

# Research to Inform the Development of the New Connexions Service

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Research can play a crucial role in helping to support policy-makers and practitioners in identifying what works and why, and what types of initiatives are required to help determine appropriate provision and resources. In June 2000, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) commissioned the Centre for Guidance Studies to host a national conference at the Post House Forte, Bloomsbury, London. The main purpose of the event was to bring together researchers, academics, practitioners and policy-makers to consider ways in which evidence-based practice could be developed and embedded within the new Connexions Service. This paper incorporates the discussion document prepared for the conference, and the event's conclusions and recommendations.

An analysis is provided of a selection of research findings related to social exclusion and youth disaffection. A number of key issues are discussed and presented as a basis for exploring how a coherent Connexions research strategy might be developed. The main conclusions and recommendations provide a stimulus for further discussion and debate at national, regional and local levels. If the concept of evidence-based practice is to be effectively implemented, closer working links between researchers, policy-makers, academics and practitioners are essential.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and/or the conference participants and do not necessarily reflect those of DfEE.

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CeGS aims to:

- conduct and encourage research into guidance policies and practice;
- develop innovative strategies for guidance in support of lifelong learning;
- provide resources to support guidance practice across all education, community and employment sectors.

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# Research to Inform the Development of the New Connexions Service

## 1 Introduction

**1.1** The *Learning to Succeed* White Paper (DfEE, 1999a) outlined the government's commitment to setting up a Connexions strategy that would support the foundation of a single and coherent support service for all young people. One of the main aims underpinning this strategy is "to give all young people access to the highest standard of education and training and give them the best possible support in the transition from adolescence to adulthood". The report by the Social Exclusion Unit, *Bridging the Gap* (SEU, 1999), proposed a new multi-skilled support service working with all young people to assist them between the ages of 13 to 19. Statutory agencies, the voluntary sector and specialist private-sector companies will now work together to provide every young person with access to a Personal Adviser.

**1.2** Research plays a crucial role in helping to support policy-makers and practitioners to determine what works and why, and what types of policy initiatives are required to help determine appropriate provision and resources. One of the eight "key principles" underpinning the Connexions strategy is the requirement for evidence-based practice, "ensuring that new interventions are based on rigorous research and evaluation into what works" (DfEE, 2000).

**1.3** This paper presents a brief summary of a selection of research findings, drawing particularly on recent United Kingdom and international projects relating to social exclusion and youth support developments, as a basis for exploring how a coherent Connexions research strategy might be developed.

## 2 Context

**2.1** The Connexions service is part of the Government's strategy for combatting "social exclusion". This term is a contested one. Levitas (1998), for example, pointed out that it is embedded in three different discourses:

- (a) A *redistributionist* discourse, primarily focused on poverty.
- (b) A *moral underclass* discourse, which centres on the moral and behavioural delinquency of the excluded themselves.
- (c) A *social integrationist* discourse, which focuses on paid work (or formal education and training).

The Connexions service is clearly based mainly on (c): the sub-title of *Bridging the Gap*, in which the service was announced, as "new opportunities for 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training" (SEU, 1999).

**2.2** At the same time, Connexions is designed to meet the needs of *all* young people in order to ensure their active participation in learning and personal development. There are potential tensions between its universal scope and its targeted remit. This has implications for the underpinning research strategy. The present review concentrates mainly on issues related to young people at risk of social exclusion, rather than on the personal and career development of all young people.

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*How far should the Connexions research strategy relate to all young people, and how far should it focus on young people at risk?*

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## 3 Evidence-based practice

**3.1** David Blunkett (DfEE, 2000) has emphasised the need for government policies to be underpinned by good research. Hargreaves (1996) has criticised educational research and drawn attention to the non-cumulative nature of much research. He argues that few researchers have sought to create a body of knowledge which is then tested, extended or replaced in a systematic way. Within the Connexions strategy (DfEE, 2000), the term "evidence-based practice" implies that innovations need to be piloted and evaluated. Whilst some of the key design features of the Connexions service are based on evidence-based practice in previous initiatives, some are novel.

**3.2** Evidence-based practice should help to determine "what works best" and to identify areas of good and illuminating practice that can be used to inform the implementation and development of policies and practices at local, regional and national levels.

**3.3** The following review illustrate key issues for consideration. No critique is included of the specific research methods used. The merits of using quantitative and/or qualitative research methodologies are not discussed; however, examples of different types of research are provided to demonstrate the diversity of approaches that can be applied. Readers are

## Research to Inform the Development of the New Connexions Service

encouraged to reflect on gaps and priority areas for evidence-based practice to inform the future development of the new Connexions service.

**3.4** Within the Connexions framework, interventionist strategies will impact on all young people within and across three systems:

- *micro-systems* which focus on the individual;
- *meso-systems* which focus on the community and institutions;
- *macro-systems* which focus on broad policy issues.

For the purpose of this paper, the research is reviewed in three categories related to these systems:

- *service users* – the lives and experiences of young people and their perceptions and experiences of state interventions;
- *service providers* – the impact of institutional and community responses to meet young people’s needs;
- *policy issues* – the range of factors which have a direct or indirect influence on provision and service delivery.

### 4 Service users

**4.1** Some young people remain outside the formal education, training or employment system because, among other factors, they perceive the system as labelling them as “failures” and offering little of value to them. They accordingly establish lifestyles in the *informal economies* – sometimes illegally, but sometimes not (Bentley & Oakley, 1999; Watts, 1999b). If interventions designed to attract them back into the formal system are applied insensitively, they are likely to be ineffective.

**4.2** Stone et al. (2000), on behalf of the Social Exclusion Unit, studied *disaffected young people’s experiences* and explored the reasons why some young people become marginalised in society. Their report stated that “behaviour such as truancy and involvement in drug and alcohol abuse were symptoms of, and reactions to, a series of preceding events or set of circumstances in a young person’s life”. Behaviours and circumstances were seen to be inter-linked and, in many cases, formed a chain of events which led to the young person being thrown out of the family home and

becoming homeless. They identified four sets of likely circumstances for problem behaviours to occur:

- a dysfunctional family;
- personality and behavioural difficulties;
- confidence issues;
- a traumatic event.

The way in which these “triggers” operated varied. The study showed that “young people were often making far-reaching decisions, such as leaving home and school, at a very young age without any advice and support”. These decisions could leave them homeless, with no money, no parents and no security. Institutional interventions were often at a stage when the person was seriously in trouble. The study identified a need for some form of institutional “looking out” for vulnerable young people at an early stage.

**4.3** This research echoed the key findings of Merton (1998) who showed how the pressures of unstable family life played an important part in young people’s educational and career development; many of them had experienced depression, stress or mental illness, and this affected their ability to participate in education and training. Many had become trapped in a “revolving door syndrome” comprising unemployment, government schemes and special programmes, and casual, low-paid and often seasonal jobs. Merton reported that although wide-ranging and responsive services existed to support young people in transition, many young people seemed “unaware of them or lacked the confidence to use them. Some needed a friendly, supportive adult whom they could turn to at times of difficulty.”

**4.4** The Audit Commission (1999a) reported that one in five children suffered from *mental health problems*. The findings indicated that “two-thirds of Youth Justice managers reported problems gaining access to specialist help for such vulnerable young people”. Certain groups were identified as being at greater risk than others of developing mental health problems. These included those with:

- poor school attendance;
- poor language skills;
- problems with family life and relationships;
- disruptive anti-social and aggressive behaviour.

## Research to Inform the Development of the New Connexions Service

**4.5** In relation to *school exclusion*, evidence from the Audit Commission (1999b) indicated that:

- 40,000 young people were absent from school every day without permission;
- 3,000 pupils were on short fixed-period exclusions;
- 6,000 pupils had been permanently excluded.

These pupils tended to:

- perform poorly in examinations;
- be less likely to secure a job;
- be more likely to become involved with crime.

**4.6** According to Payne (1996), many people who express *disinterest in learning activities* have had negative learning experiences, and view themselves as educational failures. Young people frequently have a deep-rooted suspicion of authority figures and negative views on schools and colleges. Hence, alternatives to mainstream training routes are often needed. Pearce & Hillman (1998) found that learning difficulties and disabilities are over-represented amongst non-participating young people. Costley & Maguire (1999) suggest that disaffected young people are commonly characterised as underachievers. This can be attributed to many factors including learning difficulties or disabilities.

**4.7** Recent research (Barham et al., 2000) identified the characteristics of *under-achieving young people* and identified strategies for overcoming barriers. However, much research has focused primarily on 16-19-year-olds and there is a need to gain a better understanding of what works and why with a younger age-group (13+). This will involve closer working links with parents/guardians and carers and with educational institutions themselves. Semple (1993) argues that the influence of parents and guardians should not be under-estimated. She emphasises the need for family involvement in career-related learning.

