



Teachers do know about work, but careers advice is for specialists

It's insulting to suggest that teachers don't know about work. But careers advice is about understanding the options available and how to prepare – and that requires careers advisers



Asking teachers to have a comprehensive knowledge of all careers in all industries is unreasonable, especially without any support, training or guidance. Photograph: Alamy.

Teachers, according to Vince Cable, are the "underlying problem" with poor careers advice in this country because they "know nothing about the world of work". His comments were guaranteed to infuriate teachers, but they also betray a fundamental muddling of what is meant by the "world of work" and careers advice.

It's insulting to suggest teachers don't know about work. Every day they demonstrate the employability skills that relate to any job: timekeeping; meeting deadlines; giving presentations; writing appropriately for different media and audiences and so on.

But careers advice is more about understanding what options will be available in the future and how to prepare. Teachers should be able to explain to their students why the subject they are studying is relevant to achieve their long-term goals: why, for instance, the creativity involved in studying art can be useful in careers such as manufacturing. But asking them to have a full and comprehensive knowledge of all careers in all industries is unreasonable, especially without any support, training or guidance. That is a role for a careers adviser.

Clumsiness aside, Cable does recognise there is a massive problem. He admits: "There has been argument in government about how to get the right careers advice in schools and successive governments have frankly messed this up."

He's right. Michael Gove made it clear in his evidence to the education select committee that careers advisers should be treated with derision and that Connexions was a disaster, but provided no viable alternative. Throwing the baby out with the bath water has resulted in the blame game we're now seeing played out in public.

So who should be responsible for guiding our children to ensure they take the qualifications required for the career path they desire?

The government insists that the best way for young people to make a career choice is through exposure to the "world of work". Schools, it says, should engage with business to provide first-hand experience. But making that a reality is simply another pressure on schools and teachers. Small and medium-sized businesses, already charged with driving the economic recovery, rarely have the time or money to offer, while large corporates with the resources to help represent a small number of employers and are very regional.

And are employers the answer anyway? The jobs market has radically changed over recent years. Young people need to understand the realities of different career paths, and this can involve making key decisions from as early as 13, when choosing GCSEs, to avoid ruling out necessary subjects. A specialist adviser should be available to discuss the impact of these decisions.

One of the main criticisms of Connexions was the varying quality provided across the regions. Nick Clegg has said that the government will be develop a "Ucas style" website, with information provided by local authorities. This will inevitably lead to the same variance in the quantity and quality of the information made available. According to [recent research by Barnardo's](#), none of the children they interviewed had heard of the current careers website.

What is more, offering yet another online source of information demonstrates a critical flaw in the government's plan to plug the vacuum created when funding for Connexions was axed. Websites are cheap alternatives and cannot replace the face-to-face guidance required to help young people understand the bewildering options open to them. Teenagers may be highly sophisticated users of the internet, but when they're sitting surfing in Starbucks they aren't using it to wade through complex information based on questions they don't even know they have to ask.

There can be no one answer to the problem. After 10 years as a lecturer, I know young people do not sit down at one moment in their lives and make a decision about their future. It is an evolving process and needs to be met with unbiased information and patient support over a period of time. Teachers can provide information on how the courses they are teaching can lead to a range of careers. Support from parents at home can help young people understand that behaviour in the classroom is part of learning employability skills. Information online, in print and multimedia should be provided as resources to be used when working with young people. But only careers advisers can pull all this together with a meaningful conversation about the future.

Sharon Walpole is the publisher of [Moving On magazine](#).

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