The Impact of Career Guidance on Progression in Learning and Work: A Literature Review

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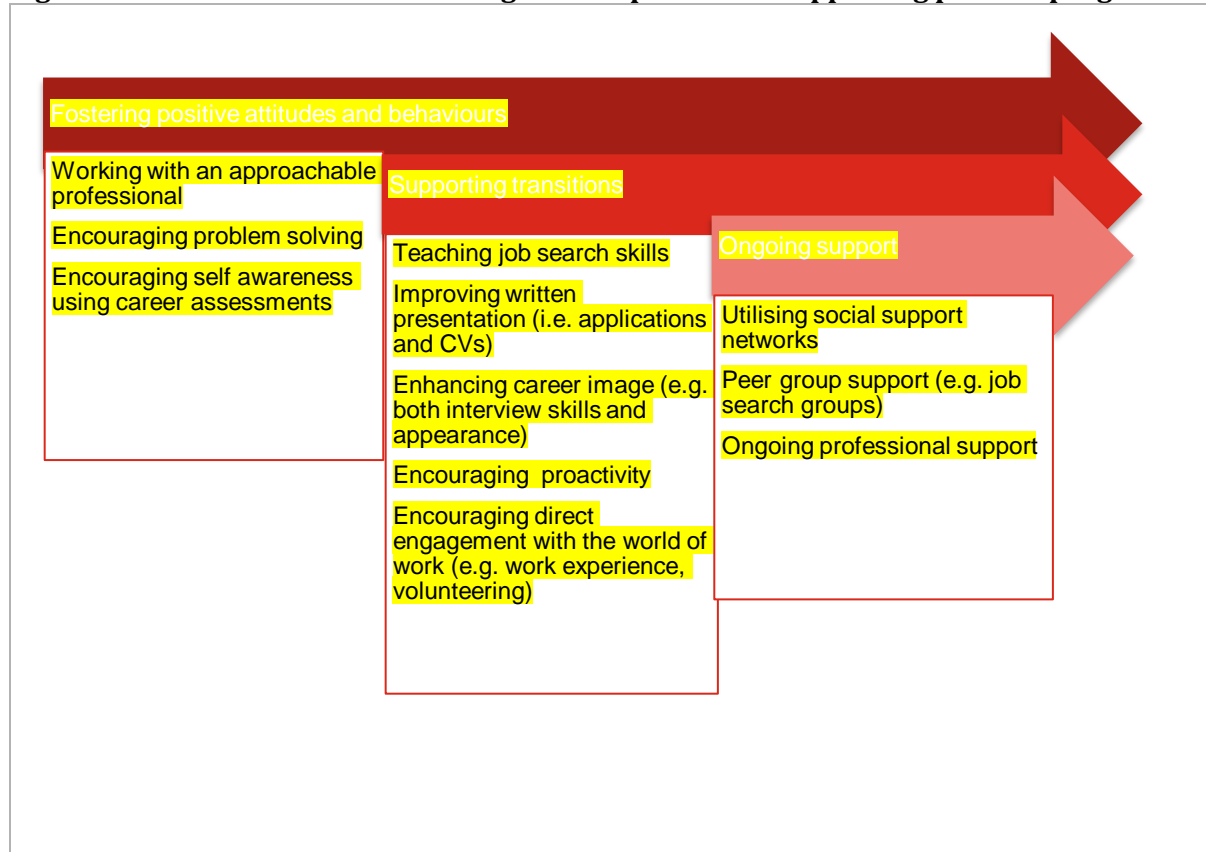
Executive Summary

This paper sets out the findings of a review of the literature on how career guidance can support individuals to progress to positive learning and work destinations. It argues that positive progression is a legitimate and appropriate outcome of career guidance, although access to career guidance is only one amongst a range of factors that might influence an individual's likelihood of progressing. It also notes that progression can be difficult to measure in research.

The initial review found a range of evidence which demonstrated that career guidance can have a positive influence on individuals' progression to learning and work. It highlighted a number of features that underpin the effectiveness of career guidance in this area.

1. Services need to be provided in a timely fashion, and as quickly after an individual has dropped out of learning or work as possible.

