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Career conversations: why it is important for students to talk about their futures in work with teachers, family and friends

The OECD Career Readiness project explores quantitative evidence to identify how teenage career-related activities and attitudes are linked to better adult employment outcomes. Evidence from multiple national longitudinal studies shows that secondary school students benefit by actively exploring their futures in work. One indicator of better employment outcomes is students reporting having career conversations with family members, peers and importantly, with subject teachers. This policy brief draws on evidence from the longitudinal studies and beyond to address the following questions:

- What is the evidence of career conversations being associated with better employment outcomes?
- What are career conversations and how common are they?
- How can schools optimise the chances of career conversations being useful to young people?

About the OECD Career Readiness project

The OECD Career Readiness project reviews existing research literature and undertakes new analysis to explore the relationship between teenage career-related attitudes and activities and better employment outcomes in adulthood. It does so by looking at evidence from national longitudinal datasets, studies which follow large numbers of people from childhood into adulthood. By using statistical analysis, it is possible to take account of factors (socio-economic status, gender, academic achievement) that commonly strongly influence the character of working lives in order to isolate elements in teenage lives that relate to better experiences as an adult in work as measured by lower levels of unemployment, higher wages and/or greater career satisfaction.

The Career Readiness project confirms 11 teenage indicators of better employment outcomes and clusters them into three themes: young people can expect to do better in work if they, as teenagers in school related to how much they explore, experience and think about potential futures in work. The ways in which students explore their futures is especially important as it relates to activities undertaken in schools.

Analysis of multiple longitudinal surveys reveals that in three or more countries, strong evidence exists of better employment prospects if students by the age of 15 have:

- Engaged with people in work through career talks or job fairs
- Taken part in workplace visits or job shadowing
- Been taught how to apply for jobs and prepare for interviews
- Participated in occupationally-focused short programmes (where available) within programmes of general education, and
- Engaged in career conversations.

This policy brief focuses on this final aspect of young people's exploration of the world of work: the conversations with parents, teachers and friends they have as teenagers about future careers. It also touches on the role of conversations with employers and career counsellors and was written at a time of growing concern over the risk of youth unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

About career conversations

A common set of questions found in national longitudinal surveys relate to whether, and with whom, students, typically aged between 14 and 16, have had conversations about their career plans. The best way to describe what is meant by a career conversation is to share examples of the questions which young people responded to:

Country and Survey	Questions
Australia: *Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth*	"Have you talked to a teacher individually about your career plans to find out about what you will do after you leave school?" "Have you talked to friends or other students about careers?"
Canada: *Youth In Transition Survey*	"Who have you talked to, to get information about work you may be interested in when you finish your schooling?"
Korea: *Korean Educational Longitudinal Study*	"To what extent did advice from relatives influence your career path for high school?"
United Kingdom: *British Cohort Study*	"Have you had any personal contact with a teacher to discuss your career/Job/further education" (Excluding career lessons)

It should be noted that longitudinal surveys rarely ask about conversations with professional career counsellors and such quantitative evidence about the long-term impacts of such provision has been historically comparatively rare. Consequently, the career conversations addressed in this paper can be characterised as typically informal and taking place with people with whom young people already have some relationship: parents, relatives, friends, teachers.

What evidence exists of career conversations being associated with better employment outcomes?

In all, the study finds positive associations career conversations and adult employment outcomes in seven datasets from four countries. The beneficial associations are listed below. Studies typically look at the experiences of young adults at around age 25, some ten years after they have reported career conversations about that future in work.

Figure 1. Summary of findings from national longitudinal datasets

Country	Study	Conversation partner	Impact
Australia	LSAY	Teachers	Greater career satisfaction
Australia	LSAY	Family members	Greater career satisfaction
Australia	LSAY	Friend	Greater career satisfaction
Canada	YITS	Teachers	Higher wages Lower unemployment
Canada	YITS	Parent/guardian	Higher wages Lower unemployment
UK	BCS	Teachers	Greater life satisfaction
UK	LSYPE	Teachers	Lower unemployment
UK	NCDS	Teachers	Realisation of occupational ambition
US	ELS	Parent or close relative	Lower unemployment
US	YDS	Teacher	Great career success

Notes:
LSAY - Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth
YITS - Youth in Transition Survey
BCS - British Cohort Study (BCS70)
LSYPE - Longitudinal Study of Young People in England
NCDS - The National Child Development Study
ELS - Educational Longitudinal Study
YDS – The Youth Development Study
Sources: For full details of the studies summarised above – see (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020[1]), "*Career ready?: How schools can better prepare young people for working life in the era of COVID-19*", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 241, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e1503534-en and (Covacevich et al., 2021[2]), "Indicators of teenage career readiness: An analysis of longitudinal data from eight countries", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 258, OECD Publishing, Paris.