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*What research is needed to identify young people at risk and assess their needs?*

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**4.8** Savickas (1994) highlights the importance of developing *narrative research* to develop “constructs of role modelling and experiential learning that can be used in guidance and counselling” to support young people’s personal development. Other research studies such as the

Beattie Committee report (Costley & Maguire, 1999) indicate four areas relating to young people’s experience and perceptions of how “adult status” is constructed:

- personal autonomy and independence from parental/family control;
- economic self-sufficiency;
- citizenship in terms of legal responsibilities and rights;
- relationship/friendship formation.

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*How can narrative research support the role of Connexions in helping young people to construct positive adult identities for themselves?*

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**4.9** Morris et al. (1999) report that a number of *longitudinal studies* have sought to provide detailed information on the lives and experiences of young people, e.g. the annual Youth Cohort Study (YCS). These have attempted to follow young people through the transition from compulsory education into post-16 education, training and work. Although these studies are a rich source of data, they are unlikely to reach young people with poor literacy skills, and may not cover those who are homeless, or otherwise suffering from multiple disadvantage.

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*Are new longitudinal studies needed to inform the future development of the Connexions service? And/or should the scope of existing studies be extended to cover issues relating to the service?*

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**4.10** The Connexions strategy includes the stated aim of *taking account of the views of young people both individually and collectively*. The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (2000) reports that “so far, policies and services at national and local levels have often failed to consult young people or involve them in the design and delivery of public services”. However, the findings from a national evaluation of the New Start strategy (Morgan & Hughes, 1999) show progress being made in relation to involving young people in most aspects of programme design and delivery. These include innovative examples of peer volunteer schemes, the application of biographical work and youth forum consultancy events. The national evaluation of the Institute of Careers Guidance Stepping Stones project (Ford, 2000) provides further examples of

young people's involvement in advising on, planning, participating in and evaluating youth initiatives, and in presenting their experiences at national and local training and dissemination events. Researchers from Queen's University, Belfast (2000) provide a review of practical approaches to involving young people in the planning and delivery of a youth support service; NYA (2000) describes a wide range of roles young people can adopt and some of the methods of involving them in the new Connexions Service. DfEE (2000) consulted 630 young people aged 11-25 on the proposals for the new service. Involving young people in the process of resolving their difficulties and consulting them about their views is consistent with the empowerment principles of ethnographic research (Mac an Ghaill, 1989; Herbert, 1989).

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*What role can research play in ensuring that the voice of young people is heard in the delivery of Connexions?*

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**4.11** Hodkinson & Sparkes (1998) highlight the importance of understanding *cultural differences* and point out that "culture is a complex and elusive concept". They argue that stakeholders operate within a specific cultural situation and that closer attention is needed to take into account young people's situations and experiences. Irving & Parker-Jenkins (1998), for example, provide insight to cultural factors relating to the career needs of young Muslim girls.

**4.12** Brooks & Lee (1998) provide an overview of the *factors affecting pupils' choices at 16* and an investigation into the reasons for pupils' choices. This concludes that government policy needs to address the wider economic and education systems including inequality in education and training as experienced by young people from different gender and ethnic groups and social classes. Istance, Rees & Williamson (1994) argue that without adequate job opportunities the integration of very disadvantaged young people into economic and social life may be problematic. Watts & McCarthy (1998) question whether current policies on youth integration in the UK and Europe may sometimes over-estimate the capacity of learning and employment systems to provide sufficient opportunities, and/or opportunities of appropriate kinds, for particular groups of young people. Ford (2000) concludes,

from the evidence of Stepping Stones, that the impact of labour market change and localised job loss on social exclusion should be the subject of more detailed scrutiny within Government initiatives to assist socially excluded young people.

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*What research is required to ensure detailed and regularly updated information on the learning, employment and related social barriers confronting groups of young people, including barriers specific to particular cultures and geographical areas, and the relationships between these barriers and social exclusion?*

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## 5 Service providers

**5.1** Hallam & Castle (1999) evaluated pilot projects relating to *behaviour and discipline in schools*. They examined three types of projects:

- multi-disciplinary;
- teacher secondment to Pupil Referral Units (PRUs);
- in-school centres for pupils at risk of exclusion.

