

“The Connexions service”

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Key Features of the Connexions Service

Operation Date: 2001 – 2012

Target Population: Available to young people aged 13 to 19 and to those with learning difficulties until age 24

Purpose: To support young people through the provision of impartial information, advice and guidance (IAG) primarily around post-compulsory educational routes

Introduction

Connexions was a UK government initiative between 2001 and 2012 to reduce social exclusion among young people and provide impartial information, advice and guidance (IAG) primarily around post-compulsory educational routes and careers. The introduction of a support service explicitly dedicated to young people was an innovative approach and an important step forward in the way careers counselling was provided across the country. The service aimed to remove barriers to learning and progression and enable young people make a smooth transition to adulthood and working life. At the time of the service's operation, post-compulsory education was covering all education received after the age of 16. Although since 2015 the compulsory participation age has been increased to 18, the structure of post-16 education is still complicated. The UK's vocational education system is often characterised as volatile and little understood by students, parents and employers. There are, therefore, profound reasons to believe that the lessons imparted from the service's operation are highly relevant to the current educational system and applicable to improve future services aiming to support young people.

Effective IAG provision regarding the available post-16 educational pathways and where these lead to is essential, in order to ensure that young people make choices that are suitable to their needs, skills and aspirations (Fuller and MacFadyen, 2012). The local delivery of the Connexions service varied considerably in scope and quality which attracted a fair share of criticism. The aim of this review is to discuss the Connexions service, acknowledge the many benefits it offered to young people and explore the potential faults in its operation. Importantly, this report intends to consider the relevance of the service at the present time in order to improve the quality of potential future support services.

Context

The UK educational system has an important and distinguishable feature in comparison to other countries, providing significant context to this review. Specifically, it is markedly flexible and offers a very broad range of educational options. Following the national high-stake GCSE examinations, students are exposed to a wide list of opportunities either academic or vocational. Notably, for the students undertaking academic qualifications (mainly A levels) the route is relatively simple and well-known. On the other hand, for students studying vocational qualifications, the available options are much more diverse, not always easy to understand where they lead to and are undermined by constant policy reforms (Hupkau, et al., 2017). Currently, there are over 12,000 qualifications available which are offered by more than 150 awarding organisations. Given, therefore, the complexity of the vocational education system (Wolf, 2011) and the fact that about half of the students are exposed to it (Maragkou, 2020) makes the need for youth support and effective IAG provision essential.

The formation of Connexions was an initiative by the UK government to remedy that. Following, the Learning and Skills Act 2000, Connexions services started to roll out across the country between April 2001 and April 2003. The service aimed to provide impartial IAG and ensure a smooth transition from compulsory schooling to post-16 learning and to the world of work to all young individuals between ages 13 and 19. Further, the service provided support to young people with learning difficulties or disabilities until the age of 24. The initiative for the formation of the service was triggered by the concern that technological change and globalisation in today's world demand young people to develop knowledge, skills and flexibility for their future. Specifically, the service's inception stated that:

Our aim is to ensure that all young people have the opportunity to learn the skills they need to make a success of their adult lives. Young people should be stretched so that they can achieve higher standards, and so that half of them are later able to go on to university. Equally, young people should be supported so that those from disadvantaged backgrounds or at risk of disaffection become motivated to participate in society through learning (Department for Education and Employment, 2000, p.17).

In its final years in particular, government expected Connexions services to have a particular role in recording the participation of young people (through the National Client Caseload Information System) and identifying and supporting those not in education, employment or training (NEET). Connexions stopped operating as a coherent national service in 2012 because of public spending cuts by the Coalition Government. The responsibility for students' career guidance has been handed to schools since then and the responsibilities around participation to local authorities. The disbanding of the Connexions service spread concerns regarding the future of IAG provision in the country and fears of an inadequate delivery by schools.

