

## **Broken Futures and a Step Back in Time: Career Guidance is at Risk of Being Cut to Shreds**

**Tony Watts**

The coalition Government has indicated the importance it attaches to career guidance for young people. But there is a strong risk that the reality will not match the rhetoric. Far from improving career guidance, the effects of current policies could be to destroy its heart.

The rhetoric is strong. Education ministers have indicated how important career guidance is, not least for social mobility. The controversial Browne Report on the future funding of higher education recommended that every school should be required to make individualised careers advice available to all its pupils. Simon Hughes, the Government's newly-appointed advocate for access to education, stated on taking up his post that he would 'work with every person of goodwill to ensure that from 2011 we have the best system of educational advice, information and support in place, designed to benefit all potential students and to ensure that disadvantaged young people increasingly gain access to further and higher education'.

The initial steps, too, have been promising. The Conservatives included in their election manifesto a commitment to establish an all-age career guidance service. The Government has now confirmed this commitment, and has given the task of establishing it to skills minister John Hayes.

In November, Mr Hayes emphasised the importance of restoring a focus on specialist expertise in career guidance for young people – which had been significantly eroded by the Labour government when it merged the Careers Service into Connexions. In particular, he welcomed the report of the careers profession task force, established by the Labour Government towards the end of its life, when it belatedly realised the error of its ways.

Mr Hayes also reaffirmed that the heart of the new arrangements must be close partnerships between schools and expert independent advisers. Such partnerships have been shown by international research to be the strongest model of careers provision for young people. They are based on, in essence, schools being responsible for careers education, and an external service being responsible for career guidance.

These components are complementary: good careers education ensures that career guidance is part of a process rather than an isolated incident, and therefore is much more likely to deliver value for money. They are also, philosophically, part of a move away

from an expert-based prescriptive model of career guidance to a model based on developing people's capacity to manage their own career, drawing upon help where they need it. At the same time, all young people benefit from having access to independent career guidance from an external service which addresses their individual needs and is impartial and closer to the labour market.

So far, so good. But at present there is great confusion about funding for the new arrangements. The Government has indicated that the funding for Connexions (currently £467m) is to be merged into the early intervention grant, which covers a range of service allocations and is to be reduced by 10.9 per cent in 2011/12. Local authorities are free to determine their own priorities between these services.

The existing funding for Connexions covers a career guidance service for all young people and a holistic service targeted at young people who have dropped out of education, training and employment, or are at risk of doing so. Responsibility for the latter is to be retained by Local Authorities; for the former, it is to be transferred to the new all-age careers service. But no announcement has yet been made about how much Department for Education money is to be transferred to the new service.

Estimates of the extent of the career guidance component in current Connexions budgets range from £280 million (Careers England) to just under £200m (Department for Education). If the DfE contribution to the all-age service is close to these figures, this provides a strong base for development. If it is significantly less, the effect will be that the Government has demolished career guidance provision for young people.

In the meantime, the effect of overall local authority cuts has been to decimate Connexions in many parts of the country. The risk is that by the time the Government creates an all-age service, the base for its youth element will have been disastrously eroded.

The need for a statement on the budget for the all-age service is urgent. If Local Authorities know that the DfE contribution is sufficient to cover the maintenance of the career guidance element of the Connexions service, they are more likely to be willing to sustain this service over a short transition period than if this is not the case.

A further complication is provided by the Government's concern for school autonomy. Mr Hayes has indicated that the responsibility for ensuring that all learners get the best advice and guidance possible should rest on schools. They should be able to secure such services from the all-age service, but also from other providers if they wish.

There have been suggestions that some ministers and advisers may envisage schools purchasing external career guidance services from within their mainstream budgets. But the dedicated schools grant, recently announced, includes no identifiable additional element for career guidance, and has already been reported as implying real-terms budget cuts for most schools.

If the idea is that schools may be able to enhance a substantial core service (including face-to-face services) from the all-age service, that is fine. But without such an externally funded core, the notion that they will allocate a not insubstantial part of such reduced budgets to purchasing an external service they have previously received for free is likely to be treated with widespread derision. The notion that they will do so in time to preserve existing services, without other actions being taken, is pure fantasy.

The notion of school as purchaser could also undermine the impartiality of the external services. The Government is planning professional standards to protect against this. But these take time to develop. The transition to the proposed new model is full of such pitfalls. There is as yet no evidence of serious strategies for addressing the pitfalls and managing the transition.

It gets worse. There are fears that the Government may be planning to remove the statutory duty for schools to provide careers education. If it does so, at the same time as permitting the disappearance of existing career guidance provision for young people, this could undermine both sides of the partnership model and destroy much of what has been achieved in the past 50 years.

It would be deeply ironic if a government so avowedly committed to the importance of careers work is to be responsible for its demise.

The Government needs urgently to announce the budget for the all-age service, and to reaffirm the importance of careers education. Any idea of using local authorities and schools as scapegoats would be an act of abject cynicism. If it wants what it claims to want, it needs to act now.

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