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Teachers' knowledge and experiences of Information Advice and Guidance: some implications for the current policy context in England

Carol Fuller, Elizabeth McCrum & Tony Macfadyen*

Abstract

Good information and career guidance about which post-compulsory educational routes are available and where these routes lead is important for ensuring that young people make choices that are most appropriate to their needs and aspirations. Yet the Association of School and College Leaders (2011) expresses fears that future provision will be inadequate. This paper reports the findings of an on-line survey of 300 secondary school teachers, and follow-up telephone interviews with 18 of such teachers in the south-east of England which explored teachers' experiences of delivering post-compulsory educational and career guidance and their knowledge and confidence in doing so. The results suggest that teachers lack confidence in delivering information, advice and guidance outside their own area of specialism and experience. In particular, teachers knew little about alternative local provision of post-16 education and lacked knowledge of less traditional vocational routes. This paper will therefore raise important policy considerations with respect to supporting teachers' knowledge, ability and confidence in delivering information concerning future pathways and career guidance.

Keywords: careers guidance, IAG, teachers, confidence

Introduction

Good information, advice and guidance (IAG) about which post-compulsory¹ educational routes are available and where these routes lead is important for ensuring that young people make choices that are most appropriate to their needs and aspirations. Yet with funding cuts in the UK resulting in the disbanding of most of the current Connexions provision and with Michael Gove, the current Education Secretary, announcing that it is schools which are best placed to provide careers advice (BBC News 2011), the Association of School and College Leaders (2011a) has expressed fears that future provision will be inadequate. Research suggests that there is likely to be an increasing need for teachers to deliver careers education and they will therefore have to be "more knowledgeable about and dedicated to, careers education in order to prepare students for the choices ahead" (McCrone et al. 2009, 1). With a rise in the age at which young people can leave formal education and training

*The Institute of Education, The University of Reading, 4 Redlands Road, Reading, Berks, RG1 5EX. Email: c.l.fuller@reading.ac.uk

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from 2013, teachers' knowledge, ability and confidence in delivering IAG is thus an important consideration. In this paper, we explore teachers' knowledge about various post-General Certificate Secondary Education (GCSE) routes. We consider their confidence in providing personalised direction to support their students' decision-making and consider the potential impact of this in terms of the quality of the future provision of career guidance.

Throughout this paper a number of – albeit contested – terms are used. For clarification purposes, the key terms used are defined as²: *Career*: an occupation undertaken for a significant period of a person's life with opportunities for progress and development; *guidance*: advice or information aimed at resolving a problem or difficulty or providing direction, usually given by someone in authority; *advice*: guidance or recommendations concerning future action, typically given by someone regarded as authoritative or knowledgeable.

Context and Background

An OECD review of career guidance policies in the United Kingdom in 2003 noted that the UK had several features that distinguished it from other OECD countries, namely; lower rates of unemployment alongside a very flexible labour market. This is also confirmed in OECD Country Note 2012, which states that employment rates were higher, and unemployment rates lower, than in other OECD countries between 2008 and 2010, and despite the economic crisis. Yet, in terms of education, the report also highlights that whilst participation in all forms of education has expanded in the United Kingdom in recent years, historically attainment levels have been towards the lower third of the OECD distribution as a whole³. Addressing these levels by both increasing the numbers of young people remaining in post-compulsory education and addressing the needs of adults with low basic skills has thus been a key priority of both the current coalition government as well as numerous previous governments.

The OECD (2003) report also highlighted an additional important and distinguishing feature of the UK education system – in comparison to other OECD countries – which provides an important context for this paper; namely, the considerable flexibility and range of opportunities it offers for individual educational choice. The OECD report noted:

Increasingly government policy is favouring greater diversity within qualifications, with tight distinctions between general and vocational pathways becoming blurred. The introduction of new (broader and more flexible) curriculum and qualification structures will put increasing pressure upon schools to provide students with good advice on subject choice and the implications of this for later educational and occupational decisions (OECD Report 2003, 4).

A policy focus on increasing the educational skills base of the UK as well as extending the range of choice for young people has resulted, as the OECD report suggested

it might, in a strong onus on schools to deliver good quality and well-informed information, advice and guidance. Young people now face a wealth of choice when it comes to deciding on which educational route to take when they reach age 16.

