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Careers work in England’s schools: politics, practices and prospects

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ABSTRACT
This article provides a five-year historical synopsis of how central government policies are impacting on careers work in England’s secondary schools. It shows attempts to reshape and re-engineer careers provision for young people, through an evolving careers experiment. The extent to which such exogenous arrangements are facilitating and/or impeding progress to secure independent and impartial careers guidance for young people is considered. Some brief comparisons are made to other national careers policy developments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. A blame culture and evidence-based rhetoric has crept into England’s policy discourse. The career development profession has largely been left on the periphery of the careers experiment and this article seeks explanations of this oversight. There are tensions yet to be resolved when it comes to a quasi-market experiment in careers work and the role of government. Key lessons learned are outlined for consideration by policy-makers, academic and practitioners both within and outside of the UK.

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Introduction

The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have little. (Franklin D Roosevelt, January 1937)

The United Kingdom (UK) is leaving the European Union. As it moves towards finding a new place in the world order, an accelerating wave of economic, social and technological change will inevitably transform the economy (Lawrence, 2016), schooling and people’s lives. There are several unknowns about the long-term impact and consequences resulting from this, but change is on the horizon. For example, almost half of UK business leaders are worried about post-Brexit skills shortages and fear they will not find enough suitable personnel (IoD, 2016). There are concerns that skills gaps in sectoral areas which rely heavily on overseas workers will be hard hit, including the teaching profession (DFE, 2016b). The ILO Skills Match in Europe report (2014) indicates the UK has the fifth highest level of mismatch, with 28.9% of its workforce in jobs not suited to their skill level. Of this, 15% of the workforce has a higher than average education level for their occupation (ILO, 2014). Working families, social justice and inclusive growth are centrally positioned in current political reforms (Her Majesty’s Government [HMG], 2016). Giving attention to working families is important, because almost half of people living in poverty in the UK are in a working household (Fullfact, 2015). However, it is to a large extent unclear what is meant by social justice and inclusive growth. Social justice, as described by Beilharz (1989) is something of ‘a catch-all category’ for keynesianism, welfarism, economic growth and consumerism, in short, something achieved through markets and/or state intervention. Stott
(2017) highlights inclusive growth is a somewhat vague and slippery term interpreted and adopted by many different individuals and organisations. He warns against conflating too many issues under the inclusive growth banner and argues for strategies that reduce poverty through jobs and improving the labour market. Warhurst (2017) argues Britain’s policy-makers need to pay greater attention to the subject of ‘decent quality jobs’ for individuals given almost three-quarters of workers who were low paid in 2002 were still in low paid jobs in 2012.

This article provides a five-year historical synopsis of how central government policies are impacting on careers work in England’s secondary schools. It highlights attempts to reshape and re-engineer careers provision for young people, through an evolving careers experiment. The extent to which such exogenous arrangements are facilitating and/or impeding progress to secure independent careers guidance for young people is considered. Some brief comparisons are made to other national careers policy developments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. A blame culture and evidence-based rhetoric has crept into England’s policy discourse. The career development profession has largely been left on the periphery of the careers experiment and this article seeks explanations of this oversight. The article concludes by highlighting tensions, yet to be resolved, in relation to fairness, transparency and accountability within current careers work for young people in England.

Turning points

Education systems not only distribute social assets, but also shape the kind of society that is coming into being (Connell, 1993). Jobs, skills and growth are inextricably linked to this and careers work in England’s schools. Labour market economists and educationalists have long recognised that high-quality careers work matters when it comes to the effective functioning of the labour market, the economy, the education system and social justice (Autor, 2001; Ginzberg, 1971; Killeen, White, & Watts, 1992; McMahon, Arthur, & Collins, 2008; Organisation for the Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010). For individuals to get in, get on and move up in learning and work (UKCES, 2014), this will require greater forms of careers leadership (Lodders & Meijers, 2017), careers dialogue in schools (Kujipers & Meijers, 2014), careers adaptability (Bimrose, Brown, Barnes, & Hughes, 2011; Savickas, 2012) and careers resilience unmatched in the past. Hunter (2001) cited in Lengelle et al. (in press) highlights the latter requires individuals to learn ‘the process of bending and rebounding to overcome adversity’.

But looking ahead careers work in England’s schools is likely to experience serious pressure given the UK Office for Budgetary Responsibility (OBR) estimates more fiscal tightening over the next four years, particularly in the public sector (Oxford Economics, 2017). Local authorities in England lost 27% of their spending power between 2010/11 and 2015/16 in real terms. Some services have experienced cumulative cuts to the order of 45% (JRF, 2015) and the National Audit Office (2016) indicates schools in England must reduce spending by 8% per pupil by 2020 – the biggest real terms cut in a generation. The trend of fiscal tightening is commonplace in Europe and further afield, but the degree to which public services reduce and careers work in schools become hollowed out varies considerably (ICCDPP, 2017).

For those committed to supporting careers work in England’s schools and local communities, a new industrial strategy, announced by the Prime Minister (HMG, 2017) provides a clear focus. This has called for improvements in education and skills, supported by careers provision for people of all ages:

Our improved education and skills system must be supported by high-quality careers provision … Careers provision continues to be patchy and inconsistent – both in schools and in later life. The Government is reviewing the current careers offer for people of all ages, and will build on the best international evidence to publish a comprehensive strategy later this year for careers information, advice and guidance. (p. 45)

The government plans to concentrate on five broad pillars to inform a national careers strategy due to be published later in the year. These include: (i) the prestige attached to careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG); (ii) the quality of careers provision (for people of all ages); (iii) the skills
needs that have to be addressed in England; (iv) support for those who are most disadvantaged using careers to improve social justice and (v) greater efforts on securing the end goal of meaningful-skilled employment that works for everyone (DfE, 2017, p. 3). School-mediated employer engagement and enterprise advisers are high on the political agenda, though for the first time in recent years, central government has indicated it wants to ensure that:

great careers guidance provides the first rung on the ladder of opportunity, helping everyone to achieve their full potential. (DfE, 2017, p. 3)

This could potentially be a significant turning point for careers work in England’s schools and local communities, but historical developments from 2012 to present day give rise to uncertainty about the seriousness of these laudable intentions.

Gaps are widening

Across England, there are growing concerns that socio-economic educational attainment gaps are widening as young people progress through the education system (Lupton & Thomson, 2015). Prestigious career routes and opportunities tend to be monopolised by young people from affluent backgrounds (Social Mobility Commission, 2016). To make this gap smaller, providing more exposure to and experiences of the world of work for students is important (Jones et al., 2016). The Wolf report (2011), endorsed by the Coalition Government, resulted in it being no longer mandatory for pupils aged 15–16. From August 2013, study programmes were introduced for those aged 16–19 in education – unless they were apprentices (because they were employed). This involves work experience for those on vocational courses and non-qualification activity for those on academic programmes. Her Majesty’s Inspectorate Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) found this was one of the weakest aspects of schools provision (2013). Teenage experience of work, in particular, part-time employment, is rapidly in decline. The proportion of 16–17-year-olds combining full-time education with part-time employment has fallen from 42% in 1997 to 18% in 2014 (Hughes, Mann, Barnes, Baldauf, & McKeown, 2016). With such decline, the requirement grows on schools, through careers provision to help young people gain the types of insights, exposure and experiences which they might traditionally have accessed through direct paid experience of the labour market.

Major government reforms for expanding apprenticeships in England, (HMG, 2015) and new technical education routes (IPTE, 2016) highlight the need for ‘the widespread availability of comprehensive career guidance’ (p. 7). Moote and Archer (2017) recently investigated students’ views on careers work in England’s schools and their satisfaction with this provision. The research draws on data collected through a national survey of over 13,000 Year 11 students aged 15/16 years and in-depth longitudinal interviews conducted with 70 students from this cohort (aged from 10 to 16 years). Findings describe careers education and young people’s engagement with careers information as both ‘patchy and patterned by social injustices’ (p. 3). Clearly careers work in schools is not reaching those most in need. Sociological research suggests that ‘racial minorities, particularly low-income minorities, have access to job contacts, but may be unable to effectively make use of their contacts’ social capital for a job search’ (MacDonald, Lin, & Ao, 2009). It is not uncommon among low-income minorities to switch off a career pathway because of barriers associated with poverty or a lack of awareness of opportunity structures. Gender role expectations are highly prevalent throughout schooling. Moreover, while gender relates to a single social variable, in reality it is often associated with multidimensional disadvantage. Bimrose, McMahon, and Watson (2015) highlight the term ‘intersectionality’ as useful to understanding the complexity of the layers of disadvantage in this regard.

Careers work in England’s schools

Prior to the 2010 general election, the Conservative Party had included in its election manifesto a commitment ‘to create a new all-age careers service’ in England (Conservative Party, 2010) to
correspond to those already developed for young people and adults in the rest of the UK. In November 2010, the then Prime Minster (Rt Hon David Cameron MP) appointed Lord Young, a former conservative government Cabinet Minister, as Enterprise Zsar (BBC, 2010). Within his remit was a key objective to encourage people to start businesses rather than seek jobs as employees. This objective continues to feature prominently under the present Conservative government. The significance of this should not be under-estimated, particularly when it comes to assessing how the dominant discourse of enterprise has featured prominently in the unique English careers experiment, discussed below. Also, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2010) and the Harvard School for Graduate Education’s Pathways to Prosperity (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011) delivered to government international evidence on the value of employer engagement to young people’s educational experiences. Both indicated that as careers diversify, careers guidance becomes increasingly important.

Careers work in England’s secondary schools spans all types of educational institutions: academies; maintained schools; community schools; foundation schools; free schools; independent schools; sixth form colleges; pupil referral units (PRUs) and other alternative schooling providers. Hutchinson (2013) defines careers work in England’s schools as: (i) careers education (including self-development, exploration and management); (ii) work-related learning (about types of work, developing skills for and through work) and (iii) CIAG. Until 2012, careers provider responsibility resided in England with local authorities and was delivered through a national network of youth Connexions centres. The Education Act (2011) placed a statutory duty on local authority maintained schools in England to secure access to independent and impartial careers guidance for their pupils in years 9–11 (ages 14–16 years old). This duty came into force in 2012, at the same time as the Coalition Government released schools in England from their statutory duties to provide careers education and work-related learning. Central government policy decisions such as ‘school autonomy’ (DfE, 2012) with new freedoms for headteachers to secure careers guidance services from an independent provider (a contractor-supplier relationship) left schools themselves to define the form such services should take. Neither ring-fenced nor any recognisable new stream of income was made available. Current legislation requires all young people in England to continue in education or training until at least their eighteenth birthday (DfE, 2016a), although in practice the vast majority of young people continue until the end of the academic year in which they turn 18 years old. New destination measures and performance league tables feature as policy levers impacting on all schools (DfE, 2017a). Local authorities have a designated responsibility to provide wider personal support to vulnerable young people and those who are not in education, employment or training aged 13–19, and young adults with learning difficulties and disabilities up to the age of 25. From 2012 onwards, a sudden rapid expansion of careers providers in the open marketplace has led to greater competition, complexity and confusion for schools as ‘purchasers’ of careers guidance (House of Commons [HoC], 2016a) in a prolific unregulated marketplace.

Four home nations

High-quality careers provision should in theory and practice raise young people’s aspirations, improve social mobility, highlight and address inequalities and, most importantly, provide hope for a better future. In England, a unique structural arrangement for government-funded careers provision in England exists, compared to other parts of the UK. For example, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales each have a government-funded all-age National Careers Service that act as the major conduit directly involved in the planning and/or delivery of careers education, information, advice and guidance in schools and offers differing levels of careers services to adults. Each has a different cultural nuanced approach, for example, ‘Changing Lives a Vision for Careers Wales, 2017–2020’ (Careers Wales, 2017) sets out a careers discovery model for young people, adults and businesses. In Northern Ireland, ‘Preparing for Success 2015–2020 careers education and guidance strategy’ (DoE, 2016) outlines key components of a high-quality all-age careers education and guidance
system. Both have National Careers Strategic Fora with direct involvement from Ministers. And, in Scotland ‘Career Information Advice and Guidance in Scotland: A framework for service Redesign and Improvement’ sets out the Scottish Government’s commitment to an all-age universal careers service provided through Skills Development Scotland (Scottish Government, 2011). An independent Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce (Wood, 2014), established by the Scottish Government, to investigate ways of improving young people’s transition into employment had representation from education and business leaders, as well as the joint Skills Committee of the Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland. The Scottish Government’s response (Scottish Government, 2014) was a greater focus on implementing a Curriculum for Excellence with appropriate resource dedicated to achieve this. In particular “local authorities, Skills Development Scotland and employer representative organisations should work together to develop a more comprehensive standard for careers guidance which would reflect the involvement of employers and their role and input” (p. 35).