They found that the success of the projects depended not on the type of provision but on the extent to which all school staff became committed to the project as a whole. Successful projects included parents, gave pupils the responsibility for managing their behaviour, and promoted a positive ethos. Similar approaches have been piloted within the New Start and Learning Gateway projects.

**5.2** Bentley & Gurumurthy (1999) provide evidence of projects that have been successful in reducing youth crime rates, particularly during the summer months when young people have a higher tendency than usual to be unoccupied and to become involved in anti-social activities. A report by the Audit Commission (1996) on young people and crime indicates that *outdoor adventure activities and summer activity schemes* provided by the youth and police services "can help discourage juvenile nuisance and offending". However, the report states that no assessment has been undertaken on the impact of extra spending on such schemes. The report also points to the benefits of *detached youth work, drop-in facilities and outreach work* for young people on the margins of society, but indicates that there is currently a lack of detailed understanding of the effects of such approaches.

## Research to Inform the Development of the New Connexions Service

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*What research is needed to measure the impact of residential, outreach and related activities on young people's personal effectiveness and future employability?*

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**5.3** Careers services involved in the Stepping Stones project have developed a range of career-guidance-related *groupwork initiatives* for pupils at risk within schools, and for socially-excluded young people aged 16+. These initiatives frequently involve a number of local partners including the youth service, voluntary youth agencies, social services, private agencies and employers. The Stepping Stones project has indicated the value of short community-based personal-effectiveness courses for socially-excluded young people with particular needs. These less formal courses can enable young people to develop self-esteem and to learn to relate to others in a highly supportive environment before progressing to longer courses including those currently provided within the Learning Gateway (Ford, 2000; ICG, 2000).

**5.4** The Kennedy Report on widening young people's participation identified nine factors that were found to improve access to education and training. Several of these emphasised the importance of planned support and relevant teaching and learning opportunities. Good-quality impartial *information and guidance* was viewed as "crucial" to broadening young people's horizons (FEFC, 1997). In recent years, guidance has been offered through formal arrangements by careers service companies and also within informal systems provided by youth services and other community organisations. A recent survey (Hughes, 2000) into careers services' practices relating to work with disaffected young people demonstrates a range of successful approaches to supporting young people into mainstream learning and work. Many of these are designed to help bridge the gap between school and local opportunities.

**5.5** *Youth work* also has a long tradition of promoting young people's achievement and fostering their inclusion in society. There are many projects in both local authority and voluntary and community sectors which have demonstrated innovative approaches to working with partner organisations in a variety of settings. A joint DFEE & National Youth Agency (1998) report describes a variety of approaches used to engage disaffected

young people and identifies key features which contribute to their success. It is argued that research, planning and evaluation are key factors in developing future youth services.

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*What steps need to be taken to bring together the research traditions in the career guidance and youth work fields?*

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**5.6** Institutional and community responses to the needs of young people at risk are often associated with neighbourhood renewal strategies including partnerships and *multi-agency collaboration*. The Audit Commission (1999b) recommends forging close links and sharing information between those agencies and schemes providing assistance for disaffected young people. Other studies, such as that by Irving & Parker-Jenkins (1995), highlight the benefits of a multi-agency approach to tackling truancy. This requires the harmonisation of policies and practices between statutory, voluntary and community agencies.

**5.7** There have been many examples of new multi-agency partnerships working well and in particular of good strategic and operational co-operation between the careers and youth services. Good practice within the New Start strategy, for example, is based on effective partnership between the youth service, with its strong "street knowledge" and links to the informal world of young people, and the careers service, with its "opportunity knowledge" and links to the formal structures of education and work. Morgan & Hughes (1999) highlight the need for such organisations to overcome their different perceptions and to foster closer networking and mutual trust at both strategic and operational levels.

**5.8** Partnerships can be analysed by adopting the following typology (Watts et al., 1994; 1997):

- *communication*, where steps are taken to support the flow of information among working partners, e.g. to enable them to cross-refer clients appropriately;
- *co-operation*, where two or more services/agencies co-operate on some joint task;
- *co-ordination*, where two or more services/agencies alter their working patterns to bring them more closely into line with one another, while remaining within their existing professional boundaries;

## Research to Inform the Development of the New Connexions Service

- *cross-fertilisation*, where efforts are made to encourage services to share and exchange skills, and to work across professional boundaries in ways that may readdress or redraw the boundaries themselves;

- *integration*, where the cross-fertilisation process is developed to such a point that the boundaries between the different services are removed altogether.

When looking at multi-agency collaborative links, it is also important to understand the tensions, both perceived and actual, between collaboration and competition.

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*How can research illuminate the potential for multi-agency partnerships, the tensions in forging such partnerships, and the issues that need to be addressed if the partnerships are to be effective?*

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**5.9** A research review carried out by Morris et al. (1999) emphasises the need for those responsible for learning provision to *focus on the individual* through:

- target and goal-setting;
- action planning and progress reviewing;
- a mentor or adviser for role-model purposes.

It is argued that “this is likely to improve or enhance young people’s attitudes to learning and employment”. This view is supported by Utting (1999) who concludes that young people thrive where they have:

- clear and high expectations;
- trusting relationships with adult role-models;
- participation in out-of-school activities and in family life;
- a mentor;
- recognition and praise.

**5.10** The Connexions service is designed to end the current fragmentation of services through the *creation of a network of Personal Advisers* drawn from a range of backgrounds (DfEE, 2000). The concept of a Personal Adviser has been a strong element in a number of recent government programmes, including New Deal programmes within the Employment Service as well as in programmes like New Start (Watts, 1999a). Given the likely diversity of activities and responsibilities placed upon Personal Advisers, more in-depth

research will be required to fully assess the efficiency and efficacy of their new models of working.

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*What research is needed to identify the skills and competences required of Personal Advisers in order to meet the diverse needs of their client groups?*

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**5.11** DfEE (1999c) draws attention to the particular problems of young people’s learning and achievement within major cities. It includes plans for improving education systems and highlights the need to focus on individuals. *Learning Mentors and Learning Support Units* are identified as having a key role in engaging young people in learning. There appears to be some confusion in relation to the respective roles of Learning Mentors and Personal Advisers:

- Personal Adviser is often used to describe someone drawn from a range of backgrounds who will take responsibility for ensuring all the needs of a young person are met in an integrated and coherent manner.
- Mentoring is often used to describe a non-professional role in a community or voluntary setting.
- But Stepping Stones describes Careers Advisers and Youth Workers as working as Mentors to support young people.
- And Learning Mentor is used in recent policy documents to describe Personal Adviser work in schools carried out by a professional.

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*How can research help to clarify the roles of Personal Advisers, Learning Mentors, and Mentors, and the relative merits of different models of delivery?*

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**5.12** Findings from the Stepping Stones projects (Ford, 2000) show that Mentors play a crucial role in preventing drop-out by providing continuing and personalised support and integrating young people successfully into formal opportunities. The complexity of transferring trust from an individual mentor to the whole organisation will normally take time and effort to achieve successfully. Strategies to alleviate socio-cultural barriers to learning often include an opportunity to establish positive personal relations with an adult. Role models can potentially support young people to affirm social attitudes, beliefs and values and to find ways of making learning meaningful and relevant to young people’s life experiences.

## Research to Inform the Development of the New Connexions Service

**5.13** Recent research undertaken by DfEE (1999) indicates that *confidentiality* is important to young people. This has implications for the sharing of client information within and across agencies, and for the development of comprehensive client registers.

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*What research is needed to inform the maintenance of a balance between respect for client confidentiality and the desirability of sharing information between agencies?*

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**5.14** The importance of *assessment* is stressed by New Start and Learning Gateway research findings. This is a key aspect of the role of Personal Advisers within the Connexions Service (DfEE, 2000). Research (DfEE, 1996) on the initial and continuing assessment of young people in work-based training found that assessment was crucial for gaining a realistic understanding of a young person's abilities, potential and learning and development needs. Involving the young people closely in the process can enable them to gain self-knowledge and awareness and to make more informed choices about opportunities. Assessment can also help in identifying barriers to learning and highlighting the need for specialist support. The Connexions Service (DfEE, 2000) emphasises the need to develop a common assessment tool, with a common core and sections related to specific problems that a young person might face. Findings from New Start (Morgan & Hughes, 1999) and GHK (2000) indicate that motivational strategies and assessment tools are required.

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*What research is needed to bring together effective assessment strategies across multi-agency organisations in order to develop a common assessment tool?*

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**5.15** GHK (2000) reports that *standardisation of policies* and practices is necessary in the following areas: assessment, Individual Development Plans, Personal Adviser competence, information sharing and collaboration between services, incentives, and funding.