The size of impacts measured can be considerable:

- In Australia, students who reported having spoken to a family member by the age of 15 reported an average level of career satisfaction 0.62 points higher on a scale of 0-10 than comparable peers who had not had such conversations
- In Canada, students who reported having spoken to a teacher about a career ambition by the age of 15 on average earned 3% more at 30 than comparable peers who had not had such conversations
- In the United Kingdom, students at 14-15 who reported having spoken with a teacher inside of lessons about their future studies are 24% less likely to be NEET at age 19-20 than comparable peers who had not had such conversations
- In the United States, students who reported having spoken to a parent or other close adult relative by the age of 15 went on to be 1.48 times less likely to be unemployed (Not in Education Employment or Training) at the age of 25 in comparison to peers who had not had such conservations

What makes career conversations beneficial to young people?

The research literature provides insights that helps to make sense of why teenagers who report having career conversations can be expected to do better in the adult jobs market. Career conversations can be a sign that a young person has access to support through their transitions, a means of securing new and useful career-related information and a prompt for confirming or challenging career thinking.

Career conversations as a sign that a young person is being supported through their transitions

Career planning is a social process, more effectively undertaken through engagement with people who can provide emotional and practical support. Not all teenagers however report speaking to people, even those close to them, about their plans for the future. A study of 6 000 young people in the Growing up in Ireland longitudinal study for example, finds that only 66% of the most disadvantaged students aged 17 and 18 had spoken to their father about their career plans. By contrast, 88% of their more advantaged peers from the highest socio-economic backgrounds agreed that they had had such a parental discussion. A UK study of 580 students aged 17-19 is also disconcerting. Hart (2016[3]) found that one in four individuals reported having aspirations they had never shared with anyone else and a third of the respondents said they were sometimes afraid to tell other people about their job ambitions. Another big study of over 20 000 students, also in the UK, looks at teenagers who experienced unemployment after leaving school. Rennison et al (2005[4]) finds that young people who had left school at 16 and were not in education, employment or training at 17 were six times more likely to report having no sources of advice about decisions to continue in education than peers who went on to stay in full-time education. As set out below, across the OECD countries more than one in six 15 year olds say that they have never had a conversation about their career plans or thoughts.

Career conversations as mechanisms for securing new and useful information

One long-standing approach for making sense of why some people do better in the search for work than others draws on the theory of social capital which explores the ways in which social networks and interactions with other people provide important benefits to individuals. Young people have much to gain from supportive families and friends, but they can also gain much from interactions with people who they do not know well. One form of social capital is particularly relevant. In the 1970s, the US sociologist Mark Granovetter coined the phrase 'the strength of weak ties.' He found that people looking for work whose social networks were broad and shallow – knowing lots of people, but from different backgrounds – were at an advantage in the search for work. He theorised that such networks increased the likelihood of an individual accessing information that proved to be new and useful ('non-redundant trustworthy information'). It is an idea that has often been applied to young people as they transition through education and into work (Raffo and Reeves, 2000[5]; Jokisaari and Nurmi, 2005[6]; Tomlinson, 2013[7]; McDonald et al., 2007[8]), for example, have drawn on Granovetter to explain why US teenagers who say that they know non-parental adults who play an important role in their lives go on to experience much lower levels of unemployment in adulthood.

Studies of interactions with people in work arranged by schools also often draw on Granovetter's ideas (Mann and Percy, 2014[9]; Kashefpakdel and Percy, 2017[10]). Career talks provides a good example. The Career Readiness project finds that students who participate in career talks or job fairs can typically expect to experience better employment outcomes. One important UK longitudinal study is particularly helpful in understanding what is happening. It finds that wage boosts in young adulthood (age 26) are significantly increased if students when aged 14-16 agreed that the career talks were 'very helpful' to them (Kashefpakdel and Percy, 2017[10]). They also benefited more financially later on from having participated in a greater number of career talks - and the more talks a student reported, the more likely it was that they

said they were helpful to them. A bit like throwing mud at a wall, the more the students experienced, the more likely it was that something useful stuck with them. What this suggests is that students are in a position to both gain and recognise new and useful information about career journeys from their interactions with people in work. In this way, they can be imagined to be gaining access to information about the labour market and their potential place(s) within it that help them to visualise and plan their own futures. Schools consequently should help students to hear regularly from people in work, but also encourage and enable young people to engage in conversations about their career thinking with a wide range of adults. The great majority of adults in all countries have an experience of being paid for their labour and each brings a potentially new and useful perspective to a young person.

Through conversations with people in work, parents, relatives and teachers, students can be viewed as gaining information about different career pathways that can prove to be helpful to them. The more conversations they have, the more likely it is that they will gain information that turns out to be helpful. Here, the role of teachers working in partnership with career guidance counsellors is especially important. Teachers are both close to young people and likely to bring with them different experiences and social networks based on their own personal journeys through education and into work. They are also likely to have a greater understanding of the potential value of their own subject discipline in the jobs market and how to make sense of opportunities to continue education or training after secondary education.

Career conversations as a prompt for challenging and confirming career thinking

An important difference however between career talks and career conversations is that the former can typically be expected to be more of a monologue and the later more of a dialogue. Through a dialogue, young people are encouraged, enabled and challenged to articulate their own career thinking. As the Dutch scholars (Kuijpers and Meijers, 2017[11]) have argued, an essential function of career guidance is to develop the career competencies of young people. By this, they highlight five primary elements of a student's exploration of, and psychological preparation for, the transition through education and into work:

- capacity reflection (observation of capabilities that are important for one's career)
- motivation reflection (observation of wishes and values that are important for one's own career)
- work exploration (researching work and job possibilities)
- career directedness (making thoughtful decisions and taking actions that allow work and learning to correspond with one's capabilities and motivation and challenges at work), and
- finally, networking (building and maintaining contacts focused on career development).

Here, they picture career conversations playing roles that help a young person to:

> *(re)formulate dreams and goals regarding a career, to create vocational hope, that is, the feeling that a career is possible and to help students develop a career narrative. A career dialogue enables students to apply career competencies and in doing so, to develop a career identity in steps. A career identity expresses itself in the form of a story and in a complex and dynamic world, this 'career story' helps people define who they are and how they should act within a career context. It does so by creating and providing meaning and direction and by constructing a sense of causality and continuity about one's career path... According to Savickas (2011) three steps are taken in shaping a career story. First 'small stories' are constructed to give meaning to actual experiences. Second, the connections between the small stories and the resulting reinterpretations become a 'larger story'. In a third step, based on this larger story, actual action steps (i.e. work exploration, career shaping and networking) can be formulated (Kuijpers and Meijers, 2017, p. 85[11])*

In this way, career conversations can be seen as challenging and enabling a teenager to articulate the ways in which they are visualising and planning their futures as adults.

Career conversations and beneficial career thinking

The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) offers insights into the impacts of career conversations on the career thinking of students. One of the conclusions of the Career Readiness project is that very frequently students demonstrate career thinking that is narrow, confused and distorted by social background (Mann et al., 2020[12]) and that such career thinking is commonly associated with worse employment outcomes in adulthood (Covacevich et al., 2021[13]; Covacevich et al., 2021[2]). Analysis of multiple national longitudinal datasets shows that students can be expected to do worse in employment if, as teenagers, they:

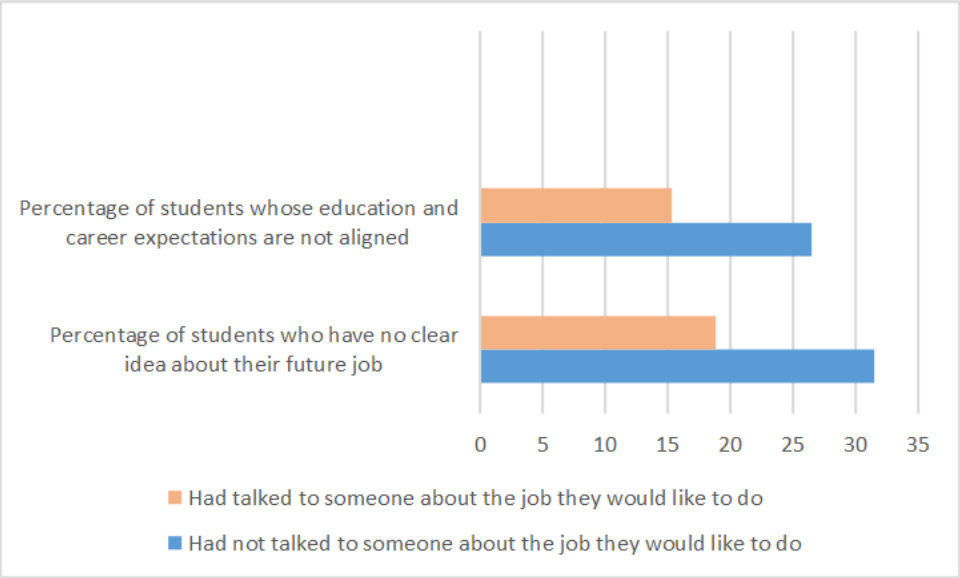
- are uncertain about their job plans
- are less ambitious about their hopes for the future
- demonstrate confusion, planning on undertaking education insufficient to achieve their job goals, and
- struggle to see the relationship between what they do in school and their futures in work.