The 14–19 education reform programme in 2008 aimed to increase young people's participation in education and training beyond age 16 and raise educational attainment. Central to the programme were the Diploma qualifications in 14 different occupational areas that were designed to offer a blend of academic and vocational learning (Committee of Public Accounts 2008). Personalised Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) that enables young people to make appropriate post-16 choices relevant to their interests and abilities is therefore considered a crucial part and was central to the 14–19 education reform. IAG was an umbrella term used to cover a range of ways used to encourage and support young people in planning for their future. In short, 'information, advice and guidance' (IAG) is commonly used to refer to the diverse range of services being examined under the term "career guidance". The particular aim of IAG is that by offering targeted and personalised support to particular groups, persisting social inequalities, particularly in relation to educational participation, can be tackled, thus preventing some young people from simply 'opting out' of decision-making completely (Du-Bois Raymond 1998; Fuller 2009). By offering targeted and personalised support to enable young people to make the 'right' choices, the idea is that more students will remain in post-compulsory education and training and student attainment and course completion rates will improve (IAG Workforce, accessed 2009).

Since the Employment and Training Act of 1973, Local Authorities have been legally required to provide career guidance to young people (Mulvey 2006). Whilst provision over time has varied from a single careers service to a much more marketised approach, a common feature was a clear distinction between careers teachers and pastoral care staff (Watts 2006). Under the Labour government in 1998, the statutory obligation for schools to provide IAG post-16 was removed and replaced with a non-statutory framework in 2003 (Pring; Hayward; Hodgson et al. 2009). Prior to this, in 2001, the Careers Service became absorbed into Connexions, an organisation that offered a wider range of youth services and provided a much more explicit and targeted focus on young people at risk of social exclusion.

The particular focus on those most at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment and training) meant that many young people received no IAG from external sources and hence became increasingly dependent on teachers (Pring et al. 2009). Research also found that almost half the IAG that was given was inadequate, poorly timed and partial and that the specialist guidance required to help young people navigate the very many different post-16 pathways, especially with respect to subject choice, university courses and future careers was also absent (The Sutton Trust 2008; Pring et al. 2009). A report by the National Audit Office (2004) found that the Connexions service was not reaching all the young people it was designed to

assist and did not cater well to those young people not at risk of “dropping out”. A more recent report to government (Cabinet Office 2009) described careers provision as “failing” and called for the complete abolition of Connexions.

Whilst high quality guidance is extremely useful for guiding young people through the labyrinth of available choices, a lack of appropriate resources means it is often difficult to deliver this well (Colley 2010). With a policy landscape in constant flux and increasing demands forcing a widening of service provision, inevitable challenges result in terms of the ability to deliver effectively (McGowan, Watts and Andrews 2009; Watts and McGowan 2007). Connexions as an all-age guidance service did not resemble the career advice of old, and it was then predictable that tension and incoherence with service provision would emerge (Mulvey 2006).

The Education Act of 2011 has made school provision of career guidance a statutory requirement once more. Advice to schools states that this guidance must be impartial, promote the best interest of the pupils to whom it is given and include information on the full range of post-16 education and training options, including Apprenticeships. That specific mention is made of Apprenticeships is indicative of yet another shift within the post-16 landscape. The current coalition government has committed itself to increase both the quality and range of provision of vocational post-16 routes and pledged significant funding to raise the number of Apprenticeships currently available. For the current government, vocational routes are positioned as offering “real qualifications ... need[ed] in the modern workplace” (DfE 2011a). Undoubtedly, they are also seen as a means to tackle the current figure of more than 670,000 16–24 year olds who are currently NEET (DfE 2011a).

A key feature of the new statutory requirement on career provision is the onus on schools to provide impartial and independent external careers guidance from September 2012. Whilst schools are free to choose how best to deliver this with respect to the specific needs of their pupils, a key emphasis remains the need for face-to-face support for those students deemed most in need of direction in making suitable transitions: those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with special educational needs, and with learning difficulties or disabilities. However, the National Careers Advisory Group (2011) warns that the shift in career guidance away from Local Authorities to schools has not resulted in a transfer of the associated funding. They argue that the loss of GBP 200 million is going to make it difficult for schools to ‘buy in’ external careers advisors. Hibbert (2010) found that many young people felt let down by the IAG they had received, that Connexions was not tailored enough to their personal circumstances, interests or needs. Under the new framework, schools will no longer be required to provide careers advisors with information on individual students (Association of School and College Leaders 2011b), making personalised guidance more difficult. Indeed, the new National Careers Service introduced in April 2012 is primarily aimed at 700,000 adults and only 370,000 young people (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2012). Support for young people

will also only consist of a website and helpline phone number for schools to direct students to so it is likely that the previous failings of IAG provision will remain.

A review of IAG and career guidance provided by schools found that its quality varied considerably and not all the teaching staff involved in the process had enough knowledge or experience to do it effectively (OfSTED 2010). The report also noted that the provision of IAG in relation to options available to students at the age of 16 was not always sufficiently impartial. This view is also supported by Watts who stated that “research evidence demonstrates that services provided solely by schools lack impartiality and have weak links with the labour market” (The Guardian 2010). Research also suggests that teachers tend to encourage students to take their own subjects as option choices and are biased towards academic options in their own sixth forms (Payne 2013). Yet the ability for schools to offer impartial advice, a key aspect of the new statutory framework, is highly problematic. As Hodgson and Spours (2008) point out, the competitive nature of education and institutional self-interest compromises any ability to offer independent advice and career guidance. Currently, school sixth forms receive on average GBP 260 more per student than other providers. However, this difference will be removed by 2015 (National Audit Office 2011) which is likely to lead to much greater competition for schools and sixth form places and further impact the type of information and guidance schools provide.

Young people are making choices for their post-16 future within a range of different pathways and developments. Whilst they will naturally draw on a number of sources in making these decisions, it is highly probable that teachers will become ever more important in this process. Indeed, research by Lord, Harland and Gulliver (2006) found that students greatly value guidance from the teachers that know them well, provided that the information is up-to-date and the teachers have knowledge of relevant careers. Teachers need to be up-to-date because many students often have misconceptions about different routes (Marson-Smith, Golden and McCrone 2009). Previous Training and Development Agency⁴ (TDA) guidance on the Qualified Teacher Standards makes it clear that “trainee teachers need to be ... familiar ... with the range of curriculum options available to learners, and the major implications of the choices offered” (DCFS 2009, 19), yet in 2009 this was not part of Initial Teacher Training, nor is it included at all in the new teaching Standards effective from 2012 (DfE 2011b). Guidance from the Association of School and College Leaders (2011b) has indicated the important ways teachers will be expected to be involved in careers guidance in schools: as teachers of careers lessons; as subject teachers but also “as tutors, with a detailed knowledge of the careers education, information, advice and guidance needs of the individual students in their tutor group” (2011b, 2).

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) discuss how career decision-making reflects an individual's culturally determined horizons. They address the relationship between

structure and agency in individual choice and how young people will follow careers, and thus make associated educational choices, based on what is perceived to fit within their current social and occupational structure (Hodkinson 2008). Therefore, as Hodkinson also (2008) notes, it matters little how good information and guidance is; unless in synergy with the student, there will be “other factors and forces . . . that exert a greater influence” (2008, 14). Knowledge of a student is therefore extremely important if students are to be encouraged to be suitably aspirational. However, whilst students will make choices in relation to what they feel ‘fits’ with what they understand and know, arguably the same will be true for the types of direction teachers feel able to offer.

Research suggests that different post-16 routes enjoy different levels of prestige and status, and some schools clearly place a much greater emphasis on particular post-16 routes than others. Foskett *et al.* (2008), for example, discuss how schools with high socio-economic status (SES) catchment areas tended to deliver careers guidance that encouraged traditional academic careers, whilst schools with low SES catchment areas had a much stronger commitment to vocational pathways. Research by the Slack, Hughes and Rout (2013) also found that students predicted to do well at GCSE were less likely to receive advice about vocational options, while those predicted to do less well were more likely to. In addition, students often have a sense that one route is more preferable for them than others, dependent on how they identify in relation to their understanding of themselves as educational ‘achievers’ or not (Fuller 2009; Fuller and Macfadyen 2012).

The new coalition government is strongly committed to increasing funding in the area of vocational training (Coalition Government, 2011) as set out in its priorities for maximising participation rates of 16- to 24-year-olds in Education, Training and Work (HM Government 2011). As Leitch also points out in his Review of Skills in 2006:

Our intermediate and technical skills lag countries such as Germany and France. We have neither the quantity nor the quality of necessary vocational skills Despite recent improvements, the UK's post-16 participation in education and training is below the OECD average. At age 17, 83 per cent are enrolled in education and training, compared to more than 90 per cent in the best performing countries. International evidence suggests that parity of esteem of the vocational route . . . are needed to achieve world-leading levels of post-16 participation in education and training (Leitch 2006, 6).

While a sustained and targeted commitment to vocational pathways is clearly commendable, the introduction and subsequent abolition of the Diploma illustrates well the confusion and ambiguity that can surround new initiatives and directives. Introduced in 2008, the Diploma was offered as a more vocationally-based alternative to GCSEs and was hailed as being a major contribution to the overhauled 14–19 curriculum. Combining both academic and applied content, the Diploma was

positioned as more inclusive, and a viable alternative to further study, apprenticeships or employment.

