

Transforming Young People's Decision- Making at Age 16

Briony Webb

Careers Wales West

This paper reports on research and consultation carried out by Careers Wales West for the Pembrokeshire Learning Network, based on fieldwork in the Haverfordwest and Milford Haven area. The project was designed to determine how careers education and guidance provision could best be developed in order to facilitate young people's access to a wide range of academic and vocational courses and training, without the restriction of institutional barriers and interests.

The research findings reported are of wide interest. In addition, the report provides a case-study of ways in which research data collected at local level can support reviews of local policy and practice.

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The field work was dependent on the co-operation of staff from the six schools and the college involved, from the Prince's Trust and from Careers Wales West; this made it possible to gather the views of staff from these organisations and from Pembrokeshire training providers as well as from young people and parents. The helpful contributions of all those involved is gratefully acknowledged by the project team.

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Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby, Kedleston Road, Derby, DE22 1GB
Tel: 01332 591267
Fax: 01332 597726
Email: cegsenquiry@derby.ac.uk
Centre Director: Deirdre Hughes

1. Executive Summary

The aim of the research was to determine how careers education and guidance provision could best be developed to facilitate young people's access to a wide range of academic and vocational courses and training, without the restrictions of institutional barriers and interests.

From an initial review of relevant research literature, the research team identified 17 success factors that needed to be in place for young people to make appropriate and effective progression at age 16. These were divided into four categories: information, support, decision-making, and transition. The evidence from previous research and from the present research study was then examined in relation to these success factors.

On *information*, the evidence from the research indicated that more comprehensive information on post-16 choices needed to be made available, in a more proactive and impartial manner, and from an earlier stage. It also suggested that opportunities needed to be provided for pupils to familiarise themselves with informal aspects of different environments, and with the longer-term implications of choices. Written information needed to be complemented by, and was more likely to be used if mediated through, personal contacts and experiences.

On *support*, the evidence indicated that the young people usually made their own choices, though they usually talked this through with their parents, who sometimes had a significant influence on the range of options they considered. There was scope to make parents more aware of the help available, including that offered by Careers Wales West, and to do so at an earlier stage. Staff development was needed for tutors to enable them to become better-informed about post-16 options. There was also scope for strengthening the careers education and guidance programmes in the schools, including more use of structured pupil investigations into post-16 options, and more flexible use of Careers Adviser time in school.

On *decision-making*, the evidence suggested that preparation for post-16 choices needed to start early. The aim should be for all pupils to be ready to make decisions on their post-16 routes prior to their GCSE examinations, even if they did not have a vocational preference at this stage. The decision should include alternative plans to take account of contingencies such as not securing the requisite examination grades. More opportunities were needed for work-related activities, and for pupils to sample options before committing to them. Pupils seemed to base their decisions on a combination of rational and non-rational factors. Schools could help to support rationality, including

recognising the non-rational factors but helping pupils to subject them to rational scrutiny.

On *transition*, non-availability of particular options or option combinations was clearly an issue for some young people. One of the benefits of institutional collaboration should be to widen the range of options available, so improving the match with young people's preferences, with possible effects on motivation and retention. Travel time was an issue for some young people, but appeared to be a significant deterrent to take-up only for some pupils from rural areas. In general, most pupils seemed to be familiar with application procedures, to be confident about their self-presentation skills, and to take action on their choices in good time.

Based on these success factors and the related evidence, 11 elements were extracted that need to be included in an entitlement for all pupils.

2. Introduction

Context. The publication by the Welsh Assembly Government of its consultation document *The Learning Country: Learning Pathways 14-19* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002), together with changes in funding arrangements for post-16 provision, offered opportunities for the three 11-18 comprehensive schools and one college of further education (FE) in Haverfordwest and Milford Haven to consider areas for collaboration and working in partnership. The two schools in Haverfordwest (Sir Thomas Picton and Tasker Milward), together with the college (Pembrokeshire College), had already developed some A/AS-level courses that were open to students from any of the three establishments. The research reported here was designed to provide ideas for further collaboration that could promote progression for young people in the area. It was based on the principles enunciated by ACCAC (2005, p.5):

'There is a clear need to avoid repetition in learners' experiences and ensure appropriate progression. Provision will be better where planning has been informed by listening carefully to the young people concerning their interests and needs.'

