Ofsted find careers guidance is effective in only one in five schools

A key finding of the recent Ofsted thematic survey of careers guidance in 60 schools is that provision is effective in only one in five schools. Anthony Barnes asks if the picture is as bad as it appears and if this report could be a game-changer, a decisive step on the road to rebuilding careers guidance provision in England.

The old HMI motto, ‘Do a little good as you go!’, has never been more apt. Of course, it is the word ‘go’ in that phrase which has always appealed to teachers; but HMI do genuinely try to make inspection a positive experience for schools. So, what can we learn from Going in the right direction? Careers guidance in schools from September 2012 (http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/news/careers-guidance-schools-not-working-well-enough-0)?

What were Ofsted trying to find out?

Ofsted set out to discover how well schools were discharging their new duty to secure independent and impartial careers guidance for all their students in years 9-11. (This duty has since been extended to years 8-13.) They were particularly interested in evaluating whether the information, advice and guidance provided enabled students to make informed decisions on the full range of career pathways.

What did they find?

Schools

Ofsted found that the arrangements for careers guidance in schools are not working well enough. In the schools visited, Ofsted reported that:

- provision was not sufficiently well coordinated, reviewed or evaluated to ensure that each student received appropriate guidance. Only about a quarter of the schools had begun to use the new data on students’ destinations at Key Stages 4 and 5 to evaluate how well their careers work was guiding students to appropriate choices. Some schools lacked accurate and complete destinations data. Careers-related activities often lacked variety and were uninspiring and uneven in quality. Participation, progression and follow-up support (especially in relation to the use of websites) were poorly planned. Successful approaches to monitoring, review and evaluation are discussed in more detail in paragraphs 57-64 of the report (pages 25-27)
- very few knew how to provide a service effectively or had the skills and expertise needed to provide a comprehensive service
- few schools had bought in adequate services from external sources. Only about one in six of the schools visited offered individual career guidance interviews by a qualified external adviser to all their students in years 9, 10 and 11; and a quarter of the schools did not use qualified external advisers at all. Individual sessions by external advisers varied in quality but their impact was not being monitored by schools. Generally, the more effective careers guidance interviews were carried
out by external, qualified careers guidance professionals or an internal specialist who had had significant experience and training. (The characteristics of these sessions are described in paragraph 30, p. 16.)
• too many students were unaware of the range of careers that they might consider. About half the schools used their own staff to inform students but these staff often had insufficient training and were unable to provide up-to-date information
• schools did not work well enough with employers to provide their students with direct experience of the world of work. Vocational training and apprenticeships were rarely promoted effectively, especially in schools with sixth forms. The proportion of the year 11 cohort entering an apprenticeship was very low and the A level route to universities remained the ‘gold standard’ for young people, their parents and teachers. About two-thirds of the schools reported that they had cut down on their work experience provision for their students in years 10 and 11, for budgetary reasons and because of the recommendation in The Wolf Report (March 2011)
• aspirations for many vulnerable students were too low. Students were often not encouraged enough to select more challenging career pathways after Key Stage 4. The report also found that not all the local authorities, who retain the responsibility for the careers guidance for vulnerable students, worked well enough with the schools visited to identify the support that these students needed.
• the promotion of post-16 options available from other providers was particularly weak in many 11 to 18 schools. (An Ofsted survey in 1998 had shown that a quarter of all schools placed students under pressure to stay in the sixth form!)
• students were generally well-disposed towards careers guidance (see paras 51-55, pages 22-24) but schools need to do more to take students’ views into account.

**National Careers Service website and youth telephone service**

Ofsted found that the National Careers Service made little contribution to careers guidance for the young people in the schools visited. Only eight per cent of the parents surveyed had even heard of the National Careers Service. The youth telephone service was little used and the website was too adult focused to be useful. (The report states that the helpline received 67,383 calls from young people in the year beginning April 2012.)

**Employer engagement**

Ofsted were concerned about the lack of employer engagement in schools. Too few schools used partnerships with employers, local enterprise partnerships and other organisations and networks to ensure that the career guidance given to students was in line with the broad range of career pathways available locally and nationally. Very few of the schools visited had local or national employers on their governing bodies.
What did Ofsted recommend?

Despite the overall findings from this survey, Ofsted believe that it is possible for schools to provide good-quality independent and impartial careers guidance to young people, and they cite the small number of examples where senior leaders and governors have done this by making careers guidance a high strategic priority. As far back as the 1995 survey when Ofsted found that one-third of schools were providing good or very good career education and guidance, inspectors recommended that senior management teams need to be more involved in planning and monitoring provision!

Ofsted also acknowledge that the government has introduced a sophisticated model of careers and changes are needed to help improve the functioning of it. They made the following recommendations:

The government needs to:

• provide clear and more explicit guidance to schools on:
  o what constitutes a comprehensive careers guidance strategy
  o how to secure independent, external careers guidance
  o how to monitor the impact of this provision effectively
• ensure that information on students’ destinations at the ages of 16, 17, and 18 is complete and accurate, so that schools can evaluate the impact of the support and advice they give their students.

Employers and employer networks, such as local enterprise partnerships and chambers of commerce, need to:

• work with the National Careers Service to facilitate links between employers, including small- and medium-sized employers, and all local schools by promoting the advantages of having an employer on school governing bodies with responsibility for providing young people with greater direct exposure to the world of work and the full range of career pathways
• provide more detailed information to schools and careers guidance professionals on local job options, business developments and local skills shortages.