2. Services need to be provided professionally by skilled advisers.

In addition to these points, the paper advances a model of the features of effective practice that support individuals to engage positively with progression. This focuses on establishing positive attitudes and behaviours, engaging in developing and effectively applying job search skills and creating a support network using both informal and formal sources. The evidence suggests that each of these interventions are useful, but that multiple and integrated activities are most successful, especially if they focus on building motivation as well as job search skills. It is important to note that, since 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly affected the way in which career guidance has taken place. Adaptations have been needed and developed in order to make sure that job seekers still have access to support and resources. The move to virtual delivery systems has meant that both advisers and job seekers have had to adapt to new systems, something that was challenging for those job seekers who lacked the technological and digital skills necessary to access help and implement job search strategies.

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Figure 1: A model of effective career guidance practice in supporting positive progression

Fostering positive attitudes and behaviours

Working with an approachable professional

Encouraging problem solving

Encouraging self awareness using career assessments

Supporting transitions

Teaching job search skills

Improving written presentation (i.e. applications and CVs)

Enhancing career image (e.g. both interview skills and appearance)

Encouraging proactivity

Encouraging direct engagement with the world of work (e.g. work experience, volunteering)

Ongoing support

Utilising social support networks

Peer group support (e.g. job search groups)

Ongoing professional support

Source: : iCeGS and SQW

Introduction

The National Careers Service was re-launched in October 2014 with a priority to 'provide advice and guidance for low skilled adults strongly focused on positive employment and learning outcomes'. An important outcome of effective career guidance is to support individuals to make informed choices and enable the enactment of these choices.

This paper updates the findings from a 2014/2015 review of the literature exploring progression to positive learning and work destinations resulting from career development activities. It forms part of a series of papers initially produced to inform development of a Best Practice Programme for the National Careers Service in England and which now underpin the Continuous Improvement programme. At the time of the original research, the service had recently undergone a shift to an outcome-based funding model, with three outcome measures for the service (customer satisfaction, career management and progression to jobs and learning). These measures have subsequently been changed to differentiate between progression to learning and progression to jobs, highlighting the emphasis of the service on enabling people to enhance their skills and move out of long-term unemployment.

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Methodology

This paper is part of an update to a series reporting the results of a literature review commissioned by the then Skills Funding Agency (now the Education and Skills Funding Agency) to inform development of a Best Practice Programme (now the Continuous Improvement programme) for the National Careers Service. The following five themes / questions were identified for the review to focus on:

1. What evidence exists which describes the **policies, systems and processes** that underpin the organisation of national careers services?

2. How can careers services maximise **customer satisfaction**?

3. How can careers services maximise their impact on **career management skills**?

4. How can careers services maximise their impact on individual's **progression to positive learning and work destinations**?

5. How is effective **brokerage** between education and employers organised?

The original **policy review** was sent as an internal document to the SFA/ESFA and so was not included in the updating process for the National Careers Service. The **brokerage review** was initially intended to inform the work of the National Careers Service in relation to the 2013 skills strategy *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills,* which explicitly note the requirement for the National Careers Service at that time to 'play a proactive role in connecting employers, education institutions and local partners' to identify and promote opportunities for young people. This was a specific focus of the Inspiration Agenda but is now more fully under the remit of The Careers & Enterprise Company.

This paper reports on the results relating to progression to positive learning and work destinations. A set of core and secondary search terms were identified for this theme (Table 1). These were **applied to the indexes, databases** and search engines listed in Annex A.

Table 1: Search terms relating to progression to positive learning and work destinations

Core search terms	Secondary search terms
• Learning • School to work transition • Learning and work progression • School to work transition	• Work progression • Employment • Progression into work • Career planning • Career guidance • Career development • Career • Employment outcome • Motivation • Career planning • Work progression • Betterment • College • University • School to work transition

Core search terms	Secondary search terms
	• Transition • Participation • Non- participation • Progression

The initial search in 2014/2015 produced a total of 26,600 results across all five research questions. The searching process in 2021 found 24 results across the three areas of career satisfaction, career management and career progression, the areas selected for updating.