Aim. The aim of the research was to determine how careers education and guidance provision could best be developed to facilitate young peoples access to a wide range of academic and vocational courses and training, without the restrictions of institutional barriers and interests. More specifically, the research was designed to explore:

- the provision for careers education and guidance that existed for pupils in the three schools (Tasker Milward, Sir Thomas Picton, Milford Haven);
- the factors that influenced pupils' choices of pathways post-16 in these schools; and
- significant differences to similar schools in another area, in which there was a separate tertiary education structure post-16 (i.e. schools ended at 16 rather than 18).

Methodology. The fieldwork carried out for the project included:

- identifying three schools in a tertiary area that were comparable to the three Pembrokeshire 11-18 schools;
- conducting interviews with the Careers Co-ordinators and Careers Advisers in all six schools and with the Careers Adviser in Pembrokeshire College;
- gathering data on the careers education and guidance provision in the six schools;
- conducting 9 focus groups with 66 Year 12 students in Sir Thomas Picton, Milford Haven, Tasker Milward, Pembrokeshire College and the Prince's Trust (a training provider);
- collecting questionnaire data from 74 tutors for forms in years 7-11 at the three Pembrokeshire schools (92 tutor groups were involved in the research, giving a response rate of 80%);
- collecting questionnaire data from 883 pupils in years 7-11 at the three Pembrokeshire schools (all 3,070 pupils in years 7-11 in the three schools were asked to complete the questionnaire; a random sample was then selected on a basis that provided appropriate statistical confidence levels);
- administering a postal questionnaire to all 1,237 young people who were in Year 11 in 2004/05 at the three Pembrokeshire schools and the three comparable schools, resulting in 336 responses (a response rate of 27%);
- conducting a telephone survey of 120 parents of Year 11 pupils at the three Pembrokeshire schools;
- holding a meeting with senior tutors, tutors, lecturers and managers at Pembrokeshire College; and
- holding meetings with the Pembrokeshire Training Providers Group and with the head teachers from the three Pembrokeshire schools.

3. Success Factors

From an initial review of the relevant research literature, the research team identified a number of success factors that needed to be in place for young people to make appropriate and effective progression at 16. The success factors that emerged are listed in Box 1.

Box 1: Success factors

A. Information

- A.1 The information is timely, comprehensive, accurate, up-to-date and accessible.
- A.2 The content of options, learning styles, learner support, financial implications, progression routes and student destinations are all clear.
- A.3 Pupils have the skills to use the information.
- A.4 Pupils use the information available.

B. Support

- B.1 Their parents/carers will support the pupils' choices.
- B.2 The advice the pupils receive is accurate and impartial.
- B.3 Careers education and guidance programmes help pupils to understand the implications.
- B.4 Pupils use the support available.

C. Decision-making

- C.1 Pupils are ready to choose between options.
- C.2 Pupils are aware of their own interests, abilities, values, attitudes and aspirations.
- C.3 Pupils can identify how far the options available might match these attributes and preferences.
- C.4 Pupils make decisions based on appropriate factors.

D. Transition

- D.1 There is an appropriate range of options to choose from.
- D.2 Pupils can gain access to the option they want.
- D.3 Pupils can travel to the option they want.
- D.4 Pupils have the skills to apply for their chosen option.
- D.5 Pupils make a decision and take action at an appropriate time.

The evidence that emerged from the focus-group discussions was matched against these success factors to identify those that needed further investigation in the surveys.

In Sections 4 to 7, the evidence stemming from the literature review and the research fieldwork is reviewed in relation to each of the four themes identified in Box 1. This will be followed in Section 8 by the recommendations for action that emerged from the study.

4. Information

A.1 Do pupils have timely, comprehensive, accurate, up-to-date and accessible information?

