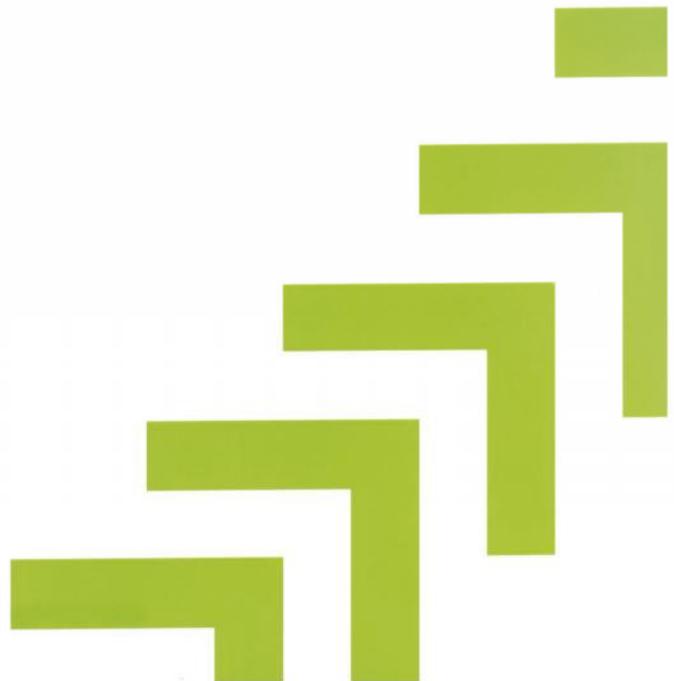


Policy Review · 14-19 Education and Skills



Careers England Policy Commentary 1

This is the first in a short series of briefing notes on key policy documents related to the future of career guidance services in England that are being issued by the Government in February-March 2005. The notes are being prepared for Careers England by Professor Tony Watts. They will culminate in an overall commentary covering the full set of documents.

White Paper on 14-19 Education and Skills

1. The White Paper on 14-19 Education and Skills (Cm 6476) represents the Government's response to the Tomlinson Report. Most press coverage has focused on the widespread disappointment that key features of the Tomlinson Report – notably the integration of academic and vocational education post-14 into a unified framework of diplomas – have been rejected. It was the notion of permitting more flexible pathways within this structure that provided the rationale for Tomlinson's recommendations for enhanced attention to personal review, planning and guidance.
2. Nonetheless, one of the key principles of the White Paper is to 'introduce greater choice of what and where to study and make it easier to combine academic and vocational learning' (Executive Summary, para.9). The paper later reaffirms: 'We intend that young people will have real choice from the age of 14' (para.3.11). This will operate in stages:

'Between 14 and 16, whatever choices they make, they should experience a broad curriculum which prepares them well for future life and learning. Whichever route they take, they will not narrow down their options – and will be able to make a further choice about how to continue in learning' (para.3.11).

Then:

'By the age of 19, young people will have had the opportunity to pursue academic qualifications; qualifications in a broad vocational area; or occupationally-specific qualifications in the work context' (para.3.11).

An important part of the paper is concerned with setting out plans to introduce new diplomas in 14 vocational subject areas, reflecting key sectors of the economy. These will replace the 3,500 vocational qualifications currently on offer.

3. The paper asserts that:

'In opening up these wider opportunities, we will address the risks' (para. 3.12).

These include:

'We cannot have young people ignorant of what is available or unable to make choices that are good for them. We cannot return to the days before the National Curriculum when boys and girls sometimes had little opportunity to study in areas which had been the traditional preserve of the other sex' (para.3.12).

It concludes:

'So good quality and impartial information, advice and guidance are crucial' (para.3.12).

4. The paper accordingly reaffirms the Tomlinson Report's recommendations regarding information, advice and guidance:

'The Working Group said that it was crucial for young people to have high-quality and impartial information and guidance to get the most out of their learning, to enable successful progression from one stage to another and to inform the important choices that young people make between different options. We agree' (para.5.26).

5. In this connection, it is worth recalling that the Tomlinson Report argued for a significant increase of resources:

'If it is to be successfully delivered, resources will need to be made available to ensure significant development of and improvement in the information, advice and guidance provided by schools, colleges and training providers and by Connexions' (Working Party Final Report, para.296).

The Interim Report had been more specific:

'There is a widespread perception that existing mechanisms for the delivery of advice and guidance are not yet of a consistently high quality, and often form a targeted service rather than a universal entitlement. Extending the availability of support, particularly from school and college staff, has significant workload and resource implications which would have to be tackled before advice and guidance could approach the levels of quality and availability needed to underpin the new 14-19 framework' (Working Party Interim Report, para.53).

The White Paper largely avoids these resource issues.

6. It does, however, set out some principles:

'... we must be sure that:

- every young person understands the options open to them and their potential implications;
- the direct influences on young people, including parents, teachers and the peer group, support them to make decisions which work well for them in the long term; and
- young people develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to make good choices, determined by their aptitudes and the needs of employers, rather than stereotypes about their gender or background' (para.5.26).

7. In relation to the third of these points, some attention is paid to careers education within the curriculum, alongside direct experience of workplaces. The main emphasis here, however, is on:

'... making sure that schools bring out the connections between citizenship, work-related learning, careers education and PSHE as they are taught' (para.5.27).

Moreover, in the earlier list to which this statement refers, careers education is omitted:

'There are clear links between RE, PE, sex education, citizenship and PSHE, and learners benefit when the links are emphasised in the way in which they are taught' (para.5.21).

Again, in the discussion of preparatory work in Key Stage 3, there is no reference to careers education, despite the fact that the Government has recently (September 2004) extended the statutory duty on maintained schools to provide career education in the curriculum to include years 7 and 8. Furthermore, in the list of personal and learning skills (p.41) to be developed across the curriculum as a whole, there is no reference to career management skills. Yet it seems that considerable reliance is being placed upon these skills:

'These skills will help young people to choose options at 14 suited to their interests and aptitudes, which will lead on to further learning and employment' (para.4.22).

8. Alongside the development of pupil skills, the paper includes as one of 'our new entitlements' that:

'We will ensure that objective and individualised advice and guidance is available at key points in the 14-19 phase' (p.77).

In relation to this, it declares that 'We will set out our plans in due course' (p.77) – presumably in the forthcoming Green Paper on youth policy. Meanwhile, on accountability, it states that inspections of individual institutions and Joint Area Reviews will analyse not only the quality of learning opportunities available but also 'the reliability of the information, guidance and support offered to young people' (para.12.28).

9. Various other measures are mentioned: developing better information about options ('a website setting out the choices, linked through in each area to an online local prospectus'), better information about employers on career routes (no detail on this); supporting parents (again left vague); exploiting the power of the peer group by training peer tutors; and using coaching and mentoring rather than simple advice-giving (paras.5.27-5.29; also 11.34-11.36).

10. The three crucial sentences, however, are these:

- 'We need to improve advice from home institutions and intend to introduce a professional development programme for teachers which boosts their ability to advise and which gives them good information about choices in their area' (para.5.28).
- 'And we need to secure objectivity and impartiality in the advice young people receive, through providing other sources of advice' (para.5.28).
- 'In the forthcoming Skills White Paper, we will set out developments which will aim to improve information for adults and so provide a better joined up service from youth to adulthood' (para.5.30).

The first of these could be read as favouring a school/college-based model of delivery; the second as favouring a partnership model; the third as favouring an all-age approach. It seems that all options are open...

11. It is also noteworthy that the only direct reference to Connexions is in the context of 'personal problems which stand in the way of educational success':

'... we will make sure that young people at risk receive effective targeted support to help them to overcome barriers to learning. The Connexions service has had some success in beginning to reduce the size of the NEET group. We will set out our plans for building on this to ensure that all young people have the personal support they need, in due course' (para.9.17).

Opaque as this is, it would seem at least congruent with the leaked reports about the Government's plans to dismantle the current Connexions structure.

12. Finally, it is worth noting that when choices and decision-making are mentioned in the paper, the main emphasis is on learning choices viewed as ends in themselves rather than on their longer-term career implications. There are some exceptions to this, but in general 'career' does not feature heavily.