Although very specific issues with the Diploma in relation to costs, assessment and academic content were perceived, more pragmatically, the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding the new Diplomas created difficulties in convincing parent and students that they were suitable options to take (Marson-Smith et al. 2009). There were also fears of creating a two-tier system: a survey of universities indicated that only 4 out of 10 saw it as a viable alternative entrance qualification to Higher Education (Hodgson and Spours 2008). The lack of information amongst teachers and schools is seen as significant in this (McCrum et al. 2009). This resulted in its quiet demise in November 2011 under the new coalition government.

Clearly, work is needed to raise both the prestige and viability of vocational courses as an attractive post-16 route for all types of students, not just educational underachievers. In addition, those involved in providing the information, guidance and direction obviously need to be well informed about what they are, what they involve and where they lead in terms of future career paths. With the shift of responsibility for career guidance to schools, it is likely that teachers will come under increasing pressure to provide high quality and well-informed direction to their students. In this paper, we explore teachers' confidence in doing this. We also consider the ways teachers will need to be supported to enable them to do this well.

Methods

Data collection: Data were collected in 2010 via a mixed method research design through an online survey and in-depth interviews with teachers in the south-east of England. Using a largely interpretivist framework, the method was considered to be the most appropriate as it enabled us to explore what may or may not matter to teachers in relation to careers guidance and advice, as well as to contact a larger number of teachers who could participate in the research by completing the survey at their convenience. Teachers were invited to participate in the study via email and, in total, 301 teachers from 40 secondary schools across the south-east – and who formed part of the University's Partnership network – participated in the online survey. This way of collecting the data will, however, inherently limit the scope of the findings to the specific geographical reach of the study.

The survey collected data on teachers' knowledge of various post-16 options and explored their confidence in providing guidance in these areas. In addition, the questionnaire collected data on teachers' roles and responsibilities in school as well as the length of time they had been teaching for. The survey's reliability was first tested with a small pilot of 20 teachers who offered feedback of the survey design. The piloting allowed for any potential ambiguity with the questionnaire design to be identified. Questions were both closed and open-ended and included a number of Likert-scaled questions enabling an exploration of the strength and direction of the responses.

For example, questions explored how much teachers knew about various routes, who they considered to be most important in providing student advice and careers guidance, and what they felt their training needs were with respect to this. A further 18 follow-up, in-depth telephone interviews were then carried out with a sub-sample of secondary school teachers from the survey. They were selected based on their willingness to be interviewed. The telephone interviews were semi-structured and explored the survey questions in more detail but with a particular emphasis on experience and views on their role in guiding and providing information to students. They lasted approximately 40 minutes, were recorded and then transcribed.

Sample: Of those included in the survey, 66 percent of teachers were female and 34 percent male. All of the teachers were currently working in secondary schools, and 92 percent of the sample had more than 5 years' teaching experience and had some form of responsibility in school: Senior management (14%); Head of Department (41%); and "other" (34%). Ninety-one percent of teachers had a sixth form facility in their school, of whom 55 percent of teachers were in schools offering a Diploma in key stage 4. The interview sample included 11 females and 7 males and all were from secondary schools.

Data analysis: The online survey included closed and open-ended questions. The survey data was analysed in SPSS with frequencies of responses and cross-tabulations used to explore the data. The use of frequencies allowed for an overall picture of the data, whilst the cross-tabulations enabled an exploration of patterns and trends. A Chi-square test of association was also carried out on key variables of interest and within sub-sets of the data to explore the relationships between responses and their strengths.

The telephone interviews were recorded and then transcribed with the data then coded deductively with themes already identified. Coding was initially applied to themes covering attitudes to advice and career guidance; for example, positive and negative attitudes, confidence or lack of confidence. The data were also categorised inductively in response to emergent themes arising through the first stage of the coding process; for instance, pressures on schools and views on differing student needs. The data coding process was carried out by two separate coders and the results of the individual coding were then compared. Comparing the similarity and difference in the coding via inter-coder reliability testing allows for a degree of confidence in both the reliability and validity of the codes identified and in their application to the data. A high degree of coding similarity was demonstrated when comparing the coding in this research. For the purposes of this paper, the key themes drawn are those that can be considered as relating to confidence in advice and career guidance delivery, for example, knowledge, responsibility and training needs. In carrying out this research, full ethical clearance was sought from and granted by the University's Ethics Committee and all ethical procedures and guidelines were complied with. When reporting the data, all identifying information was removed.

