Help yourself: can career websites make a difference?

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Official CIAG policy is placing increasing emphasis on self-help by clients and on the role that career websites can play in this. But evidence to support this strategy is lacking and decisions are being based on as yet unproven assumptions about the benefits of careers websites. Are young people able to handle and interpret the volume and complexity of the information available from career websites? Are certain groups of young people less able or less likely to make use of such websites? What role should career websites play in careers provision? This Briefing considers these questions, reporting on a study that examined pupils' use of career websites and the impact on their career related skills.

- Career websites were seen as useful in enabling pupils to access a wide range of information, in broadening their ideas and in allowing them to be more 'experimental' in their career thinking.

- Pupils' use of career websites and other self-help services was seen as dependent on their level of motivation, persistence and confidence as well as their stage of career thinking. The active support of families, particularly parents, was also important.

- Truancy, a negative attitude to school, lower attainment and a lower level of parental education were associated with a lower usage of career websites. But these factors did not impact on the likelihood of pupils having direct contact with a careers adviser.

- When prompted to use self-help services, pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely than other pupils to seek direct contact with careers advisers and school staff than to access career websites or other self-help provision.

- Use of the main Scottish career websites had a limited impact on pupils' career management skills.

- Other types of careers provision contributed positively to aspects of pupils' career management skills: an interview with a careers adviser, group work with a careers adviser and use of the school careers library each had a positive effect.

- Pupils perceive career websites as only one element to use *alongside* other career guidance provision, including direct contact with a career adviser.

Introduction

Career Information, Advice and Guidance (CIAG) is increasingly important to young people's at a time when education aims to offer greater choice and when young people need to have well-developed career management skills to function effectively in a fast-changing labour market. Its importance is reflected in policies across the UK (eg SG 2011; DBIS/DfE 2011). CIAG itself is changing with a greater emphasis on self-help by clients, on the role of ICT, and in particular, of career websites. Indeed in England, the 2011 Education Bill (DfE 2011), coupled with other changes, may mean that career websites and other online provision could be the only independent CIAG resource for pupils there is.

Yet the value of career websites in supporting users' career development remains untested. Very little is known about the impact of career websites on young people's career-related knowledge and skills and whether such websites can deliver the gains that have been identified as accruing previously from CIAG. Do all young people have the technical abilities to use websites, are they able to deal with the volume and complexity of the information available? Are certain groups of young people less able or less likely to make use of career websites? This *Briefing* reports some of the findings of a study that examined the factors that influence the use of self-help services and their impact on pupils' career management skills. We focus mainly on the career website element of self-help provision considering the two main publicly funded career websites in Scotland, the Careers Scotland website and PlanItPlus.

The research involved a 'before' and 'after' questionnaire of 182 S4/Year 11 pupils in three secondary schools supplemented by group work with a third of them and interviews with school staff and the associated careers advisers.

Career websites: a useful adjunct

Pupils' use of a career website was *alongside* their use of other Careers Scotland or school provision and they were clear that they did not want to rely solely on a website in their career planning, rather viewing it as a helpful adjunct. They wanted personal contact with a careers adviser and a one-to-one interview with a career adviser continued to be valued by pupils and also by teaching staff. It was evident that most pupils expected to use a career website in a mediated way with support from careers advisers, teachers, parents or friends.

Careers advisers noted that it was common for use of a career website to prompt a request for an interview because the pupil wanted to check out or discuss the information s/he had gained from the website. This related to a key issue raised by pupils, teachers and careers advisers: the difficulty pupils have in handling and interpreting the volume of information available from career websites:

> *"You get so much information, you don't know which bits are right for you, would apply to you. It needs someone to make sense of it for you. What do you do?"* (S4/year 11 pupil)

Career websites were seen as helpful in a number of ways including broadening pupils' ideas and providing access to a comprehensive range of information that could be easily updated; this could be especially useful for pupils in more remote locations. It was also thought that it might allow some pupils to be more 'experimental' in their career thinking than they might feel they could be in discussion with a careers adviser or teacher.

> *"Some pupils get tongue-tied, can speak to a computer and be more experimental in their ideas, it's safer, you won't be laughed at."* (Teacher)

Pupils' use of career websites

The study suggests that pupils' use of career websites and other self-help services is dependent on factors such as their level of motivation, persistence and confidence and also on having a relatively clear career focus ie their stage of career thinking. Having active support from families, particularly from parents, is another important factor:

But the use of self-help services is also related to the way in which a school or a career organisation operates. The research found that several factors combined to support an ethos of proactivity by staff and reactivity by pupils: the risk of missing targets for both school staff and careers advisers; a desire to provide good support for young people, particularly the most vulnerable; and concern for young people approaching a major transition. On the other hand, even as limited an input as introducing pupils to career websites as part of their personal and social education programme increased their use of websites.

Pupils with a more negative attitude to school were less likely to access either of the career websites and those who had truanted in S4 reported a lower usage of the career websites than their peers who had not played truant. We also found that pupils with lower attainment made less use of the websites as did those whose parents had lower levels of education. But it is notable that these factors which impacted on the use of career websites did not make a significant difference to the extent of direct contact pupils had with Careers Scotland via group talks, drop-in sessions or careers adviser interviews.

The number of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds in the study was small which meant that any differences we found were unlikely to be statistically significant. The main finding is that when pupils were prompted to use the self-help services, pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely than other pupils to respond by seeking direct contact with careers advisers and school staff rather than to access career websites or other self-help provision. This could be partly explained by a lack of confidence in those whose first language was not English:

Limited impact of career websites

The research considered different aspects of career management skills and decision-making and, drawing on other research, defined these in terms of: awareness of strengths, weaknesses and values; opportunity awareness; career planning readiness; support and advice awareness; and application skills and knowledge. Pupils assessed themselves in relation to these aspects using a specially developed questionnaire based on previous research. They were them prompted to use the career websites and three weeks later completed the same assessment. A limitation of the study is the short timescale over which it had to be conducted; nevertheless there were small increases in pupils' mean scores on four of the five aspects of careers management skills. We then used statistical modelling to examine the effect of a range of personal and career-related factors on pupils' perceptions of their career management skills. Thus the results presented on the impact of career websites control for a range of other factors that might also be expected to affect pupils' career management skills.

We found that use of career websites had a positive impact over the time-frame of the study on only one aspect of pupils' career management skills, that is, in relation to their 'support and advice awareness'. Discussion of their career plans during this three-week period with a teacher also helped to improve this. Other types of careers provision occurring during the three-week time-frame contributed positively to aspects of pupils' perceived career management skills. An interview with a careers adviser improved pupils' 'opportunity awareness'; group work with a careers adviser was associated with a higher level of 'career planning readiness'; and use of the careers library had a positive effect on pupils' 'application skills and knowledge'.

The findings in relation to the use and impact of the school careers library are worth commenting on: in all three schools the careers library was thought to be under-resourced, the result some interviewees suggested of an

assumption that the internet and career websites would supersede the library. Yet use of the careers library had at least a similar level of impact as the career websites; moreover use of it was less varied across the different pupil groups.

Conclusions

The study was a small one, conducted over a short timescale and its findings can only be tentative but they do raise important questions that need to be addressed in a context where career websites are increasingly being seen as the way forward in CIAG.

Young people do, indeed, value self-help services, particularly websites but they also wish for personal contact and advice. The study suggests that young people using career websites may well need or seek support in doing so. Although many young people may be comfortable in the use of the internet in a technical sense, there are issues about their ability to search and interpret the volume and complexity of the information available and to relate it to their own personal circumstances and needs.

The study highlights the variation in use of career websites by different groups of pupils: those who might be considered as at risk of not achieving positive post-school destinations (potential NEET or MCMC) were less likely to make use of the websites, even after prompting to do so. These young people are at risk of being further disadvantaged if CIAG moves to an over-reliance on career websites.

As official CIAG policy is placing increasing reliance on career websites, there is an urgent need for more extensive research on the use and impact of career websites: this limited study

suggests that the benefits may be less than might be anticipated. We would also argue that career websites and other self-help services should be one of a number of available interventions including mediated or personal career advice.

References

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