

Flexibility and Identity

Anthony Barnes, Editor

The identity of careers education and guidance in English schools and colleges has come under renewed pressure in the last few years. Explanations may be sought at different levels. Curriculum developments are a factor. The need to accommodate some aspects of citizenship teaching (a new national curriculum subject since September 2002) in the already overcrowded PSHE and careers timetable ghetto has not helped. In many schools, careers education and guidance is already subsumed within PSHE. A parallel trend in some schools is to subsume careers education and guidance within work-related teaching and learning. In both cases, these are pragmatic decisions often carried out with little understanding or clarity regarding the distinctive purposes of careers education and guidance. Targets and league-table accountability pressures have also played their part. Senior managers see little immediate return in investing in careers education and guidance in terms of the standing of the school in the public's eyes. Similarly, overburdened teachers and tutors whose pay is now linked to 'hard' performance outputs are understandably more reluctant to put time and effort into careers work which is not susceptible to these kinds of measures and hence for which there is little obvious return. A third major factor is a shift in the policy on career guidance and the re-modelling of services as part of Connexions.

These threats to the identity of careers education and guidance should not let us overlook the fact that there have been opportunities in recent years to strengthen careers education and guidance by building a changed identity. The introduction of 'The Real Game' at Key Stage 3, for example, has been a significant development even if it now has to be justified as a citizenship rather than as a careers activity. The emphasis on guidance and support in '14-19: extending opportunities, raising standards' also provides a new opportunity to put careers work on the map. However, the dominant impression of the schools' careers work in England is that of a semi-professional field which lacks the capacity to seize the opportunity to latch onto mainstream educational agendas and demonstrate how careers education and guidance can contribute to their success. Careers specialists in schools and colleges generally have too little time, insufficient inputs and a training deficit. They have only partially won the hearts and minds of the people they work with, their external partners and the parents they serve. Those who stand to benefit most from effective careers education and guidance have not been persuaded to become its champions.

A more detailed account of the performance of the field is given in 'Improving Careers Education - An analysis of recent research and inspection findings' which is published in this issue of the NICEC journal by kind permission of the Connexions Service National Unit. I wrote this paper with Janet Donoghue and Jackie Sadler for the national careers education support programme. This programme was launched in November 2001 to generate activities and resources for careers staff in schools and colleges and those who support them. Its most visible manifestation is the support programme website (www.cegnet.co.uk) which provides news, teaching and learning resources, a helpline,

links to relevant websites and discussion rooms. The paper published here is part of the research and consultation strand to identify the needs and priorities of careers staff and their supporters. One of the messages from this activity has been the concern about the break in the research and inspection evidence. The DfES has not commissioned any research into careers education and guidance since 2001 and the last national survey by Ofsted was in 1998. It is vital for policy-makers as well as schools and colleges to know how careers education and guidance is faring 'under Connexions' and what good practice is out there that we can build upon.

The theme of the identity of careers work is also taken up by Bill Law in his Points of Departure column. Bill reminds us of those who have written about the chameleon-like nature of careers work but urges us to stay in command of our own destiny and to use our flexibility to move forward with a clear sense of direction and purpose.

Two substantial articles in this issue relate to the processes by which young people establish their adult and occupational identities. Phil Hodgkinson and Martin Bloomer discuss how Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is important for our understanding of career progression and the role of guidance. (The second part of this article will appear in the Spring issue.) Tim Oates who will be giving a keynote presentation at the forthcoming 'Cutting Edge II' conference in Coventry in April 2003 looks at the wider educational issues affecting identity formation in young people and the need for a more integrated and co-ordinated set of policy levers if the goal of unleashing more of young people's potential is to be realised.

Enjoy!