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*How can research illuminate the desirability and feasibility of standardisation of key policies and practices within Connexions?*

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**5.16** *Performance measures* outlined in the Connexions strategy document are based on

prescribed desired outcomes – e.g. “participation in education and training” (DfEE, 2000). Barham & Morgan (1999) found that the Personal Adviser Pilot Projects had enabled a high proportion of 16-17-year-olds (78%) to access opportunities in education, employment and training. There are issues, however, about the sustainability of such outcomes. The recent report by GHK (2000) on the role of the careers service in the Learning Gateway highlights the need for effective *longitudinal tracking of young people* in order to provide information on sustainable outcomes. The use of distance travelled as opposed to hard outcome measures emerged as a key principle in performance measurement. The report indicates that a number of Learning Gateway programmes are examining options for developing progress measures.

**5.17** Slee (1988) identified several outcomes for interventionist programmes that target young people's educational and training needs. One of the crucial findings suggests that it is essential to provide engaging purposeful and important educational experiences for young people.

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*What role can research play in identifying performance measures aligned to outcomes which young people can understand and relate to?*

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## 6 Policy issues

**6.1** The over-arching ideology and key principles that underlie New Start, and subsequently the Connexions strategy, can be conceptualised in terms of tackling disaffection through:

- prevention;
- recovery;
- re-integration (Morgan & Hughes, 1999).

Extending opportunity and providing equity and social justice are major cornerstones of the government's social inclusion agenda.

**6.2** Lessons learned from recent initiatives such as New Start and Learning Gateway highlight the importance of *effective partnerships* at both a strategic and operational level in order to ensure consistency and quality in the services provided to young people. Key issues include targeting, resourcing and the balance between preventive and remedial approaches. Policy-makers will have

## Research to Inform the Development of the New Connexions Service

to make explicit the added value of the Connexions Service to young people and to balance conflicting demands for resources within a multi-agency framework.

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*What role can research play in identifying the gaps in existing provision, the added value of the Connexions service to young people, and how the conflicting demands for resources can be resolved within a multi-agency framework?*

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**6.3** It is important that policies pertaining to the Connexions Service recognise the multi-dimensional and overlapping nature of issues relating to *equality of opportunity, access and treatment* and do not reduce them to bland statements of well-meaning intent. The ways in which young people are affected by and interpret these issues are related to their own socio-economic background (Marsella & Leong, 1995). Policies and initiatives need to be holistic in nature, and multi-faceted to ensure that they acknowledge different individual needs and tailor strategies accordingly. Rolfe (1999) provides an overview of gender and equality issues in relation to careers services: the findings indicate a need to develop and structure curriculum initiatives in support of equal opportunities. Young (1990) argues that policy decisions and strategies designed to mitigate young people's social exclusion should take into consideration that "the politics of difference... aim for an understanding of group differences as entailing neither amorphous unity nor pure individuality".

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*How can research help to ensure that equality issues are addressed on a sustained basis in the implementation of the Connexions service?*

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**6.4** The *targeting of guidance resources* is currently given significant policy prominence. The Careers Service, for example, is being asked to focus its activity in schools on pupils most in need of support. Schools are accordingly being asked to "identify those most in need of help" and to "agree the right support for pupils" (DfEE, 1999b) in order to identify the kinds of help they require individually. Sampson et al. (1999) present a cognitive information processing (CIP) model designed to focus on the individual's motivation and state of readiness to engage in learning. They

argue that customer screening, varying levels of staff support, and well-designed resources and services can lead to the right resource, used by the right person, with the right level of staff support, at the lowest possible cost. This approach is currently being piloted in both the UK and USA.

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*What further research is needed to access the appropriateness and effectiveness of screening models for targeting resources?*

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## 7 International research

**7.1** Time restrictions have prevented a full trawl of international projects related to social exclusion and youth support development. There have however been a number of projects within recent European Commission programmes such as Petra, Leonardo and Youthstart which have relevant experience to offer.

**7.2** Some, for example, have examined ways in which formal career guidance services can work with existing or potential non-formal guidance agents within the community. These include (i) youth and community workers who are accustomed to working with disaffected young people but have no experience in career guidance, and (ii) significant adults, peers and parents who have ongoing relationships with the young people or might be able to form such relationships on an informal basis. Strategies have included:

- Helping the non-formal guidance agents to act as *referral points* for accessing the target-group to the formal guidance system.
- Helping the non-formal guidance agents to be initial *deliverers* of guidance to this target-group.
- Helping the formal guidance agencies to develop *new methods* for working both with non-formal guidance agents and with the target-group.