There are significant similarities in their respective approaches, such as all-age digital services, use of labour market intelligence/information (LMI), partnership work with teachers, parents and governors in schools, alongside face-to-face independent and impartial careers guidance, or in the case of Scotland, career coaching for young people. In these home nations, careers provision is recognised as a public good as well as a private one. In contrast, England’s careers provision for young people has largely been dominated by a neo-liberalist lassiez faire market forces approach that has unfolded since 2012. Is this by accident or design?

**England’s coalition government: ministerial shifts and focus (2012–2016)**

In April 2012, the formation of England’s National Careers Service funded through a government sponsored Skills Funding Agency (BIS, April 2012) spearheaded by the then Minister for Skills (Rt. Hon John Hayes MP) heralded a new beginning for all-age careers provision across England. Watts (2013) critiqued its evolution and argued there was significant erosion taking place of the all-age vision, and ‘a likely major reduction in the extent and quality of careers help for young people’ (p. 1) There were concerns about policy delays and funding challenges. Around this time, the Trade Union Congress (2012) argued for the creation of a new service for under 25-year-olds combining careers guidance with Jobcentre Plus. No further action was taken on this at the time. Instead, a Career Development Taskforce, supported by the then Skills Minister, focused on revitalising the professional status of careers guidance. This facilitated the voluntary merger of multiple professional bodies into a single new entity, now known as the UK Career Development Institute (CDI). Senior leaders from business, education and careers sectors were then brought together to provide independent advice to Government on a future strategic vision for the National Careers Service and allied career support services (National Careers Council, 2012) under the auspices of realising a high-quality all-age National Careers Service.

A cabinet reshuffle in 2013 resulted in a new Skills Minister (Matthew Hancock MP, working across the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills and the Department for Education) appeared to be keen to make his own distinctive footprint on the careers landscape. The new policy discourse focused on an inspiration agenda (HMG, 2013). A Government Action Plan (BIS & DfE, 2013) recommended that:

> The National Careers Service should foster greater exposure of young people to the world of work and facilitate closer involvement between schools and employers, so that young people can be inspired, mentored and coached by employers. (p. 6)

Some small-scale additional funding was introduced for local support to schools and colleges to broker links with employers and employees and to provide additional careers support activities such as: work in youth offending institutions/prisons, support from the National Careers Service for local partnerships and greater local collation and dissemination of LMI. The Minister made clear
that this service was not there to provide face-to-face careers guidance for young people, in line with the then Secretary of State for Education (Michael Gove MP) – a fierce critic of careers professionals’ work. In addition, approximately £2 m per annum was allocated by government to a National Contact Centre (NCC) to provide online careers information and guidance to young people and adults. The inspiration agenda and allied funding remain in place at least until National Careers Service contracts come up for renewal in March 2018.

In June 2014, a newly appointed DfE Education Secretary and Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan MP), working closely with a new Skills Minister (Nick Boles MP) in the Department for Business Innovation & Skills (BIS) signalled hope and optimism for strengthening careers work in schools across England. One month in office, the Skills Minister’s first move was to successfully transfer the National Careers Contact helpline budget and responsibilities into his Department (HoC, 2014). This was significant because it meant that the Department for Education (DfE) no longer had a direct stake in the National Careers Service. A moot point when it considering current arrangements in 2017, as discussed below. A clear feature of the Government’s policies had been that the two Departments took very different stances in relation to careers guidance in general. But, the new Skills Minister’s focus was mainly on addressing the proliferation of apprenticeship frameworks (Richmond & Simmons, 2016). At the time, it was made very clear by business and education commentators that England’s careers landscape, particularly careers advice in schools, was metaphorically speaking ‘on life support’ (CBI, 2014); ‘a postcode lottery’ (Hooley, 2014); ‘in a mess’ (ATL, 2014). Since then, a plethora of reports from businesses, educationalists, government inspectorate and professional bodies (C&G, 2015; HoC, 2016a; Hughes & Chambers, 2014; Ofsted, 2016) have highlighted the need for urgent attention to be given to this neglected area of education and skills policy.

