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LISTENING TO LEARNER VOICES: A STUDY OF VOCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND EDUCATIONAL CHOICES AMONG YOUNG LEARNERS

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Introduction

This paper presents an overview of the interim findings of a series of focus group discussions and individual interviews that aimed to explore young people's experiences and understanding of vocational education and training. The City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development worked with Nottingham Trent University (UK) and the Further Education and Training Institute (South Africa) to interview between 30 – 40 young people in schools and colleges in two countries; the UK and South Africa. A third set of focus groups is currently underway in the Netherlands. The project is set to be completed by December 2010.

The study found that, despite the difference in country and cultural contexts, there was a strong similarity in their views and experiences. We found:

- Young people have clear hopes and aspirations for their future
- Young people place a high value on vocational education and training, despite wider societal perceptions
- The term 'vocational education and training' simply doesn't feature in their discourse

- Formal careers advice and guidance regarding vocational education and training options is poor. Existing policies don't reflect the trajectories of young people's lives and their decision making processes
- The perceived benefits of vocational education and training go beyond simply gaining skills for employment with some students wishing to use their skills to benefit their communities.

This paper shares the views of the young people we interviewed discusses the implications for policy making and practice. It argues that young people's voices, often omitted, must be taken into consideration if the system designed for young people is to truly meet their needs.

Introduction

Our country literature reviews highlighted that, in both England and South Africa, there is a limited amount of published research that explores the views of young people. Our reviews also demonstrated that researchers and policymakers have been preoccupied with education initiatives aimed at tackling structural weaknesses within the system; whether the system is equipping young people with the skills employers demand, global competitiveness – as well as closing the perceived gap between vocational education and training and academic education.

It is the last point with which this study is primarily concerned. Our study aimed to investigate the views of young people and their perceptions of vocational education and training through qualitative focus group discussions and interviews. This paper reports on the outcomes of those conversations and provides a snapshot of young people's views. It also considers the implications for the policy discourse and practice within each country.

Methodology

Between March and September 2010, the City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development held a mixture of focus group discussions and individual interviews with around 30 – 40 young people per country. We specifically chose to talk to 14-16 year olds and 17-20 year olds, across a range of abilities, because we wanted to capture views before and after a key decision making point and so we sought to interview school aged learners as well as those in those in further education colleges (or the equivalent institutions).

Due to the large body of work around young people not in education, employment or training we decided to exclude this group from our study.

A conscious effort was made to ensure that the young people we spoke to were drawn from a range of different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. In England we visited a range of schools and colleges in Newcastle and Derby. In South Africa we visited a range of institutions in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Kwazulu Natal. This mix of locations allowed us to include a mix of rural, peri-urban and urban locations and ensure that the students we spoke to were drawn from a range of socio economic backgrounds.

The Findings

England

Career aspirations

All of the young people we spoke to expressed clear hopes and aspirations for the future. Across the focus groups there were broad similarities in their career aspirations. Money ranked highly, although this tended to be typical of a male response whilst female responses tended to be more qualitative. Enjoyment, developing confidence and independence were more commonly cited. Further discussion revealed that male career aspirations were driven largely by status, a desire for progression and security whilst female responses tended to reference glamour and travel. Many had secondary aspirations, perhaps reflecting an awareness and realism regarding the wider world of work and the subsequent need for a more pragmatic and flexible approach.

Student's understandings of their possible career paths varied in sophistication, with clear differences, not only between age group but also between subject areas. Those following programmes such as business and engineering which might be considered to have more significant 'academic content' and were able to make more sophisticated interpretations of the term 'career' and had greater personal clarity in terms of their career orientation. In contrast, young people on programmes that were more practical in nature made less sophisticated interpretations.

Stacey, a beauty therapy student talked about a career as a 'job that you want to do for the rest of your life and you enjoy'. This was in contrast with John, a business study student who defined a career as being a 'long-term commitment

in a specialist area and having the right skills and knowledge... progressing up the ladder'. (Atkins and Flint, 2010)

This example suggests that there is work to be done in terms of helping young people to map out and understand appropriate vocational career progression routes and options associated with the different subject areas. This in turn would help to improve the perceived value of vocational education and training programmes.

What's in a name? Defining vocational education and training

Almost all of the focus group participants (both school and college) and individual interviewees simply did not understand the term 'vocational education and training'. The majority of young people we spoke to clearly felt more comfortable with alternative terms and phrases such as 'practical' and 'skills' with many identifying it as 'hands on', they displayed a clear grasp of the concept. It was also interesting to note that the term 'practical learning' was mainly used by those in schools. All groups were more familiar with the term 'practical learning', for example, one student described it as learning by doing.'

The value of vocational education and training

The majority of young people we spoke to held positive views towards vocational education and training. They perceived it to be 'valuable, significant and important in their lives' – in sharp contrast to the higher value society places on academic learning. Students, especially college students displayed a keen awareness of this issue with one ICT student commenting 'people look down at you because of what you are doing, they don't look at it in the same way as if you were in the sixth form doing academic studies'.