The National Careers Service needs to:

• have an increased role in ensuring that external careers guidance professionals and school staff are updated frequently on the full range of further and higher education provision and vocational training, including apprenticeships, both locally and nationally
• market its services more effectively to all young people aged 13 to 18
• review the accessibility of their website for young people.

Local authorities need to:
• ensure that all vulnerable young people are involved in a wide range of career guidance activities, so that they can make informed and appropriately challenging decisions about the next stage of their education and training.

Schools need to:

• develop and implement a clear strategy for careers guidance and ensure that they make good use of the National Careers Service resources, well-trained staff, careers guidance professionals, employer networks, and local colleges and other providers to ensure that students are well supported in making decisions about their career pathways
• use destination data on students’ progression after leaving school or transferring to year 12 in their sixth form to monitor the choices made by students at the end of year 11 and year 13; schools should work with local authorities to monitor the destinations of students who have special educational needs or who are disabled
• ensure that every school governing body has an employer representative, and that the vocational route, including apprenticeships, is given equal status to the academic route, for example, by fostering greater links with employers so that young people and their parents/carers are exposed to a wider range of career options
• promote the wider range of progression routes available at further education colleges, independent learning providers, and communities and skills providers.

Ofsted need to:

• ensure that inspectors take greater account of the quality of careers guidance and of students’ destinations in judging the effectiveness of a school’s leadership and management. (Since September 2013, inspectors on school inspections have been required to evaluate how well leaders and managers ensure that the curriculum “provides timely independent information, advice and guidance to assist pupils on their next steps in training, education or employment.”)

What should schools be doing now?

As Ofsted has pointed out, some schools are further ahead than others in working out an effective response to their new duty and the guidance model promoted by the DfE. However, in addition to the Ofsted recommendations above, most if not all schools could benefit from:

• consolidating their strategy for providing effective careers guidance for all students. This involves:
  o identifying a member of the senior leadership team to lead on careers, manage external providers and support an identified team of staff to manage and deliver everyday provision
engaging the full governing body and its relevant committees, including systematically reporting on whether the school has performed the careers guidance duty. Some schools may wish to take up the suggestion to recruit employers as governors

- formulating an annual careers plan and linking it to the school development/improvement plan
- formalising a budget for careers guidance with the support of the school’s business manager. This will need to identify sources of funding (e.g. general school budget and the Pupil Premium) a breakdown of expenditure, e.g. the cost of external careers guidance services (Ofsted has reminded schools not to forget the need for a service in the summer holidays), staff costs and the costs associated with careers-related activities (such as visits and work placements)
- setting up mechanisms for recording and regularly reviewing data that will show how resources have been allocated between individuals and groups and whether students’ career guidance needs have been met and whether they have progressed into appropriate and sustainable destinations
- evaluating the quality of individual careers guidance interviews and action plans
- ensuring that the professional learning needs of all relevant staff have been met

- reviewing their policy and approaches to providing students with direct experience of work in view of concerns about young people’s preparation for the world of work
- collaborating with local education partners, employer groups, employers and careers/education-business organisations to develop a strategy for promoting employer engagement
- working closely with the local authority to improve the provision for vulnerable young people.

About a third of schools in England have found the discipline of working towards and gaining a quality award is an effective way of improving the quality of their careers guidance provision.

What happens next?

guidance policy for young people. The government, for example, intends to revise the statutory guidance for schools but the only real strengthening will be in making explicit that signposting students to a careers website is not sufficient to meet the careers duty. The lack of ambition is surely linked to the continuing squeeze on budgets. The DfE, for example, has frozen its contribution to careers guidance for young people for a second year at £4.7 million for the youth helpline. The limited initiative also announced in the action plan to safeguard the National Careers Service (NCS) budget and to ask the NCS to facilitate bringing schools and employers closer together will nevertheless be funded by BIS at the expense of funding for the adult careers service. The NCS will continue to make modest improvements to the accessibility of its website (and a new mobile site) to young people. It falls a long way short of the Education Select Committee’s recommendation that the NCS should have a capacity-building role vis-à-vis careers guidance in schools. The government is also to seek exemption for the NCS to enable it to market itself to schools.

Ofsted, for its part, will disseminate the findings of the review this autumn. Karen Adriaanse HMI, lead inspector for careers guidance, will speak at a number of high profile conferences coming up and has contributed to training for inspectors, raising awareness of this issue.

We can expect leading individuals and organisations in the careers field to campaign intensively in the coming months to persuade government, employers, teachers’ unions and associations that more needs to be done to put right the problems that Ofsted has identified. As commentators are fond of saying, you never want a serious crisis to go to waste! You can read a selection of recent blogs, briefings and commentaries from the great and the good in the careers world below!

**News coverage and commentaries**


Careers England (1st and 2nd press releases)

Careers England (Policy briefing note 5)


CDI http://www.thecdi.net/News-Reports/cdi-response-to-ofsted-thematic-review


Dr Deirdre Hughes, OBE, and Chair, National Careers Council for England
http://feweek.co.uk/2013/09/13/planning-to-change-a-careers-culture/


Tristram Hooley
http://adventuresincareerdevelopment.wordpress.com/2013/09/10/the-government-response-to-ofsted/