improved careers provision infrastructure, including an entitlement to careers interviews with a qualified career development professionals and a broadening of the National Careers Service to include face-to-face careers support for all young people (Williams et al., 2021; Hughes, 2020).

Conclusion

This paper has investigated young people's own views and experiences of careers support during the COVID-19 pandemic and has given them a voice. It found that young people experienced increasing difficulty in accessing careers support and guidance - a concern that has been highlighted in previous research with young people, and has continued and strengthened during this time. Clearly this is in part due to the added challenges careers services have faced during this unprecedented time, but it also emphasises the exacerbation of limited access to careers provision across the UK nations in recent years.

The findings of the research complement and support earlier research, calling for the provision of better-quality careers support to young people, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic (YEG 2020; YEG 2021; Hughes, 2020; Hughes et al., 2021). High-quality support includes careers provision that is properly tailored to the needs of the young person that can support them in accessing good quality opportunities aligned to their aspirations, as well as the needs of national and local labour markets (Orlando, 2021b). It is about careers provision that ensures that young people from all backgrounds and at all stages of education have equal access to opportunities and are able to develop the right skills for their future. This ranges from sustained investment in improved education-business engagement, to cross-sector collaboration to invest in widened provision of mentoring schemes and employability support interventions.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to further explore and analyse these options, but future research should focus on understanding how to translate youth voices, as conveyed through the insight found in this and like research, into tangible solutions that address the

current challenges young people experience when building their futures.



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