Clarity about the relationship between the formal and non-formal provision seemed crucial – including opportunities for progression from volunteer to paraprofessional to professional roles (Watts & McCarthy, 1996; 1998). This experience would seem very relevant to the relationship between Personal Adviser and community Mentor roles in Connexions.

## Research to Inform the Development of the New Connexions Service

**7.3** Work has also been done on the role of guidance in innovative education and training initiatives designed to provide alternatives to formal structures for young people at risk. The UK Stepping Stones project, for example, was part of a five-country Youthstart programme addressing this issue. The programme indicated the desirability of a holistic approach to the needs of such young people, met in part through a common skills framework for all staff involved. The delivery was based on generalists, but also in part on a specialist team approach. A list of competencies required for work with the target-group was identified. The relationship between the innovative provision and mainstream provision emerged as a critical issue: the general conclusion was that what was needed was not full integration, but some degree of continuing separation, with a stronger and more permanent funding base, and appropriate linkages with the mainstream; this could enable a continuing dialectic relationship between the two, with each continuing to pose questions to the other (Watts, 2000).

## 8 Conclusion

**8.1** Evidence-based practice can play a vital role in helping to identify and share good and illuminating practice between agencies. There is now scope for developing a research framework linked to evidence-based practice so that effective approaches and efficiency savings are identified and implemented.

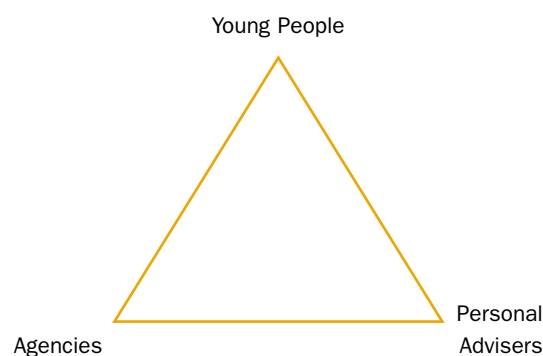
**8.2** The questions identified in this paper are designed to provide a starting point to prioritise key areas for development. The key issue is how the requirement for evidence-based practice, ensuring that new interventions are based on rigorous research and evaluation into “what works”, can be achieved.

**8.3** It is clear that there must be an end to fragmentation, of launching a range of unconnected research projects; at the very least, there should be some correlation between national research initiatives and the local ones. The main aim is to avoid unnecessary and wasteful duplication and to plan to ensure complementarity between research undertaken or commissioned by the National Connexions Unit and what is done more locally.

**8.4** A range of methods and perspectives are required: for example,

- longitudinal ethnographic investigations;
- conventional surveys;
- evaluation studies;
- reflective practitioner research;
- young people as researchers.

**8.5** It will be important that, in using a wide span of methods, there is some linkage between them. And that, as well as dissemination of findings, help is afforded to providers to *apply* the findings in their practice. In addition, it will be essential to join up the findings of the research undertaken regarding Connexions with the findings of research undertaken in other cognate social policy fields – e.g. youth justice, neighbourhood renewal.



**8.6** The key players in the Connexions service are young people, Personal Advisers and agencies. We need to make sure that the research strategy attends to the relationships along the three axes of this triangle. One of the key themes the research could focus on is the principle of *empowerment*:

- Empowering the *Personal Advisers* to do their job. This demands clarity about their role, functions, and relationships.
- Empowering the *young people* to make well-informed decisions. This requires an understanding from their perspective on Connexions.
- Empowering the *agencies* to work more effectively in partnership. There is evidence of “what works” from partnerships set up under New Deal, New Start and Learning Gateway. The lessons learned from these initiatives need to be harnessed by a wide range of youth support agencies.

# Research to Inform the Development of the New Connexions Service

**8.7** There is a need for an agreed set of principles to support national and local research strategies. These include:

- *harnessing relevant research findings* and building on these in order to gain further insight into particular areas of interest or need, i.e. not reinventing the wheel;
- *developing a community of practitioners, policy-makers and researchers* working on joint projects;
- *supporting practitioners to improve their research skills, knowledge and understanding* through investment in training and professional development;
- *ensuring clarity in relation to sharing and dissemination* of research and evaluation findings;
- *building a research culture within agencies* that have a clear vision and strategic plan to develop their services to young people.

