

Who is getting advice? Year 11 students' views on careers education and work experience in English secondary schools

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Summary

Despite the statutory requirement for secondary schools in England to secure independent careers advice for all pupils, our survey of over 13,000 Year 11 students suggests that fewer than two-thirds of students aged 15-16 report having received careers education and only half of all students have had work experience.

Moreover, our data shows that where there is careers education provision, this is patterned by social inequalities, leaving those most in need of it without adequate, or any, independent careers support. White males are most likely to receive careers education - whereas girls, students from minority ethnic or working-class backgrounds, lower-attaining students and those who are unsure of their aspirations are all significantly less likely to report receiving careers education.

Why the research was undertaken

When the government terminated the annual £200 million funding allocation for the national network of Connexions centres in 2010, the statutory requirement to provide independent careers advice to all pupils shifted from local authorities to individual schools. Since then there has been considerable policy interest in the quality and quantity of careers education provision.

Studies have found numerous benefits of careers education: from equipping students with the requisite skills for the world of work to promoting social mobility. However, the shifting of responsibility of provision to schools, paired with continuous developments in the labour market affected by technological advancements and social change, raises questions about the current standard of support received by pupils.

Existing research on the topic of careers education mainly focusses on the nature of the provision from the point of view of schools and school leaders. In this study we gather and analyse data from Year 11 students in order to understand this provision from the point of view of those who are, or should be, receiving it.

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How the research was undertaken

These data and findings are taken from the ASPIRES 2 project, based at UCL Institute of Education (previously at King's College London) and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. ASPIRES 2 is the second phase of a ten-year study into the career aspirations of young people, with a focus on science and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics) education, enjoyment and participation. The first phase of the project, ASPIRES, tracked the career and STEM aspirations of students aged 10-14. ASPIRES 2 is now tracking the same cohort of students from age 14 to 19. At each data collection stage students are surveyed, to produce quantitative data on school experiences and aspirations, and students and their parents are interviewed in order to produce in-depth qualitative data. To date, this ten-year study has collected data from over 37,000 students in the UK.

The findings presented here are based on data collected in the first data collection cycle of ASPIRES 2, when students were in Year 11, aged 15-16. Following data cleaning, we analysed data from 13,421 students from 340 schools and interviews were conducted with 70 students and 66 of their parents. Both male and female students were surveyed and interviewed (47% of survey respondents were male, 53% were female; 30 student interviewees were male, 40 were female). Students involved in the project came from a broad range of socioeconomic classes and ethnic backgrounds, and the schools they attended were roughly proportional to the national distribution of schools in England with regard to school type, attainment, and make-up of pupils.

Survey and interview topics included experience of school, future aspirations, attitudes towards school and different careers, the influence of parents, teachers and peers on post-16 choices, and experience of careers education and work experience.

What the research found

Overall, just 63% of our survey sample reported having received careers education. Our interviews revealed that a one-to-one session with a careers advisor, often external to the school, was the most common form of support given. The second most common form of careers advice reported was attendance at a careers talk or fair. A small sample of students said that their careers advice had been provided within a timetabled lesson, though one student reported that this had been stopped and replaced with English lessons in an attempt to boost grades before GCSE exams.

Alarming, our data showed that careers education provision in England is not just 'patchy', but 'patterned' – especially in terms of the following existing inequalities:

- **Gender:** Female students were found to be significantly less likely to report careers information provision at school. This trend was also apparent within aspirations: 44% of female students who aspired to a manual trade reported receiving careers information, compared to 66% of male students with the same aspiration.
- **Ethnicity:** 65% of White students reported having met with a careers advisor, while only 33% of Asian students reported similar meetings.

- **Cultural Capital:** 67% of students with very high cultural capital, and 62% of students with high cultural capital, reported receiving careers education compared to 53% of their peers from less advantaged backgrounds.⁶
- **Post-16 Plans:** Prospective 'A' level students were most likely to report receiving careers advice (64%) compared to their peers who were unsure of future plans, or wanted to pursue alternative routes such as part- or full-time work.
- **Science Options & Setting:** 65% of students taking Triple Science reported receiving careers education in our surveys, compared to only 56% of students taking BTEC science. Similarly, a higher proportion of students in top sets reported receiving careers information than those in lower sets.

Students who had received careers education were significantly more likely to be satisfied with their school's provision. However, our interviews also revealed that many students expressed **a desire for more, earlier and longer-term careers education**. Furthermore, despite the requirement for schools to provide careers education to all pupils, some schools seemed to provide support on an optional basis. Worryingly, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who were already less likely to be able to access quality work experience, were less likely to use a self-referral model of provision. Finally, when provision was available, **students often felt that schools gave biased advice**, leaving some students preferring to research their aspirations outside of school.

These findings indicate that schools are not only failing to provide careers education to all, but that **the students most in need of this support are the least likely to receive it**.

Further information

For more information about, and findings from, the ASPIRES and ASPRES 2 projects go to <http://bit.ly/ASPIRES2-IOE> or email joe.aspires2@ucl.ac.uk.

⁶ Cultural Capital (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984) was calculated with a scale of -4 through 9, calculated based on responses to items about parental education, approximate number of books in the home and frequency of museum visitation. Scores were then grouped into categories to indicate very low, low, medium, high or very high levels of cultural capital.