An English careers experiment

Roberts (2013) used the analogy of reform, accidental injury or attempted murder in relation to the Coalition government’s stance on the role of careers professionals offering independent careers guidance as a bridge between education and work. In December 2014, the Education Secretary and Minister for Women and Equalities and the Skills Minister formally announced the creation of a new careers and enterprise company to support schools:

To transform the provision of careers education and advice for young people and inspire them about the opportunities offered by the world of work. The new company is designed to support the government’s long-term economic plan by helping young people consider all the options available to them when they leave school and ensure they leave school fully prepared for life in modern Britain … The careers and enterprise company will focus on young people aged 12 to 18, helping them access the best advice and inspiration about the world of work by encouraging greater collaboration between schools and colleges and employers. (DfE, 2014)

This policy announcement was made despite the publication of the National Careers Service users’ satisfaction and progression survey (BIS, 2014) on the same day. The results of this survey showed that 94% of face-to-face and telephone customers believed that the service was good. Irrespective, in February 2015, a new privately owned Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) limited by guarantee was formally established, funded by government. Five months on, a Mc Kinsey management consultant was appointed as Chief Executive Officer to the CEC, supported by a small group of Board members from industry and education. The CEC Board does not have any representation from the UK professional careers development sector. This is somewhat ironic given the actual title of the company. In its early inception phase, further changes in departmental Ministerial responsibility for careers advice resulted in the Skills Minister (Nick Boles MP) being given direct responsibility for post-18 careers advice, whilst a new Under-Secretary of State for Education (Sam Gyimah MP) was given (DfE) responsibility for careers advice up to the age of 18 and for the new careers and enterprise company. A £20 m government package for the company was formally announced (Capgemini, 2014). In October 2015, as part of this package, a £5 million ‘careers investment’ fund was
launched to support and generate innovation in careers advice (CEC, 2015). The fund was directly aimed at geographical ‘Cold Spots’, building on earlier work undertaken by the Department for Education (DfE), the UK Commission for Employment & Skills (UKCES, 2014) and the National Careers Council (2014). In January 2016, the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) launched its Jobcentre Plus schools initiative for local Jobcentre Plus advisers to offer 12–18-year-old pupils insight into the world of work and advice on options like traineeships and apprenticeships. Shortly afterwards, in a joint BIS and DfE Ministerial oral evidence given to the House of Commons Sub-Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy into careers education, information, advice and guidance (HoC, 2016b) indicated some basic misunderstanding on the part of the Minister for careers advice up to the age of 18, since he cited inaccurately ‘the National Careers Service is there for post-16 people in the labour market’. The CEC was described as ‘a business-led organisation that was actually in charge of the process bringing businesses much more into the heart of school life’ (Skills Minister, Nick Boles MP). He argued that an organisation led by the appointed Chair ‘with the extraordinary experience she has … it is hard to get someone like that to take on a nationally led contract from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) because people of that calibre want a certain amount of independence, trusted with the budget and given a few clear objectives and allowed to get on with it’ (HoC, 2016b). As a consequence, the CEC has limited transparency and accountability beyond producing an Annual Report on its own performance. This is in stark contrast to the central government-funded National Careers Service, delivered through formal competitive tendering and contractual processes, with formal national and regional inspections by the Ofsted.

Social mobility

The concept of social mobility, as defined by Blanden, Gregg, and Machin (2005) is adopted by the CEC to highlight the organisation’s goal of helping young people to realise their potential and build careers aspiration. An early strategic decision was made to direct its efforts towards 39 Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP), with an assumption that local authorities (326 in total across England) would follow such developments through active participation on LEP Boards. In some cases, local authorities have their own-traded careers service working with schools and colleges alongside the National Careers Service regional inspiration teams, the CEC, education business partnerships, sole traders working in schools, charitable bodies and other independent careers providers. The concept of ‘Cold Spots’ and targeted funding has gathered momentum, but there are inherent dangers in this given some areas of perceived privilege have within them areas of significant disadvantage. Whilst this proves challenging for the CEC in its explanation of funded or co-funded initiatives, it is hardly surprising given the level of granularity required to identify all geographical areas of social deprivation. In January 2016, a new national mentoring programme designed to help ‘struggling teens’ was announced by the then Prime Minister:

Government will spend £70 million on its strategy to improve careers education and guidance in this Parliament, including continued funding for the Careers and Enterprise Company, which was announced by the Secretary of State for Education in December 2014 and set up a year ago. (David Cameron, Prime Minister). (DfE, 2016c)

