

## Response to the Careers Advice inquiry

Prepared by Professor Sandra McNally, CVER and CEP London School of Economics, University of Surrey.

### Summary

- The quality of careers information and guidance in English schools and colleges has long been a cause for concern. Recent work in London schools (in 2010/11) suggests that a large proportion of students in Year 10 do not know basic facts about the relationship between post-compulsory education and labour market outcomes and about how higher education is financed.
- The fact that the post-16 vocational education system is so complex and badly understood by many does not make it easy for schools to offer advice in this area.
- International evidence on the efficacy of providing careers-related information to students suggests that provision of useful information can be enough to change students expectations and motivation but not necessarily their behaviour.
- To change students' behaviour, it is important that there is some personalisation of information and that it is carefully targeted at the right groups. It might also help to have careers information and guidance throughout school. For example, students need to know the implications of doing well in particular subjects (e.g. STEM) for the careers they might want to pursue when they still have a chance to improve their performance and make the right subject choices.
- It is becoming possible to think of innovative ways to use education and labour market data to help students make better decisions. This efficacy of such approaches have been shown convincingly in the US with large-scale administrative data.
- There is reliable evidence that face-to-face careers guidance can be cost-effective for improving access to higher education.
- Recent high quality studies showing a positive effect of careers information and guidance suggest that it is important that this be provided by a trusted source.

1. My research activities in this area are (a) a literature review undertaken for the Sutton Trust in August 2009 about information advice and guidance in schools; (b) a survey of Year 10 students in 54 London Schools in 2010/11, in which an 'information experiment' was implemented and evaluated by a Randomised Control Trial; (c) a review of recent international economic studies (using Randomised Control Trials) evaluating the efficacy of careers information experiments for students' decisions. This will be published by the IZA World of Labor Series.
2. My input to this evidence is not comprehensive but focuses on insights from my work (especially b and c in paragraph 1). It most relates to the following in the terms of reference of the enquiry: 'How careers advice in schools and colleges can help to match skills with labour market needs'. I also direct the BIS-funded research centre: Centre for Vocational Education Research. We were launched in March 2015 and have a number of ongoing projects that will eventually help inform careers information and guidance at schools and colleges.
3. The vocational education system in England is very complex. There are many different vocational qualifications that might be pursued after GCSEs. It is difficult to categorise qualifications and describe progression pathways using the administrative data. Furthermore, apprenticeships are not a very commonly observed option for young people. For example, of those who completed their GCSEs in 2009/10, only 20% commenced any form of apprenticeship by age 20. In this context, careers guidance is difficult and problems are partly related to the more fundamental issue of complexity in the system.
4. Results for my study about London schools in the 2010/11 school year (McGuigan et al. 2014) show a poor level of baseline knowledge among 15 year-olds in terms of the costs and benefits of going to university. For example, only 45 per cent of students know that fees are paid after university, while only half of students recognise the fact that students loans are granted on very favourable conditions. One fifth of students do not think that a person has a better chance of getting a job if they stay on in education up to 18 (as opposed to leaving at age 16) or going to university (as opposed to leaving education at age 18). It is also surprising that 40-50% of students believe that their future earnings will not be affected by either their choice of institution or subject of study. While there are only 54 schools in our sample (10% of secondary schools in London), participating schools tend to be better performing and have fewer socio-economic problems. As the participating schools probably have better than average information on careers, our findings (on serious deficiencies in knowledge) does not bode well for schools outside the sample.
5. The above study, like several others, suggests that provision of careers-information can change students' knowledge and attitudes over the short-term. However, it also shows that it can be difficult to engage students on these issues – with many people who voluntarily access information being those who are most committed to engaging in post-compulsory education.
6. A Randomised Control Trial (RCT) in the US showed that sending regular text messages to 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students (i.e. age 11-13) about the relationship between education and earnings was enough to increase students' knowledge and self-reported effort but not enough to improve their results. The problem was interpreted as students' not knowing how to translate their higher ambitions into better exam results (Fryer, 2013). A RCT directed to an older group of students in Finland also found no effect on behaviour (Pekkala et al. 2015).

This involved giving high school students information about the earnings returns to different courses of study. The study produced a change in application behaviour but not enrolment behaviour. A possible reason is that it might be too late to influence effort (via information) the year before decisions need to be made in a highly competitive system. A lesson from these very different studies (and other studies) is that constraints on students' ability to react to information and advice need to be taken into account when it comes to assessing whether approaches are actually effective.

