

CAREERING TOWARDS A WALL? Careers guidance policy and Election 2015

Professor Tristram Hooley, Professor of Career Education and Head of iCeGS at the University of Derby reviews recent careers guidance policy and argues that the main political parties must do better in 2015.

Election fever is gripping the nation. The volume of political noise is growing. So far this noise has focused on issues like Ed Miliband's kitchens and the fact that a seagull stole David Cameron's sandwich. But, as the election gets closer the political parties might start to talk more seriously about policy. The question is whether careers guidance will be one of the policies talked about.

The last five years have seen the destruction of young people's careers services. In 2015 most of the population has little or no access to careers support. The fact that such changes have taken place alongside increases in fees for further and higher education, a challenging youth labour market and ever lengthening school to work transitions is particularly concerning.

Such changes hit graduates twice. Firstly, they are unlikely to have received any careers support before they make university choices. Secondly, although careers support within universities is usually good, once they leave, if they are unable to access their former university careers services, they are unlikely to be entitled to any careers support. This article will look at how policy makers have brought about this situation and ask whether any party is likely to do anything about it following Election 2015.

How did we get here?

The last election was a decisive one for careers work in England, although it would have been difficult to guess this from pre-election scrutiny of the manifestos. The Conservatives were elected on a promise to create an all-age careers service drawing together the best of Connexions (young people) and Next Step (adults). However, a year into the coalition careers was seen as an easy place to wield the knife when cutting services.

Careers support for young people ebbed away as funding was cut and the situation worsened as the Education Act 2011 endorsed Michael Gove's commitment to 'school autonomy'. Schools were now seen as sovereign with any education funding in local authorities (including that devoted to careers) cut to the bone. It was not just Connexions that suffered. Education Business Partnerships and Aimhigher were also cut in this period. Careers support for young people in England has been in serious decline ever since (Hooley et al., 2014).

Meanwhile, the adult careers service was rebranded as the National Careers Service and its funding largely maintained. This puts England in the strange position of providing more public funding for adult careers than for young people. This situation has come about largely because of different priorities that exist in the Department of Education, where careers has been under attack, and the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, where it has been seen as part of a broader skills policy.

The National Careers Service has been one of the high points of the government's careers policy as it has maintained a visible public careers service for citizens in England. However, there are a number of criticisms that can be made about the service (CSSA, 2012) including that it has been poorly marketed and overly focused on the unemployed. For graduates this has meant that the service has been largely invisible and that the opportunity to access careers support has been limited.

Given the importance of careers support, and its mishandling during both the coalition government and the previous Labour government (Watts, 2013), we might expect that it would be a hot political issue. However, career development is low on the political pecking order. The current government has been criticised for its careers policy, most notably from the redoubtable Graham Stuart (Chair of the Education Select Committee), but it has been a

niggling issue rather than one that has made or broken any political careers. After years of being challenged on this issue there was a sudden U-turn following the departure of Michael Gove, with an injection of £20million and the formation of a new careers company (Morgan, 2014). This was better than nothing, but was insufficient in scale (around £200 million of annual funding was lost in 2010/2011) and lacked a strategic understanding of the problem or likely solutions.

Election 2015

As the election campaign starts there is no sign that careers guidance will be a big issue. Having announced the launch of the new careers company, the Conservative Party have probably arrived at their careers policy. They will be arguing that the new company should be allowed to develop and that the rest of the status quo should be preserved.

Labour has been quick to criticise the government on its policies. The Party's education spokesman Tristram Hunt said 'the careers guidance reforms are very, very damaging' (Bawden, 2013) but has been slow in announcing what he will do if elected. The Liberal Democrats have also been vague, saying that they believe careers guidance is important, without making any firm commitments.

The Green Party has a fairly strong tradition of supporting careers work (with their MP Caroline Lucas a key critic of the government's cuts to Connexions). However, like the bigger parties they have yet to announce any specific policies on careers. UKIP has, as far as I can see, never said anything about careers guidance.

A close examination of political parties' thinking on careers guidance is disappointing. Six weeks before an election almost none of them has given any serious thought to the issue. In fact, all parties are sticking to top-level headlines which are short on specifics. As soon as you start to interrogate the policies in detail they tend to fall away,

leaving the realisation that no real commitments have been made.

What will the next government do?

Even if we could guess who was likely to win the next election, the current policies provide us with few clues about what the parties might do if elected. The May 2015 website suggests that a hung Parliament is the most likely outcome, making the future even more difficult to predict.

As most parties have given careers a low priority throughout the current Parliament it seems unlikely that careers guidance will feature in a 2015 coalition agreement. Instead the horse-trading is likely to focus on Scotland (where there is a much stronger careers support system than in England). This is a shame as careers guidance is an issue on which it is possible to command cross-party support. The cross-party Education Select Committee has come up with some strong proposals about how it should be taken forward. (House of Commons Education Committee, 2013)

Given the lack of both clarity and priority on careers guidance, an educated guess about the future would be that the current arrangements roll on regardless of who is elected. The current fragmented situation where we have a National Careers Service for adults, a careers company for young people, university careers services for

students and a very patchy entitlement for graduates is likely to endure.

What SHOULD the next government do?

Given the uninspiring future predicted above it is worth considering the counterfactual. What would careers guidance look like if the next government took it seriously?

Following a period of intense negotiations the leaders of the new coalition would emerge and announce to the world that the government would support every citizen to realise their potential. A key part of this would be a new national strategy for careers linking up a fragmented system and providing a universal, lifelong entitlement to careers support. Such a strategy would lead to cost savings as overlap is minimised and such savings could be invested in the development of the system alongside appropriate new resources. The system would be underpinned by a National Careers Service which would eventually become as mainstream a part of our political system as the NHS.

The new strategy would ensure that all young people whether they were in schools, colleges, universities, work or unemployed could access dedicated careers support. To achieve this, new funding would be found, statutory guidance tightened up and career development aims would be included in

the key performance metrics of all educational organisations.

The strategy would also make it clear that career development was not just for young people and reinvigorate the support that exists for adults. This would include dedicated support for low skill workers, for new graduates and for those in late career (building on the current 'mid-life career review' project (NIACE, 2014)). It would also support professionalism within the careers field affirming that careers education and guidance are skilled activities which require appropriate qualifications.

Utopian dreams aside, careers guidance has been a problematic political issue for the coalition throughout its period in government. However, an analysis of current party positions on the issue suggests that little has been learnt.

Those of us who care about careers work need to make sure that this does not remain the case throughout the election and in its immediate aftermath. There is a desperate need to make some noise about the importance of career development and to try and ensure that all parties move it up their priority lists.

References

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