An additional £12 million fund, administered by CEC, to boost social mobility was put in place to create a new generation of mentors from the business community. So far, £3.8 m has been allocated to this activity (CEC, 2016a). The government’s stated goal is for 25,000 young people a year to benefit from business mentoring by 2020. Hooley (2016) indicates there is a substantial evidence-base which supports the role of employer mentoring in schools and he goes on to describe the strength of this evidence as moderate to good. Whilst the evidence presented suggests that mentoring can have a significant and observable impact on behaviour, attainment and progression, the effect sizes are typically small. Hooley (2016) argues that whilst mentoring is a moderate- to low-cost intervention this needs to be high quality in order to deliver any impacts and that badly organised mentoring can
do more harm than good (p. 12). This national mentoring programme is not subject to any form of formal inspection to assess either quality or impact.

**England’s conservative government: a new shift and focus? (2016–present day)**

In mid-July 2016, a new Secretary of State for Education (Rt Hon. Justine Greening MP) and a new Minister of State for Apprenticeships and Skills (Rt Hon. Robert Halfon MP) was appointed by the Prime Minister. The new policy discourse focuses on *opportunity areas* with six geographical areas in England initially identified by the Secretary of State for Education as the most challenged when it comes to social mobility. The CEC reported a £4 m cash injection for careers and enterprise provision across England (CEC, 2016b). From this, £1 m will be spent on opportunity areas and the remainder allocated to career and enterprise programmes in other parts of the country ‘which have had a proven positive impact on supporting young people into work, such as work experience, workplace visits, careers talks and volunteering’ (CEC, 2016b). Six further opportunity areas were announced in January 2017 with a £72 m budget allocated by government for local partnerships formed with early years providers, schools, colleges, universities, businesses, charities and local authorities to ensure children have the opportunity to reach their full potential. It is unclear how much of this new fund will be allocated to the CEC. The Apprenticeship and Skills Minister with responsibility for careers education, information and guidance has used the metaphor of an opportunity ladder in his first formal announcement on careers work linking high-quality careers advice to the government’s new Industrial Strategy (HMG, 2017):

> I see careers advice as the first rung on a ladder of opportunity, a ladder that people will continue to climb throughout their lifetime … It is something that needs to be built, grafted over and shaped to reflect our modern requirements. Government’s job is to be there to hold the ladder and help people to climb up … A total of £90 million is being invested in careers over this Parliament, which includes further funding to the CEC. (DfE, 2017b)

Barnes (2017) argues government holding an imaginary ladder and helping people to climb up is over simplistic, given fewer people in the twenty-first century have straightforward linear careers. In the gig economy where insecure portfolio and serial careers are commonplace and decent jobs, as referred to earlier in Warhurst’s assertion, can be hard to find – a lattice of modern day experiences of learning and work seems more fitting. The Minister has stated his intention to provide further funding to the CEC. Two years since its inception, there are now 80 enterprise co-ordinators from business and over 1300 volunteer enterprise advisers working in around a third of secondary schools across the country. He has emphasised:

> The Careers & Enterprise Company are developing a ‘careers passport’ led by Lord Young, which will be a ‘Passport for Life’: a digital record for young people of their enterprise learning and work experience throughout their education to aid transition to employment. (DfE, 2017b)

However, in some schools and local authority areas, as well as in other private and third-sector careers providers ‘enterprise passports’ that capture young people’s skills and achievements are already underway, for example, Devon Enterprise Passport (2016) in association with the Education Business Partnership South West region of England (2016). So far, the level of CEC expenditure and progress made on developing the above-mentioned careers passport is largely unknown. Clearly, the CEC must find its ‘unique selling point’ (USP) in an overcrowded careers and enterprise landscape. The key design features of the CEC stem essentially from the Prime Minister Camron’s priorities and enthusiasm to ‘bolt on’ differing strategic rather than operational initiatives aimed at teachers and young people in schools at a pace. As in the Ancient Roman myth, ‘Janus’ has emerged, that is, a company looking to the past – required to fulfil a long-standing ‘enterprise’ ambition of Lord Young, and looking to the future – setting up strategic brokerage arrangements between employers and schools, driving forward a national mentoring programme, managing grant schemes and
seeking to carve out an evidence-base research agenda. Such an evidence-base approach claims to fill important gaps in the value chain as data is transformed into information and usable knowledge (Head, 2008). But many government-funded scientific organisations, including national LEP and local authority networks, universities, job centres and charitable bodies are already data driven in assessing and identifying both local needs compared to regional and national trends.

Blame culture and evidence-base

As in the days of transformation of careers services in England under New Labour (Hughes, 2005), a blame culture and evidence-based rhetoric have crept into the policy discourse. Recently, the Apprenticeships and Skills Minister attributed poor careers advice to spending decisions by school leaders:

I do not believe that this is just a question of funding, but how a school chooses to spend its funding: schools that provide high-quality careers advice, like [...do not do so because they have a greater share of the pot, but because they see providing high-quality careers advice as being vitally important to the future of their pupils. (Schools Week, 2017)

At present, there are few incentives for school leaders in England to prioritise careers work, apart from a statutory and moral duty to do so. Fullan (2007) argues that in order to create a strong career-learning environment this requires the ‘reculturing’ of schools. Reculturing is ‘a process of co-creating new meanings regarding situations of ambiguity and uncertainty on a dialogical basis’ (Lodders & Meijers, 2017). They and others indicate collective learning processes among teachers have to be guided by transformational leadership (Baker & Gerler, 2008; Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016). Destination measures and performance league tables are emerging from government as policy levers to encourage schools to focus on preparing young people for the next stage of their education, training or employment. Clearly, there is potential to strengthen the focus on careers work through the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted). But, fundamentally this requires the development of a shared understanding and meaning of what constitutes twenty-first-century careers work and the associated knowledge outcomes. With further cuts anticipated in school budgets by 2020 this means tough purchasing decisions are on the immediate horizon. The extent to which there will be further erosion of careers education and guidance for young people has yet to be determined.

A key challenge for the Minister responsible for careers advice is whether to harness what appears to be working well for adults – based on rigorous Ofsted inspection reports –, that is, the National Careers Service, and immediately extend its remit to provide independent careers guidance in England’s schools to address market failure. Or alternatively, to sustain the enterprise co-ordinator and volunteers from businesses model for schools and wait to see ‘what works’. Other alternative models may emerge later in the year when a long-awaited national careers strategy is published, but further delays are difficult to comprehend. Talk about the evidence-base is rampant. In previous years, for example, a key principle guiding the former national careers service for young people in England (the Connexions Services) was ‘evidence-based practice – ensuring that new interventions are based on rigorous research and evaluation into “what works”’ (DfEE, p.11). Similarly, the CEC has stated it: ‘is committed to being evidence-based, building on “what works”, and taking a pragmatic view of regional variations in the careers, enterprise and employment landscape, adapting its approach as required’ (CEC, 2016c).

To its credit, the company has embraced match-funded initiatives and international research findings in the form of supporting key principles underpinning ‘Good Guidance’ (Holman, 2014). Since their introduction in 2014, the Gatsby principles and benchmarks have been widely acknowledged throughout England. So far, the company has elected to focus primarily on encounters with employers (benchmark 5) and experiences of workplaces (benchmark 6). It has issued grants to many companies previously in direct receipt of Department for Education (DfE) funds, for example, World Skills, Big Bang Fairs. It has co-funded, in association with the Gatsby Foundation, an online ‘Compass’ tool
for schools to evaluate and monitor improvements in their careers education programmes. However, the CEC has chosen to disassociate itself with the lack of funding and erosion of independent and impartial careers guidance for young people in England’s schools. Meaningful dialogue or shared action with the UK careers development professional body representing around 5000 trained and qualified careers development professionals working in the interests of young people, parents and teachers has yet to be fully embraced. This could be potentially explained by the intention to establish itself as a free thinker in the careers market, or a market-maker in the careers marketplace experimenting with approaches to prove what works, or a future competitor in an open careers marketplace when the National Careers Service inspiration agenda contract comes up for renewal. Whatever the reason, the demand for improved careers information and guidance in schools remains unabated (FE week, 2016).

