

Careers England Policy Commentary 22

This is the twenty-second in an occasional series of briefing notes on key policy documents related to the future of career guidance services in England. The note has been prepared for Careers England by Professor Tony Watts.¹

Statutory Guidance for Further Education and Sixth Form Colleges

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1. As foreseen in the Annex to Policy Commentary 20², the Government has now issued new guidance for general further education colleges and sixth form colleges³, to sit alongside the updated statutory guidance for schools⁴. Both documents have been required in order to implement the Government's decision to extend the duty to secure access to independent careers guidance to cover all students from year 8 up to the age of 18.⁵ This is linked to the raising of the compulsory age of participation in education or training to 17 in 2013 and to 18 in 2015. In the case of colleges, the new duty covers all students up to and including the age of 18, plus 19- to 25-year-olds with a current Learning Difficulty Assessment in place⁶.

2. As with schools, the duty for colleges is defined as being 'to secure access to independent careers guidance' (para.1). One of the characteristics of such 'independent careers guidance' is that it should 'be provided in an impartial manner' (para.2). But whereas in the case of schools, 'independent' is defined explicitly as 'external to the school'⁷, no such statement is made in the case of colleges. Instead, the document explicitly 'recognises that many FE institutions already have successful student support services – often holding the matrix Standard for their careers information, advice and guidance provision', and adds that 'this support should continue'. It accordingly reframes

¹ Helpful comments from Paul Chubb on an earlier draft of this Policy Commentary are gratefully acknowledged. The author is however solely responsible for the views expressed.

² Watts, A.G. (2013). *Government Response to Education Select Committee Report*. Careers England Policy Commentary 20.

³ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills & Department for Education (2013). *Securing Independent Careers Guidance: Guidance for General Further Education Colleges and Sixth Form Colleges*. The Government have decided to extend the duty to colleges not by law but by making it a requirement of their funding agreements: this explains why the technical term used here is 'guidance' rather than 'statutory guidance'.

⁴ Department for Education (2013). *Statutory Guidance: the Duty to Secure Independent and Impartial Careers Guidance for Young People in Schools*.

⁵ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills & Department for Education (2012). *Consultation on Extending Access to Independent Careers Guidance: Summary of Consultation Responses*.

⁶ Under section 139a of the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

⁷ Department for Education (2013). *Statutory Guidance: the Duty to Secure Independent and Impartial Careers Guidance for Young People in Schools*, p.6, footnote 3.

‘independent careers guidance’ as ‘access to external perspectives beyond the college’ (para.6). It notes that:

‘The Government is not prescribing how each college fulfils the requirement and there is no compulsion to buy in specialist support.’

It then proposes that:

‘Making connections with a range of employers can be a very helpful way of fulfilling the new requirement. Students can benefit from the opportunity to hear from inspiring employers; from access to external mentors, meeting coaches or careers advisers; and from access to websites and helplines (para.6).’

Thus access to careers advisers is mentioned, and indeed ‘Buying in specialist advice where there are no in-house careers advisers’ (p.12) is the theme of one of the five case studies attached to the document. But the primacy given here to connections with employers, and the permission to view such connections as sufficient to fulfil the duty – alongside the clear statement that there is no compulsion to buy in ‘specialist support’ – are significant. Together they reveal, much more clearly than in the case of the statutory guidance for schools, the vagueness and ambiguity that lie at the heart of this duty, and of the confusion it has caused.

3. A further important theme of the document is ‘inspiration for students’, associated strongly with inputs from employers:

‘To engage successfully with information about education, training and career choices and apply it to their ambitions, students need to be inspired and motivated to think about a broad and ambitious range of future career possibilities. Often the best way to find out about different jobs and careers is from the employers themselves’ (para.8).

A list is provided (para.9) of possible methods in this respect:

- Mentoring and coaching.
- Employer career talks.
- Workplace visits.
- Work ‘taster’ events such as games and competitions.
- Careers fairs and career networking events.
- Access to open days at higher education (HE) institutions.

Significantly, ‘work experience’ is included not in this list but in a subsequent list (para.11) of the options between which students should be helped to choose (‘vocational and academic routes’, ‘traineeships and apprenticeships’, etc.). Moreover, there is no reference to integrating these various ‘inspiring’ activities into a coherent careers education curriculum: no such concept is mentioned in the document. This reinforces the clear impression from previous statements that this Government views careers guidance

as being concerned not with a cohesive learning programme with strong experiential components, managed and supported by careers professionals, but rather with a disconnected range of ‘information and activities’ in which careers professionals may or may not play a part.⁸

4. This impression is further reinforced by the section on ‘support for choices and progression’. This states that not all students will need such help:

‘Some students will need little support to make good choices based on their aspirations and the information they can access. Others will need more help in thinking about their current position; their strengths; the opportunities and risks in different career paths and what it will take to get there’ (para.12).

It refers to the value of face-to-face support, but it does not affirm the value of such support for all students: instead, it states that it ‘can be particularly crucial for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with learning difficulties or disabilities’, and as ‘part of preventative support for students known to be at risk of dropping out’ (para.13). It lists a range of ‘external sources’ that can provide such ‘in-depth and personalised support’, including:

- Mentors and coaches.
- HE advisers.
- Independent careers advisers.
- College alumni.
- The National Careers Service (NCS).

So, again, access to independent careers advisers is only one of a range of possibilities.

5. On the NCS, the document refers to its current co-location in over 100 colleges, and states that:

‘The Government is keen to see more extensive partnership working between colleges and the NCS, including extending this to working with schools, jobcentres and employers to provide a more integrated local careers guidance infrastructure underpinned by informed labour market intelligence’ (para.14).

The reference here to ‘schools’ reinforces the indication, in the Government’s response to the Education Select Committee report on careers guidance, that the NCS role in relation to schools is to be strengthened; as yet, however, no information has been provided on how and by whom this extended role is to be funded.⁹

6. On quality assurance, the only reference is the following statement in a footnote:

⁸ See Watts, A.G. (2012). *The Coalition’s Emerging Policies on Careers Guidance*, especially para.26. Careers England Policy Commentary 15B.

⁹ See Watts, A.G. (2013). *Government Response to Education Select Committee Report*, para.13. Careers England Policy Commentary 20.

‘Alongside matrix, a range of dedicated quality awards exists if your college wishes to demonstrate the quality of your overall careers education, information, advice and guidance programme. The Quality in Careers Standard, the national validation supported by the Government, will assist you in determining an appropriate quality award to pursue’ (footnote 3).

There is no mention of professional standards for careers practitioners, and no requirement to apply any service or organisational standards unless the college so wishes.

7. In summary, the guidance for colleges – like the statutory guidance for schools – effectively leaves it open for colleges to do what they like in relation to careers guidance provision for their students. It offers some suggestions, many of which are based on a distinctly limited view of what careers guidance comprises and can offer. But it does not require colleges to do anything they might not wish to do, and it provides no basis on which a sustainable challenge to the adequacy of a college’s careers provision could be mounted.

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