Service Evaluation

The Connexions service was an innovative approach to IAG provision, as it emphasised those young people who felt excluded or found it difficult to use the usual sources of advice. At the time of the announcement of the service's termination several concerns had been raised. Tristram Hooley, a professor of career education at the University of Derby, argued that the statutory guidance that the government provided to schools about their new responsibilities was vague and confusing (Hooley, 2013). Deirdre Hughes, an international careers policy, research and practise specialist, discussed that schools and academies did not have the knowledge and experience to fulfil the provision of impartial careers guidance adequately leaving the future of IAG provision uncertain and fragile (Deirdre, 2010). Ofsted (2010) suggested that the Connexions service provided good support to young individuals. On the contrary, when IAG was delivered with little prior knowledge of the full range of educational options, for example by teachers or residential staff, it was then ineffective in supporting young individuals (Ofsted, 2010) In line with this view, a report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published at the time, raised concerns regarding the objectivity of the advice that students receive in education institutions and suggested that the limited experience of teachers in the wider work environment might result in a pro-academic bias (Hoeckel and Schwartz, 2010).

Furthermore, Katharine Horler, the Chief Executive at Adviza, discussed that Connexions as a service was unique in operating as a universal service for all, including young people needing intensive support as well as those who just needed a little bit of advice. This contrasts with recent support services which are becoming much more segregated and more likely to label young people as being at high risk.

Even though there were no doubts about the need of impartial IAG provision and the benefits that the service provided to young people, the Connexions service attracted a fair amount of criticism. A 2010 research report from the National Youth Agency mentioned that some young people were unclear about the role and function of Connexions (Hibbert, 2010) that the IAG they received was ineffective or not tailored enough to their personal circumstances (National Audit Office, 2004) and that the service was difficult to access (Hibbert, 2010).

There were mixed opinions surrounding the quality of the IAG provided by the service, which was variable across the country depending on the set up and management of each service. On one hand, those young people who managed to have a systematic and close contact with Connexions were very positive about the service they received. Also, even after the service was disbanded and the legal responsibility for IAG delivery was handed to schools, there were still many schools who reached back to the service for guidance, providing clear evidence of the service's effectiveness in IAG provision. On the other hand, research by the Sutton Trust suggested that the IAG provided by the service was sometimes inadequate, poorly timed and incomplete. Also, the specialist guidance required to help young people navigate the various post-16 pathways, especially with respect to subject choice, university courses and future careers, was not always present (The Sutton Trust, 2008). This was suggested to be particularly true for those young people who were not at risk of dropping out from education (Pring et al., 2009).

The mixed opinions regarding the service's operation reflect the fact that the service's operation was not consistent across the whole country, but rather, it differed hugely across local areas. In some parts of the country the service was operated by many different organisations making it too difficult and complex to provide efficient support to young people.

Lessons Learnt

As we navigate through the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact it has on the experiences of young people, a holistic support service is needed now, more than ever. There is a lot to be learned from the Connexions initiative for the formation and structure of a future support service. Effective IAG is essential for young people's decision making and, crucially, policy initiatives should not fail to take into consideration the complex post-16 structure of the system. In line with the Gatsby benchmarks of Good Career Guidance, IAG provision to be efficient as a mechanism to reduce inequality of opportunity in education should address the needs of each individual student. IAG should reflect each student's ability credentials and future educational and occupational aspirations (Maragkou, 2020).

Support services should be very clear of the purpose and outcome they want to achieve. The concerns surrounding the service offered by Connexions, and the accessibility to it, differed according to local priorities, organisation and funding. This suggests that future IAG services aiming to support young people should be widely and easily accessible for all, but also consistently provided across the whole country. This is particularly important for social mobility as students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds might be less aware about the availability of such services (Hoxby and Turner, 2015.) or might receive partial IAG that is not well informed about the labour market needs or focused only on specific post-16 routes. For example, if careers guidance is provided by individuals who are not qualified careers advisors, such as teachers, then, in high socio-economic status catchment areas, students might be guided more towards traditional academic routes even when a vocational pathway might be more suitable to them. On the contrary, students from socially disadvantaged catchment areas might be encouraged towards a vocational pathway, when an academic route might better support their future goals and aspirations.

In conclusion, an adept youth support service should be broadly and easily accessible, impartial and, above all, equipped with the necessary knowledge to ensure that students are accessing the type of assistance to help them make well-informed decisions about their future.

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