Previous research. There is much research evidence that students report gaps in the information they receive on post-16 options (Golden *et al.*, 2005; Morris *et al.*, 1999; SWA Consulting, 1998). More specifically, young people indicate that they would like more information on job-related options (LSDA, 2005) and on jobs and courses available in other institutions (Keys & Maychell, 1998). A survey by Maychell & Evans (1998) found that over half of Year 11 pupils planning to leave education would have liked more information on the courses available, while just under 40% of those planning to stay on in education would have liked more information on combining work with training.

Comparing the alternatives. In the two Haverfordwest schools, most Year 12 students were satisfied with the information they had received before entering their course. But a small Pathfinder Learner Survey by Mills (2005) indicated that 10 of the 18 respondents from one school, and 9 of the 21 at the other, found it difficult or very difficult to compare similar courses in other institutions.

The focus groups provided several examples of young people who had done some research themselves – for example, looking at another school's option choices on the internet. The Careers Adviser was mentioned by several as a good source of information.

Gaps in information. Several students in the focus groups at Pembrokeshire College reported that their schools had not given information about the college, and suggested that this was because they wanted to recruit students for the sixth-form:

'They tried to promote the school more than anything, they talked about how good the school was and why you should come back but they didn't really say anything about the college.'

When students leaving Year 11 were asked to agree or disagree with the statement 'I wish I had known more about it [the decision at 16] before deciding', a substantial minority, including 41% at one school and 37% at another, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

Sources and timing. The survey of pupils in Years 7-11 indicated that young people have access to second-hand information about different learning providers through people they know. Less than 40% had visited Pembrokeshire College or a nearby school themselves,

yet in Year 11 the proportion who knew someone at college was 85%.

Pupils are most likely to talk to their parents and their friends about the different options post-16, and they start such discussions from Year 7 onwards. Fewer pupils report discussion with Careers Advisers and teachers, and very few do so until Key Stage 4, when most of the careers education programme takes place. Yet the evidence suggests that most pupils start thinking about their choice early in secondary school (if not before) and are interested in finding out more at an earlier stage, especially in Year 8.

Implications. More comprehensive information on post-16 choices needs to be made available, in a more proactive and impartial manner, and from an earlier stage.

A.2 Are the content of options, learning styles, learner support, financial implications, progression routes and student destinations all clear?

Level of detail. The aspects of post-16 options mentioned by young people in the Year 12 focus groups included both formal and informal aspects:

- fitting in with other young people and keeping in touch with friends;
- their perceived status in the new location;
- their relationship to the teachers or trainers;
- how far the content engaged their interest and suited their abilities;
- the support available for learners;
- whether the style of learning and assessment suited their strengths;
- the opportunities for progression; and
- the financial implications of their choice.

In some cases it was the informal aspects that had led to decisive changes in plans ('because the teacher was boring'; 'there were a lot of druggies on the course'). It seems that informal aspects such as social relationships can cause an activity to be rejected if they are negative, though they are not in themselves reasons for choosing an activity. One student suggested the need for an information process over time to cover the informal aspects adequately:

'Maybe slowly bring into our lives while in Year 10 and 11 all of the options we have so by the time we come to make our decisions we have been through all aspects of placements thoroughly to come to a decision we are sure about.'

Progression. Where information was available on progression from post-16 options, some of the young people in the Year 12 focus groups had considered it

carefully – for example, researching the A-levels needed for their chosen degree course. But some expressed the need for more information of this kind:

'I think that for A-levels they should have made a connection between which A-levels can get you which course. There wasn't much of that.'

Little information seemed to be available about destinations of students from vocational courses in college, and the information available on the websites of learning providers about progression at 17 or 18 seemed too general to allow meaningful comparison.

Perceptions of monitoring and support. There appeared to be a widely-held view both among students and among adults advising them that school sixth-form provided more support to students than college did. In the survey of students leaving Year 11, 'They check you are doing the work' was given as a reason for their choice by 39 out of 48 sixth-form pupils, but only by 5 college students. In the survey of school tutors, 84% agreed or strongly agreed that 'Students in the sixth form generally get more support than they could get in college'. On the other hand, a group of college lecturers suggested that because controls such as uniform, registration, and a common timetable for the school day were not evident in the college, pupils were unaware of the extensive and well-documented systems for monitoring and support that were in place through personal tutors and learning support staff at the college.

Implications. Information on options is not sufficient. Opportunities need to be provided for pupils to familiarise themselves with informal aspects of different environments, and with the longer-term implications of choices.

A.3-4 Do pupils have the skills to use the information? Do pupils use the information available?

Previous research. There is evidence that printed information on post-16 options and careers tends to be under-used (Russell & Wardman, 1998): only students who were conscientious and had clear career plans were likely to spend time outside lessons thinking about and researching careers (McNicol, 2005). Students expressed a strong preference for practical activities which allowed them to explore, gain experience and investigate for themselves: work experience, visits, talks by outside bodies and interactive computer programs. A major problem with ICT-based resources was information overload: more guidance was needed on using such resources (McNicol, 2005). Speaking to people with personal experience of a particular career, course or institution was particularly valued (Keys & Maychell, 1998). Written information appeared to be at best a complement to face-to-face information rather

than a substitute for it (GfK NOP Social Research, 2005).

Confidence in and use of research skills. In the survey of pupils in Years 7-11, the proportion of Year 11 pupils who felt sure they knew how to find out about the local college was 88%, about their school sixth-form was 76%, and about a job with training was 63%. But 78% still wanted to find out more about their post-16 options, suggesting that they had not yet done so, or that what they had done had not answered their questions. The proportion reporting use of written information was 59% for information about the college and 33% on jobs with training.

Preferences regarding information sources. When students leaving Year 11 in 2005 were asked to identify activities that had been helpful in making their decision, 'discussion' was mentioned most frequently, and 'visits/open days' were ranked third. 'Written information, videos and websites' was ranked ninth. 'Tasters' were ranked even lower, but this may have reflected a lack of such opportunities. In the Year 12 focus groups, many young people indicated that they preferred to experience the options or talk to people involved, though there was also evidence that some had not taken advantage of opportunities for open days, for example.

Implications. Written information is necessary but not sufficient. It needs to be complemented by, and is more likely to be used if mediated through, personal contacts and experiences.

5. Support

B.1 Will their parents support the pupils' choices?

Previous research. Few students are strongly and directly influenced by their parents in their post-16 choices: when Keys & Maychell (1998) asked for and reasons for choosing their current institution, only 12% of FE students and 19% of sixth-form students ticked 'My parents wanted me to'. Foskett & Hesketh (1996) noted that parents were more influential in the case of middle-class pupils, of girls and of those who cited as influences 'excellent academic record', 'staying in current sixth-form' or proximity. In general, parents emerged more as a general than a specific influence on decisions at 16. Foskett & Hesketh suggested that young people might be making decisions within frames of reference defined, often implicitly, by their parents. In other words, some options might be excluded as options by parents, but pupils would then be able to make relatively unconstrained choices between non-excluded options.

Extent of discussion. The survey of pupils in Years 7-11 showed that more pupils had talked to their parents about the options than had talked to a Careers Adviser, to teachers or to other adults. In the survey of students leaving Year 11, discussion with parents was the most frequently reported activity that had been helpful in making the decision. For those currently in work-based training, discussion with parents accounted for 20% of the positive responses.

Nature of influence. In the Year 12 focus groups, the influence of parents was rarely raised by pupils themselves. In general, parents were seen as supporting but not deciding. There were a number of examples of young people making choices against their parents' wishes:

'My Dad was a welder and I think he wanted me to do something like he did. But I'm not interested in that.....They think they know what's best for their kids, but in the end they don't.'

In the survey of parents, when asked to describe how decisions about what to do after GCSEs was made in their family, 85% chose: 'I try to help him/her think through the options, but in the end it's up to him/her.'