On each occasion, the results of the search process were uploaded to EPPI-Reviewer 4, a software package designed to facilitate an iterative approach to reviewing the results of literature searches. The abstracts were then subject to a seven-stage review process aimed at filtering out duplicates, any unsuitable or non-relevant material, as well as studies considered not to be of sufficient quality (perhaps lacking an indication of method) for use in the full text review. An overview of this process is provided in Table 2, as well as the results from each of the stages.

Table 2: Summary of process for review of results

Stage:	First review (2014/15): Total remaining:	Update review (2021): Total remaining
1. Full search results	26,600	**62**
2. Duplicates removed	15,300	**0**
3. Core search terms applied to Title and Abstract	7,100	**62**
4. First sift to remove unsuitable material: • Media items – e.g. TV / radio interviews and newspaper articles • Conference notes • Individual biographies • Non-research material • Items not relevant to careers • Non-English language material	3,100	**62**
5. First stage exclusion criteria applied to remove abstracts that were: Pre-2000 • Not focussed on the provision of careers guidance, information or advice • Missing a methodology statement • Not of direct relevance to any of the five research questions	326	**50**
6. First stage coding applied to remaining abstracts covering: • Method – qualitative / quantitative / mixed • Country of study • Research question(s) of relevance	326	**50**
7. Second stage coding applied to abstract (where possible): • Research design	160	**24**

Stage:	First review (2014/15): Total remaining:	Update review (2021): Total remaining
• Target population • Implementation of research design • Quality of interpretation and conclusions Abstracts that, on further investigation, were deemed not to meet the quality criteria, were excluded at this stage.		

In 2015, of the 160 abstracts remaining following completion of this systematic review and coding exercise, 17 were identified as appearing relevant to the question on progression to positive learning and work destinations. The full-text copies of these papers were subject to a more in-depth review aimed at identifying the key emerging themes. At this stage, 10 studies were excluded from the review, as the full text revealed that they either reported on part of a study that was already included in the review or provided only weak, insecure or unsubstantiated findings. In 2021, a further 11 were taken to full-text review, following a similar review of research quality, though seven of these were subsequently excluded as they proved to be predominantly 'think pieces' or policy discussions rather than empirical research related to practice.

The bibliographies of the studies identified as being of particular relevance to the topic were therefore reviewed to identify any additional material (including articles published before the year 2000) that would be suitable for inclusion in the review. This added a further 42 studies to the 2014/2015 review (a total of 49 studies were drawn on in the development of that paper) with a total of four studies added in 2021; references for which are provided in the Reference list.

We have focused our examination on empirical studies on career development interventions and progression. These relate to all of the studies that provide empirical data relating to the topics. The other studies that are referred to in the paper provide interesting theoretical discussions contributing to a deeper understanding of the issues.

The challenges of identifying progression

Greenwood (2008) argues that longitudinal work on career development interventions has been very limited in scope and scale. She notes that most studies are conceptual discussions rather than investigations into what works. Liu, Huang and Wang (2014) also suggest there have been few studies on why particular elements of job search support programmes are effective, specifically the design of interventions and participant characteristics. They argue that more research needs to be undertaken to better understand the effectiveness of these types of interventions and, particularly, to isolate the specific factors that may have an influence on progression.

There are various ways in which a progression outcome can be measured. One of the most conceptually straightforward is to measure the progress of the individual in learning and work following a career guidance intervention, contrasting it with a counter-factual in which no career

guidance was accessed. Counter-factual outcomes consider what would have happened regardless of the intervention. However, in practice, this is often difficult due to both the challenges of following an individual over a period of time and of establishing and measuring a counter-factual. Consequently, it is common to use a variety of proxy measures to explore progress. In this literature review we have tried, as much as possible, to focus on studies that present clear evidence of progression outcomes. These have focused predominantly on transitions from education into further/higher education and work and from unemployment into learning and employment. However, other kinds of relevant study, usually those using proxy measures, have been used where they inform good practice.

Examining progression to positive learning and work outcomes

Career guidance is defined as "services and activities intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers" (OECD, 2004). Implicit within this definition is the idea that career guidance leads to people making better educational and employment decisions. The assumption is that access to career guidance supports individuals to identify and move into better outcomes than they otherwise would have done and that this, in turn, leads to both personal and social benefits. The concept of progression, of moving on to better life chances, is consequently at the heart of the rationale for career guidance as an activity. This paper will explore what the literature shows about the relationship between career guidance and progression.

Identifying a relationship between the inputs and outcomes of career guidance is not always straightforward (Hooley, 2014). Inputs, processes and outcomes are contextually situated and, consequently, what may work well in one context may not produce the same results in a different context. This needs to be considered when examining research studies drawn from different parts of the world with different customer groups operating in different social and economic circumstances.

Influences on progression

An individual's career progression is contextually situated. Their background, demographics and early life experiences determine where their career begins, but they also strongly influence how it progresses and where it is likely to end.

Much of the literature on individuals' progressions throughout life highlights the barriers that individuals experience and relates them to a range of social and demographic facts including: gender (Broadbridge, 1998; Ismail and Ibrahim, 2008); race (DeWitt *et al.*, 2011); and disability and illness (Beatty, 2012; Kulkarni and Gopakumar, 2014). Arthur (2014) notes that individuals face employment bias related to a range of dimensions including, race, gender, class, religion and so on.

Reflecting on these inherent biases and barriers, many writers in the careers field (e.g. Sampson *et al.*, 2011; Arthur *et al.*, 2013; Arthur, 2014; Sultana, 2014) consider career guidance

interventions in terms of social justice. They argue that career support can level the playing field, providing individuals who are disadvantaged by their lack of financial, social and cultural capital with additional resources that can support their career progression. Consequently, equity of access to career support can be seen as an issue of social justice in itself (Sampson *et al.*, 2011).

Can career guidance influence progression?

There is a range of literature that suggests that career guidance can have a positive influence on the progression of individuals to learning and work (e.g. see Hearne, 2005; Eley *et al.*, 2007; Bimrose *et al.*, 2008, Mcllveen, Morgan and Bimrose, 2012, and BIS, 2014). Such literature suggests that individuals who have participated in a career guidance intervention are more likely to progress to positive learning and work outcomes. According to the most recent OECD Survey of Career Guidance in Adults (2021), in the six months following receiving career guidance, 70% of users had reported change in their employment or training status, with 25% progressing in their job. This throws considerable light on what features of career guidance programmes are most likely to lead towards progression.
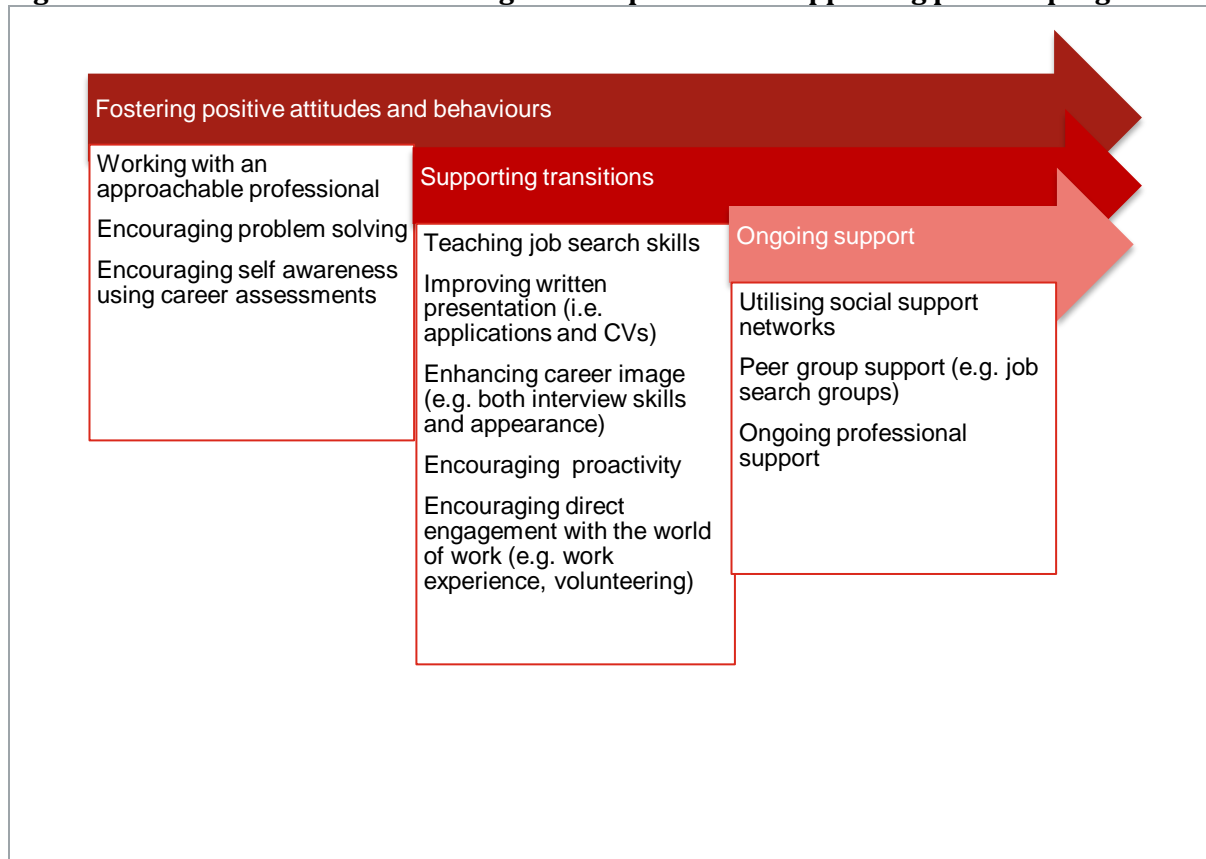
Key features which support successful career guidance interventions include:

