

Students being told to look at websites rather than being given face-to-face careers advice

April 25 2014, by Tony Trueman

School students are being told to look at careers websites rather than being given proper face-to-face vocational advice, the British Sociological Association annual conference in Leeds heard today.

Professor Melanie Simms, of the University of Leicester, said that changes to the careers advice system had created a service with "profound gaps" that puts English school-leavers at a disadvantage in the national and international jobs market.

She said that some schools were directing their students to websites to do all their own research because they knew that providing good careers advice was not crucial to pass Ofsted inspections.

Professor Simms, Dr Sophie Gamwell, of Middlesex University, and Dr Ben Hopkins, Aberystwyth University, interviewed 36 young people, 23 careers advice professionals and 33 managers from 11 companies in England for their research.

Professor Simms told the conference that in England careers advice had been funded by local authorities until 2012, when schools were given the responsibility. But funding given to them by the government was limited and not ring-fenced, so provision was patchy as a result.

"All the advisers interviewed pointed out that there were schools they were aware of that had not put in place sustained careers advice," she said.

"There was a widespread view that careers provision would not 'make or break' an Ofsted judgement so some schools were content to rely largely on the website of the National Careers Service and argued that as long as they gave students time to explore the website that would be sufficient to demonstrate provision of careers advice.

"Careers advice is seen as being a 'Cinderella service' that is frequently under-funded and regarded as secondary to core services such as education provision. As a result, even in schools that had contracted to provide face-to-face careers advice, the time they had experienced a considerable curtailing of the time available with students.

"Typically, this meant that provision was in large groups of 20 or more, supported by students spending time on the National Careers Service website. The devolution of budgets to school level means that many schools have little understanding of how to provide careers advice – in short it is not a priority for spending.

"The careers advisers universally regard the move to online provision of information as being very problematic for young people who often have little idea of what they want to do and need personal contact to help inform their choices."

Professor Simms said that the consequence of inadequate careers advice was the "striking finding" that the people aged 16 to 25 she interviewed "rarely mentioned careers advisers until prompted."

One 17-year-old in the West Midlands told her: "My school didn't do anything. We sat in front of a computer and messed around a bit."

The young people understood the importance of preparing for getting a job, but always spoke to family, friends and youth workers about this, rather than teachers or careers advisors, said Professor Simms. But this

advice tended to emphasise following an interesting career rather than considering labour market demand, and this could lead to a "brutal shock" when they found out how hard it was to find a job.

The effects of the careers service funding cuts were also felt in industry, said Professor Simms. "Many of the senior and line managers we interviewed were concerned about issues of careers advice for young people. This emerged largely because of their experiences of trying to recruit young people with appropriate skills and experience, and many had found this challenging.

"Employers did not routinely find young people to be unprepared for work. Rather, their major concerns were about unrealistic expectations of what kinds of jobs might be available and in what sectors.

"When probed about the role of careers advice specialists in guiding and advising young people, there were mixed responses from employers. One senior operations manager in the retail sector said: 'Well that's why we do it ourselves. There's not much careers advice happening as far as I can see.' "

Professor Simms said that her research had found that careers advice was "one of the very few institutions of job matching in the UK labour market". However "dramatic changes" in the UK since 2012 had meant that "even this has weakened and declined, with very profound consequences for individuals, for employers and for society more broadly." She said that figures showed that one million young people were not in education, employment or training.

She contrasted the work that unions, employers and the state carried out in countries like Germany and the Netherlands to ensure young people receive full careers advice. "The situation in England is likely to leave its [young people](#) in an uncompetitive position internationally."

Provided by British Sociological Association

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