Implications. Young people usually make their own choices, though they usually talk them through with their parents, who may have a significant influence on the range of options they consider.

B.2 Is the advice the pupils receive accurate and impartial?

Previous research. Keys & Maychell (1998) found that, while similar proportions of students in FE colleges and school sixth-forms had been given advice by Careers Teachers and Careers Advisers, students in FE colleges were less likely than those in school sixth-forms to recall having been given advice from their parents (56% FE students, 69% sixth-formers) or subject teachers (31% FE students, 55% sixth-formers). A survey of post-16 collaboration found that most schools provided impartial advice on opportunities outside as well as inside the school, but that one of the factors discouraging collaboration was excessive focus on the needs of the institution or department to maintain student numbers, rather than on the needs of students (OFSTED & FEFC Inspectorate, 1999).

Parents. Young people in the Year 12 focus groups were conscious that the quality of advice from parents might be limited by their lack of knowledge or biased by their own interests:

'Parents, I don't think they know the kind of thing on offer these days.'

The survey of parents of students currently in Year 11 found that 85% identified topics that they needed to know more about, especially Educational Maintenance Allowances and 'where we can get advice and support'. They would also have liked help earlier: 28% when their child was in Year 9 or before that, 43% in Year 10, and 29% in Year 11.

Teachers. The Pathfinder Learner Survey of Year 12 students (Mills, 2005) identified school or college staff as the main sources of information to support their decision-making. Focus groups indicated that those who considered themselves to be higher-achieving students felt they were discouraged from opting for college in order for the school to retain students who would help to maintain its reputation for good results. In the survey of tutors, 8 in 10 said that they discussed choices of future course or career with their pupils; but more than half felt unable to give pupils accurate and impartial advice, and opinion was fairly evenly split as to whether teachers naturally recommended courses in their own sixth-form. The majority of teachers did not feel confident that they had up-to-date knowledge of opportunities post-16, even those in the sixth-form, but especially in colleges and in work-based learning. Only 14% had had any opportunity to develop their skills or knowledge to help pupils choose their routes at 16.

Implications. There is scope to make parents more aware of the help available, including that offered by Careers Wales West, and to do so at an earlier stage. Staff development is needed for tutors to enable them to become better-informed about the full range of post-16 options.

B.3-4 Do careers education and guidance programmes help pupils understand the implications? Do pupils use the support available?

Previous research. Careers education and guidance programmes include both the guidance work done with individuals by the Careers Adviser, and the programmes planned by schools and delivered through careers lessons, tutorial work, events, visits and other activities. They have been found to be most effective where these two elements are integrated, so that each informs and supports the other (Morris *et al.*, 1995). All of these activities are related to the development of good career exploration and career management skills (Morris, 2004). Successful transitions at 16 in which progression is evident are most apparent in young people with good career exploration skills and a sound knowledge of the courses and routes open to them; such students are also less likely to switch courses or drop out of courses (Morris *et al.*, 1999).

Careers education. All three schools had audited their careers education provision for all Key Stages against

the learning outcomes specified in the framework developed by ACCAC (2002); two schools had ensured, as part of their preparation for the Careers Wales Quality Award, that opportunities were in place for pupils to achieve these learning outcomes. Careers education lessons were, however, hardly ever mentioned in the Year 12 focus groups, except where there had been visiting speakers or activities with external facilitators; open days and work experience received more mentions.

Careers guidance. In every focus group, young people mentioned interaction with Careers Advisers or staff at the careers centre. Their biggest impact seemed to have been on the groups at college, many of whom had applied for college or apprenticeship as a direct result of discussion with Careers Wales staff. In schools there were positive comments that the interview had helped, though also some negative comments where the Careers Adviser had not directly answered an enquiry, or where pupils had been confused by attempts to widen the options being considered. Such confusion seemed particularly likely where the pupils came to the interview without prior information about the routes open to them. Some appeared to feel that interviews with the Careers Adviser were a scarce resource; several mentioned durations of 15-20 minutes, which they did not feel was adequate. The interviews tended to be heavily weighted to Years 11-12 rather than Years 9-10: Careers Advisers felt there was not enough flexibility in this respect to respond to needs.

