

0009

14-19 progression: the mediating role of weakly collaborative institutional arrangements on learner decision-making

Ann Hodgson, Ken Spours

Institute of Education, University of London, London, United Kingdom

Background

With the raising of the age of educational participation to 18 by 2015 and the introduction of a range of new 14-19 qualifications and programmes, intelligence about how and why young people in England progress 14-19 could not be more important. This is particularly the case in the current economic downturn, which is having a disproportionate effect on young people (Vaitilingam, 2009). Yet very little is known about 14-19 progression. Government departments, their agencies and local authorities all set targets for and collect data on participation, retention and attainment and allocate funding to schools, colleges and work-based training providers on this basis. Institutions thus focus on these key indicators rather than on learner progression within or beyond education (Spours et al., 2009). It is left to those responsible for information, advice and guidance (IAG) to assist young people to navigate their way through an increasingly diverse set of progression routes, with new and complex qualification options (e.g. 14-19 Diplomas), into a turbulent youth labour market.

Spours, K., Hodgson A., Brewer, J. and Barker, P. (2009) Improving progression for younger learners in further education colleges in England, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*,

Vaitilingam, R (2009) *Recession Britain: findings from economic and social research*. Swindon: ESRC

Research Questions

Drawing on data from the first year of a five-year study tracking the progression of about 2,500 14 and 16 year olds in a Consortium of six schools and a further education college in Southern England, this paper considers the question, What effects are the new qualifications and collaborative institutional arrangements having on young people's progression plans? More specifically, the research examines if and how the new 14-19 Diplomas, introduced in September 2008, were having an impact on learner choices, to what extent the fact that young people were studying within a 14-19 Consortium aided progression and whether the recession was a factor they took into account when making choices about the future.

Methods

An analysis of individual interviews with 112 Year 9 and 113 Year 11 learners about their short and longer-term plans for the future provides the main empirical base for the paper. Learners were interviewed during the Spring (Year 11) and Summer (Year 9) Terms of 2009 when they had already been exposed to a substantial careers education and guidance process and had received information about their future options. The six schools in the Consortium were then asked to select a sample of six Year 9 and six Year 11 learners with an equal number of males and females, a representative sample in terms of ethnic background, a mixed profile of prior attainment and, in the case of Year 11, of Key Stage 4 programme (e.g. all GCSEs, mix of GCSEs and vocational qualifications). All learners were volunteers. The sample was compared with the overall profile of the total cohort and the data reported to reflect slight differences between the two. The sample learners were individually interviewed using a schedule of closed, scaled and open questions. Where possible the questions for both Year 9 and Year 11 learners were the same so that comparisons could be made. SPSS was used to analyse the closed and scaled questions while the open questions were manually coded. Interviews were also carried out with 12 IAG co-ordinators and Connexions advisers to provide a background to the learner interviews.

Frame

Two sets of literatures are brought together – those which discuss new blends of institutional competition and collaboration, characterised as ‘weakly collaborative local learning systems’ (Hodgson and Spours 2006) and those which concern concepts of ‘agency’ (Rudd and Evans, 1998) and ‘careership’ (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) - to consider how young people are making decisions about progression in a 14-19 consortium. New knowledge is produced about the mediating role of institutions, subject to national policy levers (Coffield et al., 2008), that both compete and collaborate to provide guidance and to support learner progression.

Coffield, F., S. Edward, I. Finlay, A. Hodgson, R. Steer, and K. Spours (2008) Improving learning, skills and inclusion: the impact of policy on post-compulsory education. London: Routledge/Falmer.

Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2006) The organisation of 14-19 education and training in England: Beyond weakly collaborative arrangements *Journal of Education and Work*, 19, (4) 325-342.

Hodkinson, P and Sparkes, A. (1997) Careership : a sociological theory of career decision making.’ *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 10 (1) 23-35

Rudd, P. and Evans, K. (1998) Structure and agency in youth transitions: student experiences of vocational further education, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1 (1), 39-62.

Research findings

There is a burgeoning literature on young people and decision-making at 16+ (e.g. Foskett and Hemsley Brown 2001, White 2007) with a particular focus on the effects of institutional competition for higher-attaining learners in an educational marketplace. What is new about our account is the knowledge that it contains about the role of the new 14-19 Diplomas, which have been seen as one of the main mechanisms for raising participation and attainment in the 14-19 phase, the effects of learning and progressing in a consortium of institutions, which is intended to reduce the influence of institutional competition, and how learners respond to the context of a deep and enduring recession. Findings from the research suggest that institutional collaboration around the new Diplomas has produced a new level of IAG for learners, which may be increasing their sense of agency. At the same time, young people appear to be avoiding risk-taking by planning to remain in full-time education and training for longer to weather the worst effects of the recession, to take traditional progression pathways (GCSEs and A Levels) and to follow stereotypical career paths.

Foskett, N. and Hemsley-Brown, J. (2001) Choosing futures: young people’s decision-making in education, training and careers markets. London: Routledge/Falmer

White, P. (2007) Education and Career Choice: a new model of decision making. Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan