

Guidance in Secondary Schools: Careers and the World of Work

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Against a background of major changes in schools and in pupils' post-school opportunities, a recent SOEID funded project, *Guidance in Secondary Schools*, explored pupils' guidance needs and the effectiveness of current provision in meeting these needs. This *Briefing* reports on a particular aspect of the research - careers education and guidance and the management of Careers Service work in schools.

- **S5** and **S6** pupils are now a more varied group with a wider range of needs and aspirations. This change and the growing complexity of post-school options poses a challenge for guidance. Staff recognised the need to develop careers education provision for **S5** and **S6** pupils.

- **Post-school** options were a major concern for **S4** and especially **S5** pupils. They were not aware of the full range of opportunities and found it difficult to assess their best option. Many pupils seemed unable to take the initiative in seeking careers information and advice despite emphasis in education and training on the empowerment of young people.

- **There** is a lack of integration in the curricular and vocational guidance provided to pupils by guidance and other teachers and by careers officers. Education industry liaison (EIL) activities and guidance were largely separate from each other and careers officers were not well integrated into the school and guidance system.

- **Both** pupils and parents valued the careers officer's role but were confused and dissatisfied with the Careers Service interview arrangements. They wanted better access to an interview with a careers officer. But Scottish Office guidance to the Careers Service about its work is at odds with pupils' and parents' expectations of the Careers Service and is also conflicting in itself.

Background

The central aim of the project “Guidance in Secondary Schools” was to examine the guidance needs of pupils and the effectiveness of current guidance provision. While the research covered all aspects of guidance - personal, curricular and vocational - a specific aim was to review the management of the Careers Service work in the schools and also links between guidance and local employers. In practice, work on employers and guidance was limited reflecting the lack of close links between guidance and employers in the project schools. This *Briefing* considers the careers-related aspects of the research drawing on evidence from teachers, pupils and parents in the project schools, the careers officers attached to the schools and also from those involved in Careers Service developments in other localities and at a national level.

Pupils’ concerns

S4 and especially S5 pupils were very concerned about their post-school options. S2 pupils also wanted the opportunity to consider career ideas when making their subject choice. Pupils of all attainment levels felt they were not aware of the full range of possible courses and jobs and found it difficult to assess their best option. S4 and S5 pupils of all academic abilities wanted more detailed information about careers and courses and more help with the practicalities of applications and interviews.

Careers education

All of the project schools had some careers education provision although the content and extent of programmes was variable. There was little evidence of progression in programmes which suffered from a lack of coherence and overall planning, partly explained by the number of different staff involved, especially in the upper school.

Staff recognised the need to review and develop careers education in the upper school to meet the increasingly varied needs and aspirations of senior pupils as more young people continue at school beyond 16. Staff said they found it difficult to keep up-to-date with the rapidly changing range of post-school options and were sometimes uncertain about the relative merits of possible curricular choices and different post-school opportunities.

The project schools sought to respond to pupils’ wishes for careers education but there is also the issue of how far careers education should reflect pupils’ and parents’ wishes and interests and how far it should extend and challenge ideas. A dilemma for careers-related work is how to strike the correct balance between provision that

is geared to pupils’ current wants - and therefore is perceived by them to be relevant - and the frequent need to challenge them and encourage them to think more broadly about their future.

Lack of integration

A lack of integration in careers-related provision is one of the dominant themes that emerges from the research. The research identified a lack of integration of education industry liaison (EIL) activities and guidance provision in the project schools; a lack of integration of the careers officers into the school system and with the guidance team; and, particularly for senior pupils, a lack of integration in the various elements of curricular and vocational guidance, including EIL activities, provided by different members of school staff and the Careers Service. Careers Officers, for example, knew very little about the careers education programmes in their school; some guidance teachers interviewing S4 and S5 pupils were unaware of the careers education being delivered to these pupils; and guidance teachers and Careers Officers were rarely involved in EIL activities. This lack of integration affected the knowledge and awareness of both guidance teachers and Careers Officers. More generally, the fragmented nature of careers-related provision means that pupils are not being encouraged to make connections between the various careers activities they experience and their learning is not being reinforced.

Many pupils seemed unable to take the initiative in seeking out available careers information and advice. The current approach in guidance is to stress helping clients to become more self-reliant and take more responsibility for themselves and their decisions. The idea of “empowerment” also figures in education and training discussions, for example, in respect of Skillseekers. Our experience and that of guidance staff and careers officers, was that pupils are not able to be proactive. The lack of integration of provision may be a factor in this. It certainly suggests that current efforts in Personal and Social Education (PSE) to help pupils take more responsibility for themselves and become more self-reliant are not successful. Can more be done in PSE? Or does this highlight the difficulty of reconciling the rhetoric of empowerment and individual responsibility for one’s own learning and careers development with the situation of pupils in a hierarchical school setting in which they have very limited autonomy?

Careers Service

Pupils’ awareness of the role of the careers officer varied considerably across the project schools. The large majority of pupils who had had contact with a

careers officer were positive about it and they wanted greater input from the Careers Service in subject choice, careers education and better access to an interview with a careers officer.