Implications. School provision seemed to meet the needs of most pupils. But there was scope for strengthening the programmes, including more use of structured pupil investigations into post-16 options, and more flexible use of Careers Adviser time in school.

6. Decision-Making

C.1 Are pupils ready to choose between options?

Previous research. There is evidence that many young people have career ideas at an early age. A large survey of Year 9 pupils found that 80% already had an interest in working in a specific career area, and considered that their option choices were appropriate for that area (Lines *et al.*, 2005). Indeed, a study by Foskett & Hemsley-Brown (1997) of pupils aged 10, 15 and 17 found that by late primary school most pupils had already rejected most occupations. However, it seemed likely that their ideas changed over the year-groups, and the older students were more likely to say that they 'did not know' which career path they intended to pursue. Such indecision did not seem incompatible with pupils' development of understanding both of their own

potential and of the opportunities open to them. In a study of Year 9 pupils, SWA Consulting (1998) reported that high achievers (defined as those who would obtain at least one grade C at GCSE) achieved higher levels of careers learning in all areas except their decidedness about their longer-term career.

Timing. The survey of pupils in Years 7-11 showed that they were interested in their route at 16+ at an early stage: 70% of Year 7 pupils said they had started to think about it, and 80% wanted to find out more. However, in the autumn term of Year 11, 49% of pupils said that they were still changing their mind quite a bit about what they would do after their GCSEs. The survey of students leaving Year 11 indicated that 40% did not make up their minds until after their GCSE examinations. This suggests that some young people may be relying too heavily on these examination results to help them make up their minds, rather than making a well-thought-through decision with contingency plans.

Consequences of indecision. The Year 12 focus groups indicated that decision-making on post-16 routes was particularly difficult for those young people who were undecided on their occupational interests and had not achieved the 5 GCSEs they needed for entry to AS-level courses. Some young people in the college, in sixth-form and in training had taken vocational courses without much conviction that it was right for them:

'Then there wasn't really anything else I could do, so I just ended up on this course.'

Others had left school without any plan for their next step. These were perhaps more visible than those who were avoiding a decision by staying on at school.

Implications. Preparation for post-16 choices needs to start early. The aim should be for all pupils to be ready to make decisions on their post-16 routes prior to their GCSE examinations, even if they do not have a vocational preference at this stage. The decision should include alternative plans to take account of contingencies such as not securing the requisite examination grades.

C.2-3 Are pupils aware of their own interests, abilities, values, attitudes and aspirations? Can they identify how far the available options might match these attributes and preferences?

Previous research. Morris (2004) indicated that there was a significant relationship between young people's satisfaction with their post-16 destinations and their understanding of themselves, their strengths and weaknesses (i.e. their self-awareness), and their ability to examine these in the light of the skills and abilities

they would require on their chosen courses and in their potential career.

Satisfaction with choice. The survey of students leaving Year 11 found that most were satisfied with their choice. The proportion of college students who indicated that the course was what they had expected was significantly higher in Pembrokeshire than in the comparison area. When young people in the Year 12 focus groups were asked to describe how they had chosen their current course, many were able to describe their interests and abilities.

Impact of work-related activities. Work-related activities were mentioned by several students as a turning-point that had helped them realise what they wanted to do. One boy had gone to the college on a Saturday club and this had helped him decide on his course. A girl in the same group had chosen child-care on the basis of work experience.

Sampling and 'tasters'. Several young people in the Year 12 focus groups independently came up with the idea of sampling during Key Stage 4. A sixth-form student suggested similar arrangements to those for choosing secondary schools in Year 6. In the survey of students leaving Year 11, nearly half the young people said they would have liked to try out their course or activity before committing themselves to it. When asked 'How could we improve the help for young people choosing at 16?', 48 young people asked for 'tasters', and this was the most frequently occurring theme:

'Give people a taster of what 6th form, college, apprenticeship, unemployment etc. would be like e.g. a week on each.'