## 9 Recommendations

### 9.1 Young people

Research is needed into:

- a** What young people want and need. This should include research which describes young people's conceptual worlds, including what "reintegration" means to them.
- b** Young people's perceptions of the services offered to them – including market research to inform the design of services.
- c** What determines "turning points" in young people's lives.
- d** Why some young people do not respond to initiatives such as mentoring.

Ways should be explored of involving young people actively in designing, carrying out and disseminating Connexions-related research. This may include involving young people in evaluating a range of approaches used by agencies for diagnostic screening and assessment purposes. DfEE have already commissioned research activities in relation to some of the above topics.

### 9.2 Agencies

Research is needed into:

- a** Mapping of agencies working with young people and how their services overlap.

- b** Good practice and difficulties experienced in forming sustainable local partnerships.
- c** Issues related to client information flows (including professional boundaries and data protection).
- d** Referral systems (including referrals to and from Personal Advisers).
- e** How young people pre-16 and post-16 will be linked to Connexions.
- f** Exploring ways in which family learning projects can be more fully developed?

### 9.3 Personal Advisers

Research is needed into:

- a** Identifying similarities and differences between varying models of the Personal Adviser role, and the strengths and weaknesses of these different models in different contexts and with different client-groups.
- b** The construction and nature of the relationships which Personal Advisers form with young people.
- c** The tensions between maintaining these relationships and meeting the aims and demands of the Connexions service, and how these tensions are resolved.
- d** How evaluation of the Personal Adviser role can feed into, support, and link with other professions such as teaching and social work.

### 9.4 Support for Personal Advisers

- a** Research is needed into the strengths and weaknesses of different forms of training and support for different models of the Personal Adviser role.
- b** Appropriate links need to be established between the role of work-based mentoring for Personal Advisers and the concept of reflective practice (see para. 9.7 below).

### 9.5 Output measures

- a** Careful balances need to be struck between output measures which are "hard" and "soft", quantitative and qualitative, and outcome-oriented and process-oriented. These need to include indicators of "distance travelled".
- b** Comparative research is needed into the outputs from work with young people receiving intensive help as opposed to those receiving less help.
- c** Benchmarking exercises will be required at local and national levels.

## Research to Inform the Development of the New Connexions Service

### 9.6 *Types of research*

- a** Within a co-ordinated strategy for research related to Connexions, there needs to be a place for national and local studies, for quantitative and qualitative studies, and for “expert” research and practitioner research. The balance between these may vary at different stages in the evolution of Connexions. Structured links between different kinds of studies can be fruitful: for example, between national and local studies.
- b** Comparative studies are needed looking at value for money, impact and efficiency.

### 9.7 *Reflective practice*

- a** A culture of evidence-based practice should encourage risk-taking and reflective practice.
- b** To be effective, reflective practice needs to be supported in terms of resources (including, crucially, release of practitioner time), managerial support, and incentives.
- c** Collaborative partnerships are needed between researchers and practitioners. A key role for researchers is to extract, frame and disseminate the tacit knowledge of front-line workers.
- d** Elements need to be embedded in the specification for Connexions business plans to encourage local research, mechanisms for the dissemination of research findings, and reflective practice.

### 9.8 *Dissemination*

- a** One way of sifting research evidence might be to establish a panel of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners to examine the evidence and pull out the key lessons from it.
- b** Attention needs to be given to the sifting of evidence not only from current UK research but also from relevant research in the past and from research in other countries.
- c** Ways need to be found of disseminating research findings to practitioners in a user-friendly way. Possibilities include:
  - A newsletter.
  - A website, with good practitioner-oriented indexing and referencing.
  - Cross-evaluation events.
  - Further national conferences.
  - Similar conferences at regional level.
- d** Consideration should be given to broadening

the boundaries of the national Careers Research Network (and of its regional “nodes” at East London, Derby and Strathclyde) to cover Connexions. Relatively small sums of government funding for such networks could prove very fruitful.

### 9.9 *Strategy*

There must be a robust and clear evaluation strategy at both national and local levels in order to ensure a cross-fertilisation of good and interesting practice. This must involve policy-makers, academics/researchers, practitioners and young people in order to develop a high quality and efficient support service as an entitlement for all young people.

# Research to Inform the Development of the New Connexions Service

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