The 2018 PISA dataset includes responses from over 650 000 15 year olds in 79 countries. It allows us to explore the relationships between participation in career conversations and more beneficial career thinking. By the age of 15, PISA 2018 shows an average of 83% of teenagers agree that they have "talked to someone about the job you would like to do when you finish your education" (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020[1]). Taking account of academic achievement (on the PISA tests), social background and gender, the analysis shows that students who reported such conversations are overwhelmingly more likely to exhibit more beneficial career thinking. They are:

- more certain about their plans for the future,
- more ambitious about those plans
- less confused about what they need to do to achieve their job goals (more aligned in their educational and occupational planning), and
- more likely to agree that their education is useful for their futures in work.

As illustrated in the figure below, the difference in career thinking between students who had had a career conversation and those who had not can be substantial.

Figure 2. Relationship between teenage career thinking and having spoken to someone about job interest. OECD average.

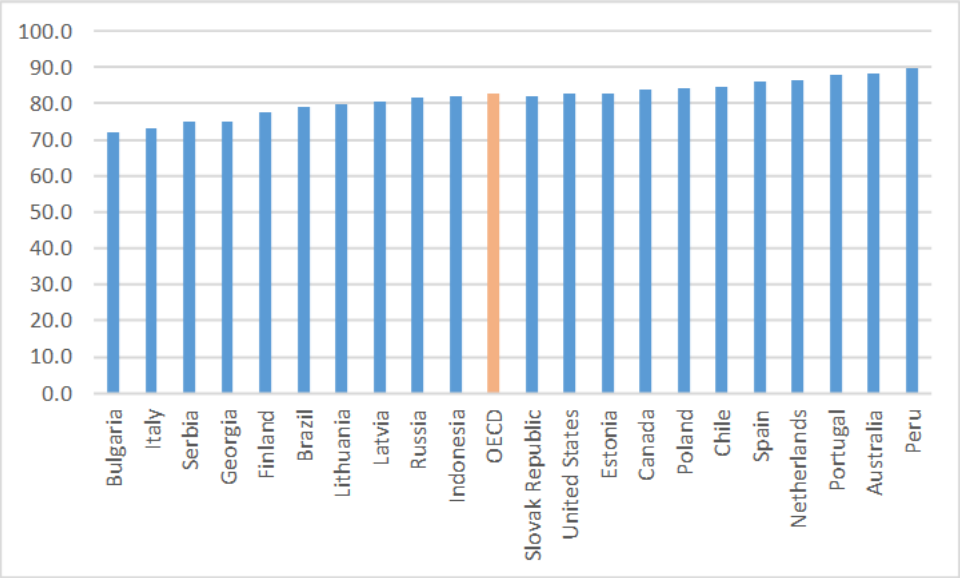


Source: (OECD, 2019[14]), *OECD PISA 2018 Database*, https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database/ (accessed on 22 October 2021).

Career conversations: who is having them?

Survey data highlights the fact that not all students report they are speaking to anyone at all about their career plans. PISA 2018 data shows that on average 17% of 15 year-old students from participating OECD countries say that they have not spoken to anyone about jobs they would like to do when they finish education. The proportion in such a position is more than 30% in six of the 21 countries for which results exist: Bulgaria (32%), Estonia (30%), Italy (33%), Latvia (30%), Lithuania (30%) and Serbia (32%). In terms of social background, young people from the most socially advantaged quarter in every country participating in the survey were more likely to have spoken to someone about their job interests than peers from the least advantaged quarter. In Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Serbia, the Slovak Republic and the United States, the difference between the two groups is more than ten percentage points. A particular concern is low achievers who can be expected to leave the safety of full-time education to make their way in the jobs market at a relatively young age. Of the quarter of students with the lowest scores on the PISA academic assessments, one in four (on average across OECD countries) have not had a career conversation. By contrast, 88% of the highest achievers reported having spoken to someone.