**Fundamental flaws**

The core of the analysis by the government was the belief that a new business-led organisation, namely the Careers and Enterprise Company, with ‘a strategic focus’ will bring on an industrial scale more schools and colleges plugged into the world of work. But there are at least three fundamental design flaws. Firstly, the Careers and Enterprise Company is a ‘market player’ competing with other national and local careers providers and relies primarily (though not exclusively) on enterprise and mentoring volunteers from business, supported by government funds. Secondly, whilst it has fully adopted a set of universally agreed benchmarks for ‘good careers guidance’ – welcomed by those working in the careers sector – and supported a new tool for schools’ self-assessment against the benchmarks – it has so far failed to make any serious attempt to achieve a stable careers programme in schools (benchmark 1); embrace or acknowledge the need for better use of labour market intelligence/information (LMI) (benchmark 2). This is clearly illustrated in its first published research report ‘Moments of Choice’ (CEC, 2016d). The company remains silent on linking curriculum learning with careers (benchmark 4) and young people’s access to personal guidance (benchmark 8). And thirdly, it has chosen to prioritise use of scarce public funds to aid further experimentation rather than directly supporting impartial and independent careers guidance for young people to be made available in all schools in England.

**Local and regional frameworks**

At a local and regional level people are beginning to notice the impact of cuts to their budgets. A lack of coordination across local areas has created an environment for schools and businesses that business leaders describe as ‘chaotic’ (Ofsted, 2016). The inspectorate reported projects such as those sponsored by LEPs are at the very early stages of development. Business leaders have raised concerns that there is little coherence to provision and a lack of strategy by government, business organisations or individual schools. They were largely unaware of the work of the Careers and Enterprise Company. Relationships were often hampered by poor communication between school and business staff and a lack of clarity over what was wanted from the partnership. Instead, new forms of partnerships are beginning to explore ways in which they can co-create more accessible and coherent careers support for young people, parents, teachers and employers in their area. They are seeking local solutions to a national problem by bringing key stakeholders together from the National Careers Service, Job Centre Plus, Careers and Enterprise Company, Education Business Partnerships, Local Authorities, School and College bodies together, for example, London (London Councils, 2015), Cornwall (2016), The Black Country, Somerset, and Yorkshire & The Humber – to name but a few. There are some signs of a renewed focus on a local all-age careers offer for young people and adults in preparing a response to post-Brexit skills shortages, for example, Sheffield.
There are Ministerial plans for linkages between the different organisations and services including the National Careers Service, the Careers & Enterprise Company and the National Apprenticeships Service to be reviewed. The role of Jobcentre Plus advisers now working with young people in England’s schools (since 2016) has yet to be mentioned by DfE. How might this be considered as part of the new careers strategy planned later in the year? More fundamentally, as local budgets for schools and local authorities further tighten, key questions on the efficacy and added-value of the English experiment in the form of the Careers and Enterprise Company are likely to emerge. It is clear that more employers working with schools and enterprise activities are vitally important. But, so too is careers education, information, advice and guidance (CIAG) in schools embedded within a strong careers learning culture.

**Conclusion**

It is apparent that all schools and colleges require leadership and practical support if they are to develop effective careers work (Lodders & Meijers, 2017). The present system of support for careers work in England’s schools is chaotic and congested. If the English careers experiment (CEC) continues in its present form, greater fairness, transparency and accountability are required between private and public sector arrangements. An important and, as yet unresolved issue is whether the role of government is to pump-prime a new player in the careers market (one which is neither fully independent or fully-private ownership) – and for this to be self-sustaining within a set timeframe – or whether government’s role is alternatively to guarantee access to careers provision and ensure quality by bringing coherence to an unregulated marketplace. There is a growing and justifiable demand for Treasury funds to be directed into regions for more targeted delivery of CIAG in schools and local communities. For Ministers and policy-makers in a post-General Election climate (June 2017), a renewed strategic focus combined with the economies of scale that can be achieved through an all-age national careers service merits further attention.

For those academics, policy-makers and practitioners within and outside of England, the promotion of a quasi-market experiment may, in principle, seem appealing to bring about systems change. But, lessons learned from this historical analysis show part of the problem is that when you randomly bolt on initiatives, mix careers and enterprise nomenclature, for example, enterprise co-ordinators reliant on employers and volunteers for careers work in schools, and overlook the added-value contribution of career development professionals’ work, this complicates understanding. More fundamentally, it fails to address the disparities that exist and social inequalities that arise when young people have restricted access to independent and impartial careers guidance.

**Disclosure statement**

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