- **ensuring that services are provided quickly**. Studies suggest that career guidance interventions are more effective when they are provided quickly. This has been observed particularly for unemployed clients of services and it appears that the longer an individual is out of work the more difficult it is to help them. Blundell *et al.* (2004), Meadows (2006) and Hasluck and Green (2007) all suggest that timing of interventions is important, noting that job search interventions are most effective with those who have recently left the labour market. Blundell *et al.* (2004) highlight the importance of achieving "quick wins" with young unemployed men, noting that programmes are more effective in the first four months of unemployment. Liu *et al.* (2014) report a similar finding with older people. All of this suggests that speedy access to career guidance is likely to improve progression rates and that accessing unemployed clients as soon after they have become unemployed as possible is also likely to be important.

- **ensuring that services are provided professionally**. The expertise of advisers was identified in a number of studies. Kuijpers(2019), Miller *et al.* (2001), McTurk (2003), Beddie *et al.* (2005) and Behaghel *et al.* (2014) all suggest that the nature of the relationship developed between the customer and the adviser is a crucial factor for successful progression. The advisers' interpersonal skills and relationship building were specifically cited as a crucial factor. Hechtlinger and Gati (2019), in their research on gender differences and the effectiveness of a group intervention, found that the most experienced advisors/facilitators also had the most effective outcomes for their customers. Creed *et al.* (2001) and Hasluck and Green (2007) suggest that not only the skills but the demeanour of the adviser is important. The BIS report (2014), for example, reported that 90-95% of customers accessing the National Careers Service face-to-face in England were satisfied with the professionalism of their adviser, found them helpful and knowledgeable and (critically) felt that they understood

their needs. These findings align well with the importance of the working alliance that is highlighted in the paper on customer satisfaction (Hooley *et al.* 2015).

In addition to these general features of effective practice, the literature focuses on three main areas. Firstly, a number of studies make the argument that, in order to allow people to progress, they first need to be supported to develop the **attitudes and behaviours** that will underpin this progression. Secondly, studies focus on the actual **process of transition** and explore how career guidance interventions can support this transition. Thirdly research looks at **long-term support** which helps to sustain the individual's progression. Each of these foci provide a different lens through which we can examine how to influence an individual's progression and, consequently, each of them measures this impact in different ways. However, these approaches are complementary rather than contradictory and can be viewed as a sequential part of a model of effective practice. There is some evidence (e.g. Liu *et al.* 2014) which suggests that these three foci are most effective when they are addressed in combination. Figure 1 provides a representation of this model.