They were extremely positive about their experiences and the perceived advantages of vocational qualifications. Commonly cited benefits included the 'building of esteem and self confidence' as well as the development of practical skills – and better preparation for the future. There was a clear belief that the qualifications would enable them to fulfill their aspirations.

Many related training provided to the world outside their formal education. For some it went beyond simply providing opportunities for employment and future

career. It was a means by which they could 'make valued contributions to their communities'.

High value was also placed upon the placement component of courses. 'Not all jobs want grades, they want experience as well' commented one young person. There was a commonly held belief that the practical component of a course would enhance their employability and provide them with a practical edge over their academic counterparts. 'Learning by doing' was valued by students – some of whom had commenced A Level courses and 'drew unfavorable comparisons between A Levels and vocational courses'.

Another clear theme to emerge is the realism of college student's expectations of their courses and employment prospects. Many students felt that their vocational courses placed them in a better position than their 'academic counterparts. During the course of the conversation it became very apparent that the students did not have a realistic view on they type of skill, knowledge and experience that would make them employable from an employer's perspective – and help them to realise their ambitions.

Careers guidance: Meeting the needs of young people

Our conversations revealed that both college students and school students were more likely to arrive on their programmes by chance than by 'making rational career choices and pursuing routes supported by coherent and consistent careers advice and guidance'. (Atkins and Flint, 2010)

Across the focus groups and interviews, family influence was high. Examples included David computing level 2 who aspired to work for the policy in their forensic IT department and he had been influenced by his uncle in this who worked for the police. Another student aspired 'to do something in health' – she followed advice from her mother, a nurse to do Health and Social Care before progressing to a career in the health arena.

It was also evident that they also sourced their guidance from friends and teachers – as opposed to Connexions services – and that they used this service 'when directed to do so mainly around the transition point of 16+'. (Atkins and Flint, 2010)

There was also clear evidence of school age students being 'firmly guided onto the vocational education courses at the point of decision making. Students acknowledged that teachers might be 'biased since they want you to pick their

courses.' This leads to another point around the notion of free choice in relation to course selection. Policy often makes the assumption that students make rational choices and pursue straight forward paths from education to employment. The stories of these young people serve to demonstrate the reality is very different. It was clearly apparent that there are many factors, such as social class, cultural background, family influences, and teachers pulling and influencing their choices meaning that more often than not this students decisions have effectively been made for them prior to the critical decision making point.

During our conversations around careers guidance it was clear that Connexions and teachers and families were the major forms of careers guidance. This is in line with other studies which explore the issue of careers advice and guidance provision – and its effectiveness.

Our findings lead us to question the role of careers advice and guidance – and its effectiveness. It is clear that young people place very little value on it with many only ever accessing the services for online assessment when directed to do so by their teachers. It was evident that the provision wasn't in place at the points at which students needed it most, and it certainly does not equip them with the knowledge to take informed decisions.

The power of marketing

None of the participants had any memory of any national advertising campaigns promoting the benefits of vocational education and training. Amongst college students, college marketing, ranging from advertisements on taxis to college literature, was cited as the most common factor in influencing their decisions. They also cited instances of informal marketing – there were a number of instances where they had been encouraged to choose courses through discussions with teachers and to a more limited extent Connexions – particularly within the younger cohort. (Needham, Papier, 2010)

South Africa: Young People's views of vocational education and training

What's in a name? Defining vocational education and training

The term vocational education and training simply does not feature within their discourse. There was a lack of understanding by both groups (schools and further education training colleges) regarding the meaning of vocational

education and training. Like their English counterparts, these students were more familiar with the terms 'skills' and 'practical'.

FET college students struggled to define what vocational training meant, even though they were studying National Certificate vocational courses. Whilst the linkages were made between skills and practical application with vocational training, there was no further understanding.

However, they 'had sophisticated understandings of what it meant in practice...students at schools and colleges saw practice as part and parcel of knowledge and that practical application was a form of learning academic knowledge and getting a better grasp of it. (p61) Practicals and practical learning were viewed not as inferior but rather as a superior form of learning that should be incorporated into school studies as well. Knowledge only becomes real when it is 'felt with your hands' ie applied and tested commented one student. They understood the meaning of practical learning – one set of students describing it as 'the application of theory...You evaluate what you have studied and then you go and do it'. One group went on to conclude that 'all education was vocational'; they blurred the distinction between 'vocational' and 'academic' which policy makers and wider society take for granted. (Needham and Papier, 2010).

Attitudes to vocational education and training

Commonly held views amongst school students included 'Further education and training colleges would result in low paying jobs and no careers prospects'.

College students held more positive views of vocational education and training than their school counterparts. They placed a high value on the practical component of vocational courses, describing them as 'contributing towards a better understanding of theoretical knowledge within the curriculum'.

School students debated whether or not there were jobs available in the vocational sector. College students also expressed concern about the recognition of college courses stating 'People don't even know about (name of college). If you tell someone that I'm studying at the (college), they think that you are a local university'. Both school students and FET college students saw their vocational course as a route to higher education'.

That said, students clearly placed a higher value of vocational education and felt that the vocational education was superior with regards to its focus (more

in-depth knowledge) – providing an edge over their school counterparts. They felt practicals enabled them to experience and test their chosen field to see whether they would continue in field, specialize or abandon it.

