

Embargoed until 0001 BST Friday 25 April 2014

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

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. [Friday 25 April 2014]

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.”

For more details contact:

Tony Trueman
BSA Press Office
07964 023392
tony.trueman@britsoc.org.uk

Other quotes:

A careers advisor told Professor Simms: “We’re used to being restructured all the time – we’re just one of those services that everyone messes with – but this is the worst I’ve seen in 20 years.”

Another careers advisor said: “The [careers] budget isn’t ring-fenced, and it’s so small by the time it gets to them [individual schools] there’s not much they can get away with. So unless there’s a good network or someone has the idea to pool it, there’s a danger it just gets overlooked.”

One **human resources manager** told the researchers: “I think we’ve got a big problem – there are loads of jobs in retail but it seems to be up to us to promote the section. In our experience it’s been really difficult to get into schools.”

One politics graduate told Professor Simms: “I’m really disappointed – I’ve been looking for more than six months now and applying for loads of jobs, but nothing is happening, no responses. I think if I knew that before I started my degree I’d have done something different, like business, something that’s practical. No one really made me think about jobs [when choosing a degree].”

Professor Simms told the conference: “The experiences of the careers advisers we spoke to illustrate the profound changes in recent years. Without exception they had undergone some restructuring of the services within the past two to three years. Typically, they had had a number of years of upheaval, often leading to a perception that the service that was being offered to schools and to young people was inadequate.

“The messages that young people had received about work choices were about personal satisfaction and generic employability skills rather than labour market demand. This, we argue, is a direct consequence of how careers advice provision has changed and, in particular, the lack of one-to-one guidance available to most young people.

“For example, hospitality in pubs and restaurants is an industry with massively growing demand for labour, especially in management ranks. But there is a perception that it’s an entry level job with few prospects so young people and their parents don’t think of it as a career. Without careers advice specialists there’s no-one to explain that it’s a serious career opportunity. Retail is similar.

“On the other side, you get many young people choosing to study childcare and car mechanics or in the building trades, but there is nowhere near enough demand for that labour as compared to the numbers trained. That’s often a brutal shock to the young people.

“This matters within the wider functioning of the UK labour market because it means young people are often not receiving support about how to match their skills and interests within a fast changing labour market. This leaves them at a disadvantage and helps to explain why they are struggling so much even as the economy starts to recover.”

Notes:

The 2014 British Sociological Association annual conference is being held at the University of Leeds from 23 - 25 April. Over 600 social scientists will present their latest research, and 750 people will attend. The British Sociological Association’s mission is to represent the intellectual and sociological interests of its members. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729, and a Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk