



Careers advice should be at the heart of education, not an afterthought

Without adequate support schools are in danger of delivering an ivory tower curriculum that lacks relevance for young people

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Are schools doing enough to help young people jump over the obstacles blocking their career paths? Photograph: Matt Dunham/AP

Government departments try and neaten up the world into categories. But life isn't always this simple, and between education, business and welfare policies a mess is emerging. Careers education and guidance are focused on the spaces that exist between these agendas and this is causing some serious problems.

Learning how to manage your career is a lifelong process which needs to start early on in secondary school. But government policy is leading to less rather than more career support for young people. Career management is not just something that those in danger of slipping into unemployment need to be good at – all young people are presented with a host of difficult decisions. What subjects to choose? Sixth form, college, apprenticeship or work? Which university will be best? Stay at home or live away? All of these choices have huge implications and young people are likely to need help to navigate them.

But in 2011, the coalition government handed over the duty to secure careers advisors to individual schools, rather than local authorities. This means they can cut the amount of careers guidance and opt out of providing fully qualified careers advisers. As a result, eight out of 10 schools in England have reduced their careers advice, a survey last year suggested. In one case, a school had switched from 65 days of careers advice a year from Connexions to just 16 days of bought-in services.

Subject teachers do their best to support the progression of young people, but they are rarely specialists in the labour market. When teachers are able to work with careers professionals some exciting learning opportunities open up and it is possible to link careers education to subject-based education. For example, young people can learn about literature, about how books are produced and about what jobs exist that enable

the book to get from the author to the reader.

Even in schools which have well-developed careers programmes, only a fairly small amount of time is spent helping pupils to think about what opportunities are available, how to go about moving into them and how to decide what path to follow. Similarly, despite the amount of time that young people spend learning new skills and knowledge, relatively little time is devoted to thinking about how these might be applied beyond the school.

Without adequate careers education there is a danger that schools deliver an ivory tower curriculum that lacks relevance for employers and for the young people themselves. Moreover, without the support provided through personalised and professional career guidance, young people may struggle to find help with their career.

The Conservatives pledged to create a new all-age careers service that would be "the engine room of social mobility". But in reality, the government has created a tremendous policy mess. Within the department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) the argument for the importance of careers has been won and a National Careers Service was launched last year.

But at the Department of Education, careers guidance is ignored amid the rhetoric of school autonomy. As a result of these policies, the Connexions service has been effectively closed and schools have received a poorly articulated new duty to support career guidance, with no new money to implement this.

Against this policy backdrop many schools continue to find the resources to deliver excellent careers education and guidance. There is a growing body of evidence, however, which suggests that the quality and quantity of careers work in English schools is in decline. With pressure on school budgets, it's unsurprising that schools are cutting back on careers advice.

To avoid a national problem over a lack of guidance, the government should tighten up the statutory rules to ensure schools are offering adequate careers education and work-related learning.

The National Careers Service should also be funded to work with schools: it's absurd for government to fund a National Careers Service and then prevent it from working with young people. We should also think about the place of careers education within the broader education system. Career is a powerful concept that should be placed at the heart of education rather than tacked on as an afterthought.

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