

A.G. Watts 'Career guidance policy development under the Coalition Government: a critical analysis', pp 8-15

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Career guidance policy development under the Coalition Government: a critical analysis

A.G. Watts

Introduction

Policy development under the Coalition Government to date has been something of a roller-coaster. A speech last November to the Institute of Career Guidance Annual Conference in Belfast by John Hayes (the Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning) (Hayes, 2010) was widely welcomed and gave grounds for hopes that, despite the public expenditure cuts, we might be about to see a major breakthrough in the development of careers services in England. Since then, however, these hopes have been replaced by fears that we may be seeing the most serious collapse of service provision in the last half-century.

How and why has this happened? In addressing this question, I will draw on a detailed analysis I have recently completed for Careers England of the wide range of statements made to date by Ministers and civil servants – in a variety of speeches in Parliament and elsewhere, in responses to Parliamentary Questions, and in correspondence (Watts, 2011b). I will also try to draw out some conclusions and briefly to indicate some ways forward.

Context

First, though, we need to go backwards, and remind ourselves briefly of the background to the situation when the Coalition Government came to power. As I have chronicled in previous contributions to this series (Watts, 2006; 2008; 2010a), the merging of the Careers Service into Connexions – as part of an attempt to address social exclusion and young people at risk – resulted in a significant erosion both of careers services to young people and of the professionalism of careers advisers (see also Lewin and Colley, 2011). At the same time, however, the skills debate, fostered significantly by the Leitch Review of Skills (2006), produced the development, for the first time, of a serious careers service for adults. The outcome was the exquisite but nonsensical paradox that whereas in the past we had a careers service for young people and an information, advice and guidance (IAG) framework for adults, we now have a careers service for adults alongside an IAG framework for young people (Watts, 2010a).

Towards the end of its time in power, the Labour Government belatedly acknowledged the errors of its ways. This was stimulated significantly by the Milburn Report, which pointed out the importance of career guidance for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and how the focus on social exclusion had resulted in the neglect of social mobility (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009). The result was a flurry of activity, including the development of a new strategy for young people's IAG (DCSF, 2009) and the establishment of a Task Force on the Careers Profession. The very title of the Task Force seemed an apology for the professional erosion its earlier policies had caused.

Rationale and core principles

The Coalition Government has sustained the enhanced rhetorical concern for the policy importance of career guidance. The rationale seems to be two-fold. One is a continued interest in supporting social mobility, as evidenced in the prominent attention given to career guidance in the Government's Strategy for Social Mobility (HM Government, 2011). This is widely viewed as a distinctive Liberal Democrat contribution to the Coalition, but John Hayes – a Conservative – has also indicated it as a key motivation for his own commitment (Hayes, 2010).

The other rationale is the role of career guidance in moving towards a demand-led skills system. This was argued in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills strategy document, with its reference to wanting to 'turn the system on its head, so that it is those using the system, not the state, which drives the system'. On this view, the role of the state is to 'give them control over their funding and the support and information they need to make the right choices for the future' (DBIS, 2010:5). The same view drove the influential Browne Report on the funding of higher education, with its reference to wanting to 'put students at the heart of the system', so that 'their choices will shape the landscape of higher education'. Accordingly, the Browne Report recommended that 'every school will be required to make individualised careers advice available to its pupils', delivered 'by certified professionals' (Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, 2010:25, 28). In other words, career guidance is viewed as a market-maker: a means of making the learning 'market' (as well as the labour market) operate more effectively, by ensuring that the actors within it have the support they need to ensure that their decisions are well-informed and well-thought-through.

Based on these rationales, a number of core principles underpin the Government's emerging policies. The first is to establish an all-age careers service, as the 'centrepiece' of the reform programme (DBIS, 2010:42). This had been advocated by John Hayes and by the Conservative Party for some time (Hayes and Kelly, 2007; Conservative Party, 2008). Its title is to be the National Careers Service. Its stated objective is to build on the best of Next Step and Connexions (Hayes, 2010).

The second principle is to 'revitalise the professional status of career guidance', including the need to 'restore a focus on specialist expertise in careers guidance for young people' (Hayes, 2010). This includes a commitment to implement the recommendations of the Careers Profession Task Force (2010). In the wake of the Task Force report, the main professional associations in the careers field have formed themselves into a Careers Profession Alliance. John Hayes (2010) has indicated that he looks to the CPA to establish common professional standards and a code of ethics for careers professionals, leading possibly to a 'licence to practise', alongside organisational quality standards.