Changes of plan. In addition to the level of students' satisfaction with their choice, another performance indicator might be the proportion of young people who change activities before completing them. There were a number of examples in the focus groups of last-minute changes of plans. In general, however, the actual number of changers was small.

Implications. Work-related activities are opportunities for self-exploration as well as for occupational exploration. More opportunities are needed for young people to sample options before committing to them.

C.4 Do pupils make decisions based on appropriate factors?

Previous research. Kidd & Watts (1996) distinguished between three styles of decision-making: rational, intuitive and dependent. Hodkinson (2004) found that, within 'horizons' for action set by social background

and other factors, most young people made 'pragmatically rational' decisions, based on partial information, and informed as much by emotion and tacit preferences as by considered logical choice. As an example of this process, a research review by Payne (2003) indicated that few young people chose a particular post-16 route because their friends had chosen it, but that friends might help to form their general attitude towards education, which in turn influenced their choices. Blenkinsop (2005), however, indicated that young people were more likely to make their decisions in a rational way in schools where impartial advice and guidance was accompanied by a caring and supportive ethos and where pupils believed that support (whether academic or pastoral) was available and was focused on helping them.

Basis for decisions. In the Year 12 focus groups, many young people seemed to divide quite clearly into those who had decided to stay on at school and those who had decided to leave, regardless of the limitations this put on their choices. Some freely admitted that their decisions were based on what their friends were doing:

'I thought about college but my mates were coming back. I probably would have been better off – I could have done the subjects I wanted and it would have tied into my hobbies.'

In the case of those staying on at school, some clearly indicated a desire to stay with what was familiar – teachers who knew them, for example.

Reasons given. On the other hand, in the survey of students leaving Year 11, when young people were asked why they had chosen the options they had, most chose 'I am interested/I enjoy it' and 'It will help me get into the career I want', both of which fit well into a rational approach to decision-making. The most frequently chosen reason for choosing a particular institution was 'They offered the course I wanted'.

Implications. It seems that Pembrokeshire pupils base their decisions on a similar combination of rational and non-rational factors as young people elsewhere. Schools can help to support rationality, including recognising the non-rational factors but helping pupils to subject them to rational scrutiny.

7. Transition

D.1-2 Is there an appropriate range of options to choose from? Can pupils get access to the options they want?

Previous research. Research indicates that for pupils who want a particular subject or type of course,

availability is a significant factor in their choice of institution. Foskett & Hesketh (1996), for example, found that when asked for the single most important influence on their choice of post-16 institution, 15% of Year 11 pupils said 'The only institution offering a suitable course'. An OFSTED (2005) review of 14-19 provision in England found that many gaps and inequalities remained, and that in particular progression into work-based learning was limited in some places by lack of availability.

Restrictions. As previously noted, some young people in the Year 12 focus groups who had not achieved the grades for entry into A/AS-level courses felt limited by the vocational courses available in their sixth-form, and had taken a course that was of limited interest because it meant they could stay on at school. There was also strong evidence of dissatisfaction among some A/AS-level students who had been unable to combine the subjects they wanted:

'I don't think I know a single person who is doing the subjects they actually wanted to do.'

This varied by school: in one school less than half of the Year 12 students responding to the Pathfinder Learner Survey (Mills, 2005) said that all or most of the courses they wanted to follow were available to them, whereas in another the figure was 90%. Of the 25 respondents to the survey of parents whose child was considering employment or training, only 12 agreed that work-based training was available for the sort of jobs young people wanted, and 5 disagreed.

Implications. Non-availability of particular options or option combinations is clearly an issue for some young people. One of the benefits of institutional collaboration should be to widen the range of options available, so improving the match with young people's preferences, with possible effects on motivation and retention.

D.3 Can pupils travel to the option they want?

Previous research. Proximity was reported as the single most important influence on their choice of post-16 institution by 14% of the Year 11 pupils in the study by Foskett & Hesketh (1996). When Keys & Maychell (1998) asked young people about their reasons for choosing their current institution, 33% of FE students and 75% of sixth-form students ticked 'Easy to get to'.