This research was funded by Progress South Central, a now disbanded lifelong learning network that worked in partnership with universities and colleges to promote, develop and support the progression of vocational students into and through higher education.

Results

This section is organised in relation to teachers' knowledge of post-16 routes and their confidence in delivering advice and career guidance about these routes. Perceptions relative to responsibilities for post-16 guidance, as well as the ways teachers can be supported in improving current career guidance provision are also explored.

Knowledge of post-16 routes

When asked about their involvement with career guidance and post-16 options in their schools, almost all the teachers stated that they had some form of input. Concerning how confident they were in providing this, most stated that they were, although a quarter expressed no confidence at all. Most teachers felt competent in offering direction on 'traditional' routes, such as A level (93%) but were less sure of other, more vocational options. A large number of teachers knew nothing at all about Apprenticeships (50%); NVQs (38%) or BTECs (24%) and one-quarter was unsure which, if any, non-traditional options were offered in the sixth form of their schools.

Having confidence in offering guidance on A levels was often connected to a teacher's subject area, whilst a lack of knowledge and experience explained their lack of information regarding other routes:

I'm am pretty good at A level stuff and advising on uni courses in my subject area (Maths, interview).

I am not sure of the type and range of courses available, particularly apprenticeships and other vocational courses; typically teachers won't have taken these routes so won't be familiar with them (Physical Education (PE), interview).

A focus on A levels was also explained by some as resulting from the type of school they were working in:

We are an academic school so A levels are the thing (English, interview)

Each teacher is confident about their subject. The focus is on A Level in school ... that's what I know about (Maths, interview).

Most of our boys don't need much IAG really. We get 100 percent A-C year in, year out. They will proceed to university so we'll advise them well on that (Head of Economics, interview).

In exploring teachers' knowledge of Diplomas specifically, only 13 percent of teachers claimed they knew a lot about them. Most felt they did not know enough to comment, whereas some knew nothing at all.

To be honest, I don't know what it is. When it comes to parents' evening, we tell the parents that we haven't a clue about it and ask them to phone the teacher who teaches it (Psychology, interview).

As Fosket *et al.* (2008) note, the type of school and likely routes of their students appeared to be important to the type of guidance and direction schools provided and which information teachers felt able to give. Interestingly however, teachers knew very little about other local providers in their area or what they offered in terms of education and training; over a third stated they knew nothing at all:

... I know a little bit about BTEC because we have a couple of kids every year who do it and they chat about it (French, interview).

... quite a lot of pupils go to agricultural college and hair and beauty courses (PE, interview).

... I've got to say I don't know a hell of a lot about what other places do (History, interview).

... alternative provision? That's not something we have much call for here (Maths, interview).

Hodgeson and Spours (2008) suggest that the interest of schools matters in the provision of IAG and this was true for 44 percent of the teachers surveyed:

Schools are not independent and simply do not put the needs of the students first. The financial incentive for keeping students in a sixth form are key, as are league tables, Ofsted pressure and political capital (Survey response).

[advising on] the best route for individuals is not easy in the current league table environment (Survey response).

For many teachers, the plethora of post-16 options alongside a 14–19 landscape that appeared to be in constant flux meant that a lot felt they simply did not have time to keep on top of all the developments. In the interviews, some teachers acknowledged that, as a profession, teachers' information and knowledge about the different pathways was not up to standard, "teachers don't have enough knowledge, that's my gut feeling".

Responsibility for providing Advice and Career Guidance

Almost all teachers felt they were important in the provision of advice and career guidance to students and should be involved in the process (90%). The same share

also believed that students really welcome and value this input. Teachers were then asked to identify, in order of significance, those they felt were most important in delivering career guidance to young people. Subject teachers and school careers advisors were those the teachers ranked most highly (31% and 30%). Connexions was considered important by 14 percent and parents by 10 percent. Clearly, the teachers feel they have a role. Yet it is interesting that previous research indicated a significant disparity between teachers' and students' views on this. In research that looked at student attitudes to their career guidance and provision (Fuller et al. 2009), parents were ranked as most important by 45 percent of students, followed by Connexions (26%) and subject teachers (13%).

In the interviews the teachers were asked to consider who they felt was best placed to offer career guidance to students. All of the teachers felt that students should have access to one-to-one careers guidance and that this should be delivered by someone who had a good relationship with the pupil, understood their needs as well as their academic capabilities. The form tutor (the tutor with pastoral responsibilities) was seen as the person best placed for this:

The role of the tutor is very important as the key is the person with the knowledge of the pupil (English, interview).