Figure 2: A model of effective career guidance practice in supporting positive progression

Source: iCeGS and SQW

Fostering positive attitudes and behaviours

This section explores the literature that addressed the skills and behaviours that need to be in place for an individual to progress successfully. It argues that career guidance has a role in

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developing these skills and behaviours, helping individuals to identify their strengths and weaknesses and supporting them to develop their capacity to progress.

There is considerable evidence which suggests that an individual's psychological well-being and behaviours strongly influences their capacity to progress. Creed *et al.* (2001), for example, argue that self-esteem correlates with an individuals' ability to find work. Pinquart *et al.*'s (2003) study of young people suggests that low levels of self–efficacy (their belief that they can positively influence their careers and lives) negatively influence an individual's career interests, goals and performance as well as their capacity to make effective transitions. McCrone *et al.* (2013) also report on evidence that a lack of self-confidence and self-esteem can create barriers for individuals seeking to progress in their careers.

However, many studies suggest that it is possible to ***influence*** individuals' confidence, self-efficacy, self-esteem and so forth through career guidance-related interventions. Pitan and Atiku (2017), in their study of determinants of employability amongst 600 undergraduate students, found that career guidance activities significantly enhanced students' employability through self-awareness and opportunity awareness. Bimrose *et al.* (2008), in their longitudinal study, report that engagement in career guidance can enhance career confidence, self-awareness and motivation. BIS (2014) in their analysis of customer satisfaction and progression noted that 89% of customers achieved personal added value as they had developed their skills, confidence, ability to make decisions about their future. Liu *et al.* (2014) present a meta-analysis of the effectiveness of job search interventions; concluding that job intervention programmes which actively address self–efficacy were more effective than approaches that did not include them; participants in groups who experienced such activities were more than three times as likely to find jobs than those in groups that did not include them. This finding was based on an analysis of 47 studies using experimental designs, or quasi-experimental designs with a control group, thus representing 9,575 participants.

Creed *et al.* (2001) explored the impact of unemployed individuals participating in a programme that combined the development of vocational skills with a career guidance programme. They found that involvement in such a programme could have a positive impact on self-esteem and that it may also have an impact on self-efficacy. McCrone *et al.* (2013) reported similar conclusions. Their findings provide further illumination on the features of a career guidance programme that is most likely to support the development of these personal qualities. In particular, they highlight two aspects of the trainer/careers professional that are important.

- The professional needs to be approachable and willing to discuss a range of issues beyond the immediate ones covered within the programme of study.

- The professional needs to encourage the individual to take part in career exploration and problem solving activities to better understand themselves and the opportunities available to them.

A number of studies (Miller *et al.*, 2001; McTurk, 2003; Cameron, 2009) provide further insights into effective practice in supporting individuals to enhance their skills and behaviour in ways that support their progression to work. These include:

- Supporting individuals' to become more self-aware through the use of various kinds of career assessment.

- Exploring the individual's experiences with them, including their leisure and social interests, their reasons for leaving education, their past learning and work experiences. Gaining insights into the individual's broader experience can help the professional and the individual themselves to understand why they are where they are and what they need to do in order to move on.

These studies argue that effective progression requires a set of behaviours and attitudes to be in place either prior to or as part of a set of progression-related activities. They specifically cite the importance of attributes such as career self-efficacy, self-confidence and having a positive state of mind and argue that these can best be developed in partnership with other job intervention activities.

Supporting transitions

The literature also suggests that there is a range of learning associated with making transitions. In particular, it suggests that there is a need to support individuals in finding career information, in managing recruitment processes and in action planning. McCrone *et al.* (2013) and Liu *et al.* (2014) identified that those who were proactive in job searches were more likely to find work than other more passive job searchers. In the Liu *et al* study, this is quantified with proactive individuals being 4.5 times more likely to enter employment than those who were passive. This proactive approach was differentiated from 'shotgun' approaches of applying for whatever jobs are available, which might be seen as proactive, but is unfocused and ineffective.

Opportunity awareness and the development of research skills for finding out about these opportunities have been key components of careers work since the introduction of the DOTS framework (Law and Watts, 1977). Morris *et al.* (1999), in their study of over 1,600 young people through from Years 9 and 10 (ages 13 and 14) into their post-16 destinations, used hierarchical modelling techniques to examine the relationship between career exploration skills and self-awareness and young people's positive progression outcomes. