

## Aiming for Higher Education: Challenges to Careers Education and Guidance in a Changing World

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With the major expansion of students entering Higher Education (HE), and continuing changes in the arrangements for student funding, the issue of the role of Higher Education has come into sharper focus. From the perspective of the current government, the rationale for expansion combines social justice with economic rationales. Thus:

*'In a fast changing and increasingly competitive world, the role of higher education in equipping the labour force with appropriate and relevant skills ... is central' (DfES, 2003)*

This expansion also places new challenges upon pre-HE guidance provision and upon HE itself. The former reflects increasing emphasis on the widening participation agenda (itself a reflection of the concerns for social justice and harnessing the talents of citizens) and concurrent changes to both the pre-HE curriculum and the organisation of guidance practice; the latter reflects the growing diversity of entrants. Given such increasing diversity, the 'pre-HE experience' is becoming increasingly difficult to categorise. All non-graduate members of the population are potentially part of this experience with entry to HE being possible through a variety of entry routes and pathways, some structured via programmes and courses, some highly individual. Mature entrants in particular may enter HE for highly individual reasons that may not relate to future occupational career progression. Some may be returning after a career break, others seeking new directions after redundancy, still others taking advantage of retirement to pursue new possibilities. Here, I can do no more than sketch out a range of issues evident through the literature and highlight some emerging research needs.

### Areas of importance

This paper is based upon a paper produced for the recently appointed National Co-ordination Team for Student Employability (Ward & Pierce, 2003). It seeks to identify three areas of importance for guidance practitioners in the emerging context to which research can make a contribution.

1. **In relation to learners, there is a need for more information on the starting points of entrants to HE in terms of career development and employability.**

The successive overlay of policy initiatives in this area (Ainley, Barnes & Momen, 2002) has provided much descriptive information but limited evaluation evidence (particularly external evaluation). Where evaluation work has been undertaken, the focus has emphasised elements of government policy related to the social exclusion agenda. Such a policy focus is clearly evident in terms of research output (see, e.g. Richie, 2000; Fieldhouse, Kaira, & Alam, 2002; and Bynner & Parsons, 2002). In contrast, as Barnes, Donoghue & Sadler (2002) note:

*'Little research has been carried out into the career development and guidance needs of gifted and talented students'. (p. 9)*

2. **In terms of providers, there is a clear need to evaluate changes in the provision of careers education and guidance on those seeking to progress into HE.**

In the field of careers guidance, provision has been re-oriented in support of specific policy initiatives, manifest in the move from Careers Services - with a remit to support the career thinking of the whole student cohort - to the Connexions Service. The integrated approach to providing information, advice and guidance to young people across all aspects of development of the kind which underpins Connexions may serve to limit the visibility of careers provision, and overt messages concerned with career management or employability, (see Twigg 2002; Watts, 2001). The impact of the 'focusing' agenda prior to Connexions also appears to have had a more direct impact leading to a reduction of resources allocated to work in education of 15-25% during 1998-2000, with *larger reductions in post 16 work* (QPID, 2001, cited in Barnes, Donoghue & Sadler, 2002). Evidence from a study undertaken for the DfES by Morris, Rickinson & Davies (2001) reinforced concerns that the status of careers education and guidance may be lessened by this association with 'problem students', whilst further reporting that over half of the careers service managers involved in the research felt that the 'focusing

agenda' had led to significant difficulties in maintaining the profile of careers education and guidance within schools.

3. **In terms of the curriculum, there is a need to review how change in the pre-HE curriculum is impacting upon the career development starting points of HE entrants.**

This is necessary both immediately and in the longer term.

In respect of immediate need, Curriculum 2000, a new post-16 curriculum introduced in September 2000, has provided a range of new and revised qualifications at Advanced level. One aim of this innovation was to support 'curriculum breadth' by enabling students to:

- study 'more subjects and/or a wider range of subjects';
- continue academic and vocational study;
- develop Key Skills;
- participate in enrichment activities.

Early survey data suggests that progress in respect of the first of these, the impact upon careers education and guidance (CEG) provision, appears to have been mixed at best. Curriculum enrichment time, where CEG has been concentrated, has itself come under severe pressure, especially when combined with less external support from outside (see above). Less directly, the pressure to 'cover the content' in a new and high profile curriculum has led to those more independent approaches to learning and teaching which may promote the characteristics associated with personal and career development to be sidelined. Similarly, opportunities for extra-curricular initiatives, where a range of skills can be emphasised, have themselves come under pressure from both the increasing demands of the curriculum and of part-time employment. The latter may also appear to lessen the need for a strong emphasis upon preparation for working life in the pre-HE curriculum, especially if the formal transition from full-time education to full-time employment is perceived to have been delayed until graduation.

Understandably, given limited time and resources, the focus of careers education and guidance in such a context is upon the next transition in terms of securing access to Higher Education. This focus may be given additional emphasis by the concerns of the Government to widen participation in HE. This preparation for the next transition may also be no different from that which has gone before. It could be set within a richer framework which emphasises a shift towards individuals taking responsibility for managing their own careers in learning and work, and delivered within the context of curriculum enrichment work. However, even this work has come under pressure and the gap between rhetoric and reality may be becoming more apparent.

### The longer term

In the longer term, there will be a need to review how the emerging 14-19 curriculum model emphasising greater curriculum flexibility - for some students at least - will impact upon the career management skills of HE entrants. Flexibility has already been manifest in opportunities to allow the 'disapplication' of individuals from certain statutory subjects at Key Stage 4 (from 1998) and, from 2002, an 'Increased Flexibility' programme facilitating learning for 14-16 year old students within work contexts whether in colleges of further education, with training providers or via the new GCSEs in vocational subjects. Most recently, the *14-19: Opportunity and Excellence* document (DfES, 2003a Annexe 3) identified some 270 local partnerships that are expected to involve over 2,000 schools and 30,000 pupils with additional funding for the development of further partnerships. Such moves, and the general shift to a more unitised pre-HE curriculum requiring more regular choices and decisions by students, may strengthen the self and career management skills of entrants. For this to happen, they would need access to enhanced levels of guidance and support in mastering such processes. While current developments do not seem to have made a significant impact on those considering HE, this will be an area of future interest.

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