Figure 3. Percentage of students agreeing that they had talked to someone about the job they would like to do when they finish their education



Source: (OECD, 2019[14]), *OECD PISA 2018 Database*, https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database/ (accessed on 22 October 2021).

Consequently, schools cannot take for granted that students, outside of formal guidance sessions, are talking to people around them about their futures. Schools have a strong interest in understanding whether students are having informal conversations about their futures and encouraging a culture of career conversations within school.

Encouraging student-parent conversations

Parents occupy a hugely important role in the career development of young people. Around the world, school systems in different ways seek to engage parents in developing the career readiness of students. A recent summary of practice by Sally-Anne Barnes and colleagues at the University of Warwick highlights approaches that engage parents from Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, France, Hong Kong (China), the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. At the heart of such approaches is a commitment to bring parents into school approaches to career guidance and the activities that it involves (Barnes et al., 2020[15]). A further example comes from Pakistan, where guidance counsellor Raza Abbas puts on career events designed to include both parents and children (Covacevich et al., 2021[13]). In many countries, there are traditions of schools taking part in take-your-child-to-work days. It is important for schools to communicate to parents that they have important roles to play in encouraging and enabling the career exploration of their children, beginning with regular conversations about their plans for the future.

Encouraging teacher-student career conversations: from monologue to dialogue

Dutch studies based on recordings of career conversations between subject teachers and students shows that often they are very one-sided. Conversations tend to be driven by the teacher and focus on educational requirements more than actual occupational plans and/or the emotional engagement that students show in the pathways that they are engaged or their plans for the future. Looking particularly at the experiences of studies taking part in vocational placements, (Kuijpers and Meijers, 2017[11]) finds that conversations

which allow the student space to reflect upon and develop their plans are associated with more mature career thinking and a greater ability to see value in the work placement.

Box 1. Two roles for subject teachers in career conversations.

Within general education, Hooley and colleagues argue that subject teachers have important roles to play in supporting the development of student career thinking. Two particular roles are relevant to subject teachers in all education systems.

The teacher as career informant

Many students turn to their teachers to have informal conversations about their careers. Teachers bring a range of resources to the career conversations that they have with students. Notably, they are trusted adults who have made career decisions, built a career and have networks of friends and colleagues who have done the same. This personal experience of career building is a valuable resource that teachers can bring to career conversations in a similar way to conversations that young people have with other working people.

Typical tasks that a teacher might undertake in this role include:

- talking about decisions that they made and how they made them;
- talking about their career building (including discussing challenges and regrets);
- providing relevant examples (e.g. how they used a work placement or internship to help in getting a job);
- discussing other people that they know and their careers (this may include providing links to them to offer further career learning opportunities);
- discussing the role that organisations and networks have played in their career building and providing links to these resources; and
- providing specific subject or occupational information for those students who are particularly interested in pursuing a similar career.

The teacher as subject specialist

The connection with employer involvement in curriculum is a particularly fertile one. It is common for schools to bring in working people to demonstrate particular processes, talk about their working life, provide access to specialist equipment or offer enrichment activities. Teachers and schools have the opportunity to use these interactions for career guidance as well as curriculum learning. Building on the learning opportunities presented by returning alumni, guest speakers in schools, or the work placements of pupils, is a skill that can enrich teaching practice across subjects and age ranges – for example, by drawing links between particular areas of work and the academic skills that enable this work to take place. This could include anything from the influence of history and politics for a journalist, to the mathematical requirements for an engineer. This kind of real-world contextualisation can serve to both deepen the subject learning, and to increase the motivation of pupils.

Typical tasks that a teacher might undertake in this role include:

- explaining to pupils the progression routes open in continued learning in their subject area;
- using the curriculum to develop core employability skills;
- providing information and advice to pupils considering taking their subject as an option;

- making a planned contribution to the school's career guidance programme (e.g. use of letters of application and CVs, and reflective accounts of work placements, in English; use of a careers information database in Information and Communications Technology; study of local business in Geography; the changing role of women in the workplace in History);
- arranging work placements for pupils with employers relevant to their subject and visiting pupils on these placements (such visits are critical both for safeguarding young people and for scaffolding their learning, but also offer development opportunities for teachers to see how their subject is used beyond the context of school);
- explaining to pupils the relevance in the workplace of the knowledge and skills developed in their subject;
- using work and career as a way of making cross-curricular links with other subjects;
- using work-related projects within their subject teaching;
- arranging visits to relevant workplaces;
- organising a programme of visiting speakers from business;
- embedding employer-led interventions as part of the overall learning journey of pupils.

Source: Adapted from (Hooley, Watts and Andrews, 2015[16]), *Teachers and Careers: The role of school teachers in delivering career and employability learning*, International Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby.

Teacher training, professional development and career conversations

In most education systems across the OECD, it is not the contractual role of subject teachers to engage students in career conversations. However, longitudinal studies show that the benefits to students can be expected to be important. And yet, examples of initial or continuing teacher training covering career conversations are relatively few. The Dutch studies highlighted in this paper are an important exception. Supported by the Dutch Ministry of Education, vocational secondary schools nominated volunteer staff members to take part in a four-day training course focused on the practice of effective career conversations underpinned by understanding of the theories of change at play. Returning to their schools, over two days these school coaches trained teacher teams, videoing practice conversations. An important focus within training sessions was to introduce subject teachers to theories of teenage career learning and development. At times, career guidance can be seen as simply a signposting exercise towards publically available information. OECD research shows that such approaches can be expected to be much less effective than provision that encourages and enables students to actively and openly reflect on their career thinking and plans for the future. The training called on teachers to reflect on the character of such career conversations and the approaches which would be likely to make them more effective for students:

> *They were instructed to use a meaningful experience of a student as the starting point for a career conversation. This meant getting students to tell a small story about an actual experience and help them to assign personal meaning to it by combining various small stories into a larger story. Subsequently, teachers were taught to encourage students to use career competences by asking them specific questions. Finally, much attention was paid to affective components of the conversation: teachers were taught to give appreciative feedback (i.e. to engage with the emotions of students instead of ignoring these) and explicitly expressing particular qualities they felt they had identified in students (Kuijpers and Meijers, 2017, p. 87[11]).*

Drawing on questionnaires completed by 2 500 students before and after training had been undertaken, the study found that following teacher training, students found much greater value in conversations and came away from the experiences encouraged to undertake greater exploration themselves of their potential futures in work and pathways into them. Education systems and schools should feel encouraged to build on the results of work undertaken in the Netherlands to evaluate the effectiveness of different professional development approaches to enhance the quantity and quality of career conversations through secondary schooling. The Dutch study provides valuable information, but further research is warranted to explore the value of different approaches, including whole school engagement, that may be supported through alternative training programmes, initial teacher training and other interventions.

Talking about young people's futures in work

The evidence considered within this OECD Career Readiness study shows that it is especially important for students to be helped to develop the capacity to navigate confidently through education and training. Never before have so many young people stayed in education for so long and they are required to make plentiful decisions about what they will study, where they will study and, importantly, how hard they will study. This is the decision-making that underpins a sense of personal agency through education systems and into employment. Participation in career conversations can be seen as evidence of students seeking to make sense of their pathways through education, seeking out and (hopefully) reflecting on new information and experiences that will enable more confident decision-making.

Career conversations should be encouraged with a wide range of people, including family members, teachers and people in work. As well as encouraging active reflection among students, for schools they also provide a means to gauge student need for greater support. More effective conversations will ensure that students have space to speak, share their perspectives, ambitions and concerns, enabling them to create for themselves an understanding of how they can best engage in education and training to achieve their emerging ambitions for adult life. It is important for schools to understand whether their students are engaging in such conversations and if they are finding them useful. Where such conversations are taking place, some confidence can be taken that students are taking an active role in visualising and planning their futures. If this is not the case, international evidence suggests that this will be a matter of concern for schools.

The bottom line: creating a culture of career conversation to enhance the career readiness of students

To maximise the benefits of informal career conversations within career guidance, schools should:

- Engage and encourage parents to speak with their children about their job ambitions and how they plan to achieve them;
- Create opportunities for students to engage with people from a wide range of different occupations within guidance programmes;
- Prepare subject teachers and other members of the school community to encourage and engage in student-focused career conversations;
- Ask students if they are engaging in career conversations and with whom and consider providing greater guidance support for students who are not.

Career Readiness in the Pandemic

The OECD Career Readiness project provides policy makers and practitioners with evidenced guidance on how schools can best prepare young people for employment during a period of economic disruption. The project makes particular use of the results from the 2018 round of PISA and new analysis of national longitudinal datasets in ten countries.

For more information

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See: https://www.oecd.org/education/career-readiness/

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This report was prepared by the Career Readiness team at the OECD with assistance from the JPMorgan Chase Foundation.

NEW SKILLS AT WORK
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