7. One recent US study with potential high relevance to the English context is by Hoxby and Turner (2015). It uses administrative data to target high school seniors who are both very high-achieving and have low family income. Students are posted an information package which is 'semi-customized' for their situation (i.e. income and location) and includes a fee waiver for making college applications. The information package includes a guide on application strategies, a list of where similar students applied and compares institutions based on graduation rates, resources and costs. The findings are that students receiving this information apply to more institutions and enroll in better-performing institutions (with a better match between their academic ability and the average intake of the institution). It requires no 'face-to-face' contact at all and can be entirely devised based on administrative data (albeit in a very sophisticated way – to ensure that the right information package gets to the right target group at the right time). A big advantage is that it can get to students that are geographically dispersed and in schools that are not regularly enlisted in various forms of college outreach. Clearly such an approach would not be enough on its own to deal with all issues of careers advice and guidance. However, it might be one useful component within an overall strategy. The authors emphasise that is important that information be provided by a well-known and trusted source.
8. Another recent RCT study with very interesting results come from Paris (Goux et al. 2014). It focuses on decisions made at the end of middle schools (where students are aged 15/16) and targets the parents of young people who the school head teacher has identified as the most low-achieving. The background is that young people in this group often have unrealistically high expectations about where they can apply (in a competitive system). They have a high probability of repeating grades and eventually dropping out of education. The intervention aims to encourage the parents of these students to consider two-year vocational programs on their list of possibilities for the following year. The intervention consists of two group meetings with the head teacher. District experts prepared guidelines that explained how to inform and counsel families about the complex tracking system and the application and allocation mechanism. Parents were also shown a DVD showing students who explain how they perform in vocational education, although they failed in middle school. The effect of the intervention is to increase the proportion of students who enroll in two-year vocational programs (rather than repeat grades) and this outcome is shown to persist one year later. The success of this intervention is partly attributed to the active involvement of school principals for identification of appropriate groups of students, encouraging their parents to attend meetings, and facilitating the meetings themselves.
9. There are several studies showing that mentoring by college students can be very effective at influencing students to apply for and enroll in college. A recent example is by Carell and Sacerdote (2013). This approach is also advocated in a wider review published by the White House in January 2014: "Increasing college opportunities for low-income students: promising models and a call to action".

10. In conclusion, careers advice and information can be effective in changes students' knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. But it is not always effective. Details about targeting, timing, and mode of delivery need to be considered carefully. There are useful lessons to learn from international research. Interventions in England should be tested using similarly rigorous methods.

## References

Carrell, S.E., and B. Sacerdote. "Why do college going interventions work?" NBER Working Paper No. 19031 (2013).

Fryer, R.G. "Information and student achievement: evidence from a cellular phone experiment." NBER Working Paper. No. 19113. (2013).

Goux, D., M. Gurgand, E. Maurin. "Adjusting your dreams? The effect of schools and peers on dropout behaviour." IZA Discussion Paper. No. 7948. (2014). Online at <http://ftp.iza.org/dp7948.pdf>

Hoxby, C., and S. Turner. "What high-achieving low-income students know about college." NBER Working Paper. No. 20861. (2015).

Pekkala Kerr, S., T. Pekkarinen, M. Sarvimäki, R. Uusitalo, "Post-secondary education and information on labor market prospects: a randomized field experiment." IZA Discussion Paper No. 9372 (2015). Online at: <http://ftp.iza.org/dp9372.pdf>

McGuigan, M., S. McNally and G. Wyness. "Student awareness of costs and benefits of educational decisions: effects of an information campaign and media exposure." IZA Discussion Paper No. 8596. (2014). Online at: <http://ftp.iza.org/dp8596.pdf>

McNally, S., (2008). Information, Advice and Guidance in Schools: A Brief Literature Review. Report to the Sutton Trust.

The Executive Office of the President. "Increasing college opportunities for low-income students: promising models and a call to action". January 2014. Online at: [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/white\\_house\\_report\\_on\\_increasing\\_college\\_opportunity\\_for\\_low-income\\_students\\_1-16-2014\\_final.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/white_house_report_on_increasing_college_opportunity_for_low-income_students_1-16-2014_final.pdf)