Yet not all of those surveyed felt they were the best person to guide students, recognising that most often it is a teacher's own experience on which they draw:

... a subject teacher in a 11–16 school with no training, no time and an out-of-date view of their own journey through higher education is not going to be very helpful to students (Survey response).

Over three-quarters of teachers felt that schools were currently doing a good job in supporting their students' decision-making, although somewhat paradoxically only a third felt students were provided with enough information to make an informed choice. In terms of how supported by their schools teachers felt in delivering advice and careers guidance, the picture was a little mixed. Whilst only 10 percent felt unsupported at all, 64 percent felt they needed more support than they currently had:

... I personally feel very supported in my school. They [pupils] only have to say 'oh yes I'm interested in engineering' and I know who I would ask immediately (PE, interview).

... we've had no support in providing IAG to anyone let alone the 16 plus group (Maths, interview).

Most teachers agreed that they spent some time on finding relevant information and improving their knowledge of pupils' post-16 options. However, more than half

stated this was in fact very little time, with some indicating that the area was not a priority. The following quotes typify some of their responses:

There is no time and with the other responsibilities we have any enquiries we make are on a need-to-know basis (Survey response).

To be brutally honest my research into it is not in any depth. You can only give pointers (Survey response).

I have a large workload and I am a head of department. I do very little on IAG (Survey response).

Some teachers were aware of sources of support available “I know the TDA⁵ website is there, but I never look at it”. However, nearly all teachers felt that it was training that was essential, with three-quarters of those surveyed expressing a need for much more information and support than they currently had:

If I were to advise 6th formers about their options then I’d want to be given information about options other than university as I currently have no idea what’s available to them in terms of apprenticeships etc ... (Psychology, interview).

It is clear from the data that the teachers are involved in a number of ways of providing information, advice and career guidance to their students. Whilst for some this was quite ad hoc, very subject specific and also constrained by institutional influences, the teachers were clear that they want to direct students well, but felt they needed far more information to be able to do so well.

Improving Information, Advice and Career Provision

The teachers felt there were a number of ways additional input could be used to support students’ decision-making in positive ways. Visits from employers were considered as being “*very helpful*” (56%) for example, as were “taster” days (an opportunity to try out and experience a particular route) (55%) of different options. Visits from Further Education/Higher Education tutors and ex-pupils were also viewed as particularly useful.

In terms of practical suggestions, perhaps unsurprisingly time was a key factor in suggestions for improving advice and career guidance: time for teachers to spend on improving their knowledge but also in supporting students. A vital theme in all the open-ended comments was the recognition that a good understanding of the students’ ambitions and aspirations as well as their academic profile was important for helping students make choices that were personalised, suitably ambitious but also realistic. In many ways, the knowledge of the students was framed as a strong justification by the teachers for the value of their involvement. However, the important role of external input was also acknowledged. Expertise in careers

provision was seen as important, not least because of the specialised knowledge but also a perceived sense of a greater impartiality.

Currently, students receive some form of advice and guidance in year 9 (age 14 years) during the process of choosing the subject options they wish to take in years 10 and 11. Just over half of those surveyed felt this was an appropriate time in students' lives to begin thinking about career guidance. Just under a third, however, felt that career guidance and support could be introduced much earlier, with 23 percent stating that the point of starting secondary school, in year 7, would be appropriate:

I don't see why it couldn't start in year 7 or 8. Why it can't be the basis, the right time to lay the groundwork to making subject choices ... there's often a bit of a panic later (Survey response).

In the interviews it was clear that for many teachers consecutive governments have given very ambiguous messages about the direction and emphasis of post-16 education. The sporadic moves towards and then away from the provision, value and status of vocational training are one example cited:

Not in all the time I have been teaching, since about the 1970s, has there been a genuine sustained promotion of the vocational side of education (PE, interview).

These views were also evident in attitudes to the previous Diplomas. Overall, the teachers had felt overloaded with information and found it hard to keep abreast of ongoing developments. A typical interview response is:

The Diploma? It's yet another qualification. There are too many! It's difficult to keep up with them all! (Chemistry, interview).

The teachers were unequivocal in needing training to be able to direct students well "teachers must be fully trained so that they can advise with confidence especially when it comes to apprenticeship". Yet, even when vocational routes were framed as positive and worthwhile post-16 routes, there was an implied assumption that they were not necessarily an obvious choice for the more 'academic' student:

... don't 'force' the bright students into making the As/A2 route their only choice. Allow the students to make their own decision and if they want to do an apprenticeship, despite being predicted 8 A* then let them (Head of Economics, interview).

Such a view was also evident in some teachers' attitudes to the Diplomas in that they were an opportunity to provide alternative routes for disadvantaged pupils to train for the future. It was seen by one teacher as an aid to helping "those who were a bit slower to develop". Indeed, discussions made it clear that the teachers saw the Diploma as being for the less able and A Levels for the more able. More importantly,

it was seen as yet another change that was creating a sense of instability and a lack of consistency.

In relation to the best ways to support teachers more practically, suggestions typically related to guidance around vocational options, other post-16 providers as well as higher educational routes. Interestingly, specific input around what employers ‘want’ was also considered to be valuable:

Guidance regarding options available and their relative value to employers ... (Survey response).

Information on how employers view non-A level qualifications (Survey response).

... what skills employers are looking for? More info on the skills needed by local employers and the likely development areas would be useful (History, interview).

Opportunities for employers to talk in school and pupils to visit would be really good (English, interview).

Some teachers felt that many initiatives such as the Diplomas introduced by the last Labour governments were ill conceived and such a view was explained by some as a reason for reticence in advocating non-traditional post-16 routes to their students. For almost all of those surveyed, the post-16 landscape was fast changing and transient and an ability to ‘stay on top’ of current developments and directions was considered difficult. Invariably, this had an impact not just on teachers’ knowledge but also confidence in delivering career guidance and support and this raises important considerations with respect to encouraging participation in more vocational routes. Perhaps quite unsurprisingly, the teachers were overwhelmingly in favour of help and assistance in understanding the many pathways now available; indeed, it was considered crucial if they were to be able support students in navigating them. This perhaps takes on even greater significance with the raising of the compulsory school leaving age to 17 in 2013 and to 18 in 2014.

Inset training days, continuing professional development opportunities as well as leaflets that provide ‘at a glance’ information were considered by the majority of those surveyed as the most effective means of supporting teachers. Many also expressed a view that a dedicated careers advisor “a trusted advisor, someone [students will] have built a relationship with, perhaps from lower down the school” should be available in schools. Such a role was considered as offering a source of informed and knowledgeable support for students but would also be a useful point of contact for teachers.

Discussion

The new government framework for careers provision effective from September 2012 places the onus on schools to ensure that students have access to the support and

direction that best reflects their needs. The need for students to have an opportunity for impartial guidance so as to make informed decisions about the routes and pathways available is key – where these lead in terms of future careers and which course is the most suited to their educational strengths and interests. The teacher's role is clearly articulated in this directive, particularly in the responsibilities of subject teachers and form tutors in its delivery. However, with schools required to produce their own data on the destination of their year 11s it is clear that teachers face a number of challenges if they are to be able deliver information, advice and career guidance that is not just unambiguous, well-informed and up-to-date but also, and perhaps more importantly, impartial. Indeed, one might argue that it will become even more difficult than research suggests it has been to date.

Teachers can and do play an important role in guiding and directing young people in the choices they make about their futures. Whether formally or more informally, the teachers in this research feel they are well placed to do so given their relationship with their students and the knowledge they have in terms of student backgrounds, abilities and career aspirations. The very apparent finding of this research that the teachers feel they have a significant part to play and that students want and value their input is consistent with other studies. Invariably, an understanding of a student is important for being able to personalise and direct well. It is worrying that current proposals do not consider this background knowledge as an imperative in supporting and guiding students. This is clearly unproblematic for students with clear goals and parents and carers who are well informed. However, for students who are undecided and lack other sources of support there is a risk that they will not necessarily make the most appropriate choices.

However, the results of this research also suggest that teachers are most comfortable and confident in delivering guidance in areas that relate to their own subject specialism and experiences. As Fosket et al. (2008) found, there was also a clear sense that some teachers view particular routes as holding more value than others and that the 'type' of school a teacher worked in would inform the priority focus in offering post-16 direction. Teachers knew very little about what other providers offered and, consistent with the contention of Hodgson and Spours (2008), the financial incentive in securing student progression into a school's sixth form was very relevant. The loss of what is essentially a pupil premium on sixth form places will invariably be hugely influential in terms of future post-16 guidance. It is almost inevitable that this loss will lead to a much greater imperative for schools to secure student numbers within their sixth forms. A positive consequence may well be that we see the increasing development of local consortia of schools working together to increase the range of post-16 options offered. However, it may also mean that it becomes unviable for some schools to retain a sixth form.

The results of this research strongly suggest there is a real priority need to improve teachers' knowledge and understanding of the full spectrum of possible

options available to students as they consider their transition from compulsory education. Whilst from a small-scale study that is not intended to be generalisable, this finding nonetheless resonates with and mirrors the recommendations of other research in this area (Lord et al. 2006; McCrone et al. 2009). Given the government's commitment to a far more comprehensive vocational programme, a system of qualifications that is more transparent and easier to understand is going to be vitally important. Teachers are already in need of support to make sense of and understand the plethora of progression routes already available. As a need, this will undoubtedly only escalate under government proposals. The value of various qualifications needs to be clearly articulated as do the ways these sit within the world of work. Rationalising the curriculum by providing a unified and more inclusive framework for vocational study could help achieve this. It is only if a teacher understands that they can ensure that their students do too.

The proposed push towards vocational pathways and apprenticeships in particular is likely to significantly increase in momentum in the near future. The ways these routes are currently being framed within the media as a viable alternative to the increased higher education tuition fees (coming into effect from 2012) will have a contributory role in this emphasis. Yet it is important that the existing academic–vocational divide is not further aggravated. If vocational education and training is to shake off its lower status than its academic equivalents, good information on the value of these as well as their realistic links to the workforce need to be clearly communicated. In Germany, for example, apprenticeships in engineering are hugely competitive and as a result enjoy a great deal of social prestige and esteem. An on-going need therefore remains to improve the current status of vocational programmes if there is to be any sense of parity within the education system of England and Wales and only good careers guidance will help achieve this. Explicitly, the existing system of qualifications needs to be far more obvious and easier to navigate and understand, as do the progression routes and their importance to employers. It is equally necessary that vocational pathways do not continue to be identified by some with lower educational attainers and particular types of institutions. To ensure this, it is important that an increasing emphasis on vocational opportunities is not seen as simply tokenism and that evident parity exists in terms of content and quality both within and between routes. However, the most logical way to best alleviate some of these distinctions and misconceptions is via those on the frontline of dissemination, through the well-informed advice and guidance that teachers offer alongside the provision of guidance and support by those qualified and best able to deliver this.

Despite the loss of an explicit reference to an understanding of careers guidance in the new Teacher Standards, there is a strong case for careers guidance to be embedded in Initial Teacher Training to take explicit account of the role teachers clearly play, and will continue to play, in directing students in relation to their future

pathways. The growth in vocational curricula suggests, at the very least, that support and training to increase teachers' awareness of the various vocational landscapes as well as the progression routes to vocational higher education and the professions will be essential. Strongly evident in this research was the desire for targeted and generic continuing profession development opportunities and these will become vital for current teachers if schools are to meet their statutory obligations.

Conclusion

Policy initiatives in the area of careers guidance that fail to take account of the complex post-16 landscape are courting the probability that the failings and weaknesses inherent in the previous system will not only be replicated but exasperated under the new one. If, as is suggested, there is inadequate funding provision to permit schools to buy in the external expertise required, it is likely that there will be a far greater dependence on teachers than currently, particularly for those students previously ill served under Connexions, and that teachers and schools are likely to fail in their statutory duty to offer impartial career guidance. Enabling students to make the right choices is important for both the individual and the national economic well-being. Teachers are an important source of guidance and direction for students, yet teachers lack confidence to do this outside of their sphere of familiarity. Careers guidance is acknowledged as a highly specialised area, thus without sufficient knowledge, experience and support for teachers we will be doing a great disservice not just to our students, but also to our teachers. We suggest then that support and training for teachers to enable them to deliver high quality careers education and guidance is crucial – as is its inclusion in teacher training programmes. We also argue that the task given to schools to provide good IAG cannot be achieved without funding, specialised support and outside services. Only if teaching staff are equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and support can we be sure that students will be accessing the types of support to which they are entitled.

Dr Carol Fuller is the Programme Director for the Educational Doctorate and Deputy Director of Research at the Institute of Education, the University of Reading, where *Dr Elizabeth McCrum* is the School Director for Teaching and Learning and *Mr Tony Macfadyen* the Director of Enterprise.

Notes

- 1 This was post-16 at the time of writing this paper
- 2 <http://oxforddictionaries.com/>
- 3 In 2001, 68 percent of the 25- to 34-year-olds had completed upper secondary education compared to 74 percent in the OECD as a whole (OECD report, 2003).
- 4 The Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) is the national agency and recognised sector body responsible for the training and development of the school workforce.
- 5 Training and Development Agency

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