Local travel issues. In the survey of students leaving Year 11, 'easy to get to' was only ticked by 7% of students as one of the reasons for choosing a particular option. On the other hand, a youth worker at the Prince's Trust had found transport difficulties to be a decisive factor for many unemployed young people in

rural areas. Travel issues could also be a significant factor in the success of inter-institutional collaborative arrangements. When asked how much time per day they were prepared to travel, the vast majority (36/52) of the Year 12 students responding to the Pathfinder Learner Survey replied 'less than 30 minutes per day'. In the focus groups, however, it seemed that the main concern was not the time involved but missing part of lessons.

Implications. Travel time is an issue for some young people, but travel appears to be a significant deterrent to take-up only for some pupils from rural areas.

D.4 Do pupils have the skills to apply for their chosen option?

The survey of pupils in Years 7-11 asked if they knew how to apply to the four post-16 options. Two-thirds (66%) said they knew how to apply to the college, 58% to their school sixth-form, 40% to a job with training, and 23% to a nearby school.

The survey of students leaving Year 11 asked whether they knew how to make a good impression when applying for their next course or other activity. Over four-fifths were confident about their self-presentation skills.

D.5 Do pupils make a decision and take action at an appropriate time?

By the time Careers Wales West collected first-destination information in the autumn term, only 31 (5%) of the 621 young people who had left Year 11 in the three Pembrokeshire schools were counted as not in education, employment or training (NEET). Records of the number of young people from Year 11 registering for help at the careers centre show an increase of activity after the young people complete their examinations in June and again after the examination results are announced in August/September. The figures for placements into training or employment show relatively high figures in June/July, suggesting that many young people take action in good time.

8. Recommendations

The aim of the research was to determine how careers education and guidance provision could best be developed in order to facilitate young people's access to a wide range of academic and vocational courses and training, without the restrictions of institutional barriers and interests.

The results of the research can help us envisage the conditions that will be needed to achieve the aim. Some of these conditions are already in place for some young people; many simply involve adjustments to existing good practice. But to achieve the aim, the entitlement for all pupils will need to include the following elements:

- Pupils in Key Stage 3 will have first-hand experience of at least one or two other post-16 learning providers – schools, college or training companies – and will have visited them or worked with their staff.
- Their National Curriculum subjects will be enriched by work-related learning, including examples of related issues in business and industry and problem-solving exercises in the classroom, as well as visits and visitors when this is possible.
- Young people who are interested in considering their post-16 choices from an early stage will be able to gain ready access to the information they need, to attend events with their parents, and to have flexible access to expert advice from the Careers Co-ordinator and Careers Adviser.
- Information about post-16 opportunities will be presented in a common format that allows easy comparison, and will be readily accessible to pupils, parents, teachers and advisers.
- Post-16 opportunities will be planned to meet the needs of young people and will offer as wide a range of combinations of AS-level subjects as possible.
- Learning providers will have a common timetable for applications and offers, and a common standard of evidence, such as a personal statement, to support applications.
- Key Stage 4 pupils and their parents will be clear at an early stage about the timetable and processes for transition at 16; this will be presented as an important decision for which the young person will need to take responsibility, with the support of their tutor, and with flexible access to impartial guidance from the Careers Adviser when they need it.
- More pupils will be able to make a well-thought-through decision in good time, with an alternative plan to take account of contingencies.
- Careers and work-related education will offer a range of experiences, including 'tasters' that allow young people to explore options before making commitments to them.
- Tutors, trained in the skills they need, and with first-hand experience of at least some post-16 learning providers, will work with pupils throughout Key Stage 4 on a research task and on the completion of a Personal Statement using Progress File materials; they will refer those who need additional help to the Careers Adviser.
- Schools, other post-16 providers and Careers Wales West will jointly plan how to monitor progress and will evaluate activities to ensure that the overall aim is achieved.

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