The third principle is to safeguard the partnership model in relation to careers provision for young people, in which schools work in partnership with external independent advisers. In support of this principle, John Hayes (2010) referred to the need for access to impartial advice independent of vested interests, and cited an Ofsted

(2010) report indicating that schools with their own sixth forms were not always sufficiently impartial about options at 16. He also indicated that schools were unlikely to be able to keep sufficiently up-to-date with the latest developments in careers and the labour market.

In all three of these respects, Government policies are closely in line with best international practice as indicated in international studies (Watts, 2011a). All three have been widely welcomed.

Complications

From this point, however, complications begin to set in. Their core source is the Government's commitment to school autonomy. Its view, set out in the Schools White Paper (DfE, 2010), is that school autonomy is at the heart of all high-performing education systems in relation to pupil attainment (as revealed in particular in the OECD's PISA studies). Accordingly, it believes that in order to raise standards, it needs to trust head teachers and their staff to make decisions in the interests of their pupils.

This principle is reflected in the Education Bill currently going through Parliament. The Bill includes a new statutory duty for schools to 'secure that all registered pupils at the school are provided with independent careers guidance during the relevant phase of their education'. This statement is clarified in the accompanying 'explanatory notes' as referring to 14-16, though the Government has subsequently indicated that it will consult on whether this should be extended to 18 (as it obviously should) and possibly downwards to Year 8. The Bill does not apply to academies, but Ministers have indicated that they plan to extend the duty to academies through their funding agreements.

At the same time, however, the Government has indicated that schools should be able to choose their own provider rather than having to work with the National Careers Service. This effectively undermines the partnership model by converting the relationship into one of contractor and supplier. The school is to determine what is contracted out, and to whom. Yet the schools that are being trusted to make these decisions are the very schools whose 'vested interests' have been identified as part of the rationale for the partnership model that is now being abandoned. It is also noteworthy that, in relation to the international evidence cited by the Government as the justification for such school autonomy, a review of such evidence indicates that there is no common pattern which characterises the career guidance provision in highly performing education systems; and that in the two countries which have abandoned the partnership model in favour of school commissioning (Netherlands and New Zealand), this resulted in significant reductions in the extent and quality of career guidance provision (Watts, 2011a).

At least, however, the Education Bill appeared to insist that schools will not be able to appoint their own careers adviser. But now the DfE has indicated explicitly that this is not the case. The wording of this part of the communication to schools which it issued in April 2011 (DfE, 2011) is worth quoting in full:

Those schools that have already developed their own arrangements for providing impartial careers advice and guidance – for example, by employing their own careers adviser – may continue to do so. However, in such cases a school must also ensure pupils have access to a source of guidance which is independent and external to the school. This might include web-based or telephone services, and/or face-to-face guidance from a specialist provider.

This would seem to undermine the declared purpose of this section of the Bill. Moreover, the use of the words 'might' and 'and/or' in the final sentence suggests that schools could fulfil this duty, at a minimum,

by providing 'access to online resources'. Since it is difficult to see how such access could be denied, such an interpretation would seem to render the formal duty meaningless. All of these confusions and contradictions reflect unconvincing attempts to resolve the fundamental tensions between the original BIS vision for the all-age service and DfE policies relating to school autonomy.

On top of all this, the Government is proposing through the Bill to repeal the current statutory duty for schools to provide careers education to pupils between the ages of 11 and 16. Although the communication to schools states that this 'does not imply that these activities are unimportant' (DfE, 2011), the double negative is hardly a strong affirmation. In addition, it seems that the focus now is not on a 'curriculum' but on a range of 'information and activities': the Strategy for Social Mobility refers to career guidance being complemented and enhanced by, for example, "'taster" sessions; open evenings and "next step" events; past students coming in to schools to talk about their experiences; employers visiting to talk about their jobs; and mentoring opportunities' (HM Government, 2011:40). It is also worth noting that the future of work experience at 14-16 is threatened by the attack on it in the Wolf Report (Wolf, 2011) and by the recent removal of funding for Education Business Partnerships (EBPs).

In relation to all this, there are strong grounds for doubting whether schools of their own accord will give much priority to careers education and guidance. Some will, because their senior management teams view it as an important part of good education, and as contributing to pupil motivation and attainment. But others will not, because they take a narrower view of their role and purpose, and see careers work as a diversion. The consistent message of international studies is that school-based guidance systems tend to have weak links to the labour market, to view educational choices as ends in themselves rather than as career choices (which they are), to lack impartiality, and to be uneven in extent and quality (OECD, 2004). Whatever the arguments may be for school autonomy in relation to pupil attainment, they do not hold true in relation to careers provision.

This appears likely to be particularly the case here, because the policy levers are weak. Much emphasis is being placed by Ministers on the proposed destinations measure, under which schools will be required to indicate how many continue in education, training or employment. This is however a crude measure, influenced by a wide range of factors outside the quality of guidance programmes. School inspections, too, are likely to be a weak lever, particularly as Ministers have indicated that they would only expect Ofsted to look at this area if there was evidence of weakness – without any indication of how such evidence is to be gathered. It seems that the recommendation of the Careers Profession Task Force (2010) to develop an overarching national kite mark to validate the different existing CEIAG quality awards will be implemented by Careers England, but no specific support for this has yet come from the Government, and such a kite mark would not affect the voluntary status of such awards.

Funding and transition arrangements

Alongside these changes, the funding base for existing careers services for young people seems at risk of being allowed to vanish. The assumption had been that the funding for the new all-age National Careers Service would be based on merging the Connexions and Next Step budgets. The Next Step budget currently amounts to around £83m, and DBIS has announced that a comparable figure has been committed for 2012/13. This is however dwarfed by the notional budget for the career guidance element of Connexions, which is currently estimated as being £203m, including £7m for Connexions Direct. It is important to note that this is already substantially less than the old Careers Service budget, which was over £300m at current rates (Watts, 2011b). But a DfE announcement about its funding contribution to the all-age service has been conspicuous by its

absence. Fears are growing that it may be confined largely or wholly to the Connexions Direct element of £7m.

If it is the case that the direct DfE contribution to the all-age service is to be confined to web-based and telephone-based services, then any face-to-face career guidance services for young people will be dependent on what schools are prepared to pay for. This also applies to staff and programme development support previously available from Connexions or Local Authorities, and other external services that have had their funding withdrawn, including EBPs and AimHigher. Yet there has been no discernible transfer of funding for such services to schools. And many schools are anticipating significant reductions in their overall budgets. So they are being expected, from these reduced budgets, to pay for core career guidance services which they have previously received free of charge. The extent of the resources at the disposal of the all-age service for providing such services will presumably be dependent on the extent to which schools are willing to purchase them, and to do so from the all-age service rather than other providers.

A serious transition plan for the new arrangements would have involved a three-stage process, transparent to all from the outset:

- Ensuring that Local Authorities kept services in place during the initial stage
- Transferring the Connexions career guidance funding to the all-age service for an interim stage, in order to maintain continuity of services while the work on quality standards and other arrangements was being developed and completed
- Notifying schools that the bulk of this funding would subsequently be transferred into their budgets in order to enable them thenceforth to purchase the services.

None of this has been evident. Indeed, many Local Authorities have already announced major reductions and even closures of their Connexions services, including massive staff redundancies. Since Local Authorities are not in future to retain responsibility for career guidance services, and in the absence of any clarity about the extent and nature of the all-age service into which these services are supposedly to be merged, such services have in some cases been particularly hard hit. A reminder to Local Authorities of their continuing statutory responsibilities to provide such services in the meantime was only published in April 2011, by which time much of the damage had already been done.

The reality seems to be, therefore, that the existing notional funding for face-to-face career guidance services for young people under Connexions has not just been pruned in line with general cuts in public expenditure, but is being allowed to disappear altogether – without any public announcement to this effect. This at a time when the challenges facing young people are being exacerbated by rising youth unemployment and by changes in higher education funding, and from a Government which claims to believe in the importance of career guidance.

Implications for the all-age service

Moreover, it seems likely that this will affect the services for adults too. At least civil servants have confirmed that money from the BIS budget cannot be used to pay for areas that BIS is not responsible for, such as career guidance for young people. But some current Next Step arrangements are built significantly upon the foundations of services for young people through Connexions: where these are eroded or destroyed, this could seriously affect the future services which will be available for adults as well.

Meanwhile, no information is yet available about the structure of the new all-age service. The current Next Step careers service for adults comprises regional contracts with 'prime contractors' for face-to-face services (each of which sub-contracts elements of service delivery to additional providers), plus one national contract for the telephone helpline. Is this model to continue? If not, what? BIS has indicated that the network of organisations it funds as part of the all-age service will be able to offer services on the open market to individuals or organisations that are willing to pay. What will the relationship be between these various contracting processes, with their differing and potentially conflicting contractor-supplier relationships? What will the transaction costs be? What will be the level of integration of service delivery, both across the youth/adults divide and across the different channels of service delivery? How can an integrated customer management system be implemented within such a complex and diffuse structure?

Linked to this are questions about the status of the National Careers Service. To what extent is it to be a strategic body, and to what extent a mere collection of competitors within a market? The other leading all-age careers services in the world – in New Zealand, Scotland and Wales – are clearly strategic bodies, effectively providing a strong professional spine for a lifelong career guidance system, and paying significant attention to supporting the development of career support capacity in educational institutions, in workplaces and in the wider community (Watts, 2010b). Will the all-age service in England have a similar strategic and capacity-building role? Or will its providers simply be encouraged to build their own service-delivery 'businesses'? If the latter, how does this relate to the notion that high-quality career guidance is a key market-maker in relation to the learning and labour markets: does it make sense to marketise the market-maker in this extreme way?

Conclusions

If the main elements of the Government's policies are to be implemented as planned, in a way that improves rather than damages services, there are a number of steps that need to be taken. In particular:

- The architecture and funding for the new all-age NCS service need to be announced
- The organisational and professional standards have to be developed and implemented both for the NCS and for all providers secured by schools
- The all-age NCS has to be designed, tendered and contracted
- The basis for any local contestability has to be determined (including the issue of how any 'competitors' to the NCS are to relate to it)
- Schools have to be persuaded to pay for services which they have previously received free of charge (with clarification of what schools are now expected to buy).

There are severe doubts about whether these steps are achievable within the timetable Ministers have set (for young people and adults to be able to begin accessing the new arrangements from September 2011, with the all-age service being fully operational by April 2012, and the new statutory duty for schools coming into effect from September 2012). There are also concerns that:

- By the time the new market is established, much of the expertise for its professional base will have disappeared
- In the meantime, there will have been a widespread collapse of careers help for young people

- The original BIS vision for the all-age service will have been fatally eroded by lack of serious engagement from DfE, with adverse impact on the services for adults too.

It is deeply ironic that all this has occurred under a Government which espouses the importance of career guidance and which had raised such high hopes. There are various explanations of how and why it has happened. Probably the most convincing is that the original plans were owned by John Hayes and by BIS but not by DfE, and have foundered as they confronted the intransigence of DfE Ministers with their commitment to school autonomy. But this does not explain the refusal to admit to the likely destruction of the budget for careers services for young people, by a Government which claims the virtues of transparency. This is open to the serious charge of collective hypocrisy.

The other serious charge is that of collective incompetence. On the last occasion the Conservative Party was in power, in the 1990s, it marketised the Careers Service. This was controversial, but the transition was well-managed, in ways which minimised the risks and maximised the potential benefits. As a result, it had more positive effects than many had anticipated. This time, however, the delays and confusions have exacerbated the tensions and conflicts built into the model. There has been no coherent plan of how to achieve the Government's espoused goals. The result, I fear, is that the erosion of careers services in England, which started under the subsequent Labour Government, will now be completed by the other two major parties – all less by design than by default, based on ill-considered subordination to other policies.

Not all of this is yet set in stone. There is still room for lobbying as the Bill goes through Parliament, which could enable some ground to be reclaimed. Moreover, there is an opportunity to establish a serious careers profession for the future, as well as the infrastructure for an all-age service which could provide a base for future development. A stronger market could produce innovation as well as fragmentation. The work will continue. But finding spaces to work in, to develop the exciting ideas discussed at the May 2011 conference, will not be easy. It will require tenacity and creativity, probably – for the immediate future anyway – in local spaces rather than as part of a serious national strategy.

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