Careers advice and guidance: Meeting the needs of young people

School students were relatively unaware of the existence of Further education and training colleges stating that they had 'no idea' and 'no clue'.

School students commented on the lack effective guidance offered at schools. As per the UK students they tended to get the careers guidance information from family. Other sources included television and radio. It was also observed that FET colleges 'never visited their schools'. The only real opportunity to learn more about what colleges had to offer were at career fairs. Students from colleges also commented on the lack of guidance. It was evident that vocational education and training was not actively promoted in schools.

There is clearly a need and a desire by students for more comprehensive guidance. For example one student said 'schools are not aware of tourism and civil engineering' – courses offered in further education and training colleges.

Attractiveness of vocational education and training

Some college students were attracted to FET colleges because they were disillusioned with the school system; were promised that vocational education was practical and prepared them for the world of work. They had also been promised that the college system was an alternative route to higher education. Many students recognized that they would need to pursue higher education if there were to achieve their goals – though they seemed to be unaware of the possible barriers to entry.

Students raised the issue of skilled artisans in South Africa. They linked their life trajectory to the national development agenda without prompting – they clearly saw themselves as contributing themselves to the national development agenda as well as potential benefiting from the shortage of skills – enhancing their employment prospects.

Key attractions of vocational education and training included the opportunity to learn basic skills and gain practical skills which 'couldn't be taken from them' – resulting in greater job opportunities.

For some the benefits went beyond ensuring that they were work ready and attractive to an employer - some argued that completing a vocational programme would make them easier to train. One of the most notable points was the recognition that they would be able to 'bring skills back to their communities – this was particularly strong view expressed by young people drawn from rural locations.

The power of marketing

As per their English counterparts, learners at schools were largely unaware of any advertising for vocational learning. FET college students referred to newspapers, posters and the internet. Some felt that the advertising could sometime be misleading in that they offered courses such as management studies without explaining that students could not enter the workplace as managers.

Conclusions and recommendations

If we are to effectively challenge and begin to change perceptions of vocational education and training, policy makers and wider society must listen to and respect the views of young people towards vocational education and training. The survey findings suggest that young people, despite negative societal views, place a high value on vocational education and training – and in some instances do not make the broader distinction between 'practical' and 'academic'. In South Africa, one group of students even went as far as to call for blended approach to education – a mix of practical and academic education – surely this would go some way to addressing the issue of esteem?

Examples of the key benefits provided by students were the practical application of knowledge, developing specialist knowledge and preparation for employment. For others the benefits went beyond acquiring skills for employment. They viewed it as a chance to gain skills that would directly benefit their communities. It is interesting to note that this comment was made in both the UK and South African contexts.

Although a high value was placed vocational education and training, some students recognized the 'low exchange credential between vocational education and academic education'. Many also recognized the need to progress from their vocational programmes to higher education in order to

achieve their aspirations and career goals – but many were simply unaware of the possible barriers to doing so.

Both the UK and South Africa are no strangers to debates about poor careers advice provision. Our conversations served to confirm previous studies which highlight that provision is generally weak and that young people tend to rely on family networks and teachers as sources of advice. Given the fluidity of young peoples lives as clearly portrayed by the study (particularly in the UK), it is clear that policy initiatives simply do not take these into account the 'trajectory of young people's lives'. (Atkins and Flint, 2010) More consideration must be given how careers advice and guidance can be made available at the points at which it is most needed. Within schools, (across both countries) general careers advice and guidance, let alone advice focusing on vocational education and training, was disturbingly absent leaving students with no choice but to rely on the advice of their teachers whom students acknowledged were sometimes 'biased'.

Furthermore, careers advice and guidance must play a role in challenging students to think about their immediate horizons and consider other possibilities and options. It also needs to provide vocational students with a clear picture about their future options and progression routes depending on the vocational course they opt for to facilitate the development of a clear sense of career orientation and raise the value placed upon vocational education and training.

It is clear from both of our conversations in both England and South Africa, students following vocational courses have high expectations of their courses but they aren't always realistic. Few displayed a real awareness or understanding of employer's expectations or the skills and experience that would make them attractive to employers. Many embarked on courses without a realistic picture of where their courses might take them and what steps they need to take to progress in the future.

There are a range of approaches which could be taken to tackle those issues raised above. Suggested approaches range from work experiences and taster days undertaken prior to young people actually deciding their options and selecting their courses, ensuring that careers advice and guidance delivered in schools challenges young people to consider their wider options and broadens their horizons. From our survey it is clear that teachers have a critical role to play in this by understanding the factors which can limit student's horizons – and understand the role that they can play in broadening them. They also need to

be equipped with, or given access to the right information to fulfill this role. These suggestions are just a few which could go along way to improving young people's chances of choosing the educational path that's right for them, creating a vocational system which meets their expectations and ultimately ensure that they can realise their expectations.

References

L. Atkins & K. Flint (2010) Young people's perceptions of vocational education and training in England.

S. Needham & J. Papier (2010) Young people's perceptions of vocational education and training in South Africa.