Interviews with S4-S6 pupils was the main element of careers officers work in schools but there was considerable confusion and dissatisfaction among pupils about the Careers Services interview systems. Many pupils were uncertain about interview arrangements although they had been explained to them. Both guidance staff and careers officers over-estimated pupils awareness of how the system worked. Parents and pupils wanted better access to an interview with a careers officer even if the pupil was not about to leave school or did not have a problem with career choice.

On the one hand, the Careers Service is being faced with these demands from pupils and parents, on the other, it has to take account of shifting official guidance on interview systems. The Requirements and Guidance for Providers document (SOED 1993) advocates a flexible interviewing system in contrast with the more specific interview targets for S4, S5 and S6 implied by the Secretary of State's more recent document "Training for the Future". There is a major dilemma here for the Careers Service about how it should organise the main element of its work in schools.

Official guidance to the Careers Service is also at odds with pupils' and parents wishes in other respects. They valued Careers Service involvement in the S2 subject choice process and wanted more individual contact with the careers officer. Guidance teachers also valued Careers Service input at this stage. They and, to some extent, careers officers wanted to maintain individual Careers Service contact with S2 pupils. But Scottish Office guidance does not identify S2/S3 subject choice as "a key transition point" so that work with S2 pupils does not have the same priority as work in the upper school where there are defined "key transition points". How should the Careers Service respond in a situation where the needs expressed by pupils, parents and teachers for input in S2 appear to be at odds with official priorities that focus on the upper school?

Effective guidance/Careers Service relationship

Teachers and careers officers identified a number of factors critical to an effective guidance/Careers Service relationship. A system to ensure that the organisation of Careers Service arrangements in school worked smoothly was necessary. However the research suggests that a system that is administratively convenient can have a negative effect on other aspects of the relationship between guidance teachers and

careers officers. In the majority of the project schools, the careers officer liaised mainly with one guidance teacher. This enabled the efficient organisation of interviews and reports but distanced them from guidance staff as a whole.

Guidance teachers and careers officers noted other factors important to an effective relationship: good communication and the building of mutual trust and respect; clarity about respective responsibilities and standards; and good personal contacts. They saw stability in staffing as basic to building up personal contacts and mutual understanding and trust. But relatively high levels of staff turnover have been common in the Careers Service in most regions in recent years and were exacerbated at the time of the research because the Careers Services was only able to issue short term contracts due to the changes to the management of the Services.

Both school staff and careers officers believed that the implementation of Service Level Agreements under which schools and Careers Services agree provision and the responsibilities of each in delivering this provision were helpful in improving understanding of the minimum level of involvement and standards on either side. Nevertheless, careers officers recognised that there was some concern in schools that SLAs might restrict Careers Service input to schools and, in particular, restrict flexibility to respond to pupils' needs.

The specific interview targets for S4, S5 and S6 pupils arising from Scottish Office guidance were increasing concern that careers officers' might less able to be flexible and responsive in their work.

Education industry liaison and guidance

Except for work experience, education industry liaison (EIL) activities and guidance were largely separate from each other. Most guidance teachers interviewed had little knowledge of, or involvement in, EIL activities.

There were different models of organising work experience. In half of the schools, non-guidance staff organised the work experience placements. Four schools certificated work experience via the National Certificate module. Teachers, pupils and parents identified a number of benefits of work experience, especially the opportunity to test out career ideas but careers officers were more critical of its value in this respect. They were concerned that a single placement was insufficient to test out career ideas but that it could have a strong influence on pupils' career decisions.

Implications for policy and practice

- It is clear that senior pupils need more coherent and integrated curricular and vocational guidance. Provision needs to be developed to achieve the quality of guidance for senior pupils identified as critical to the success of Higher Still.
- It seems that Careers Service interview arrangements are not meeting the needs of all groups of pupils and that Careers Service Companies may need to review their systems.
- The research suggests that when organising school-Careers Service links, schools and Careers Service Companies need to consider ways that are administratively efficient but which also promote the integration of the careers officer with the guidance team and school system.
- It seems likely that there will continue to be a relatively high turnover of careers officers, schools and Careers Service Companies should consider strategies to reduce the negative effect of this on their work in schools.

About this study

In 1993 the SOED commissioned CES to carry out a two year study of guidance in secondary schools. Six schools, contrasting in size, school roll and type of location participated in the research. The schools were identified as having better than average guidance practice. The project involved:

- an extensive programme of interviews with guidance teachers, other school staff and careers officers (119 interviews);
- group discussions with S2, S4 and S5 pupils (233 pupils);
- a postal questionnaire to 720 parents of S3 and S5 pupils in the project schools and interviews with 29 respondents;
- interviews with 12 key informants.

Further information

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Publications

Howieson, C and Semple, S (1996) *Guidance in Secondary Schools*, CES (price £15) (**The full research report**).

Howieson, C and Semple, S (1996) "Guidance in Secondary Schools", *Interchange No. 41*, Research and Intelligence Unit, SOEID (**An Interchange summary of the project** available, free of charge, from The SOEID Dissemination Officer, SCRE, 15 St John Street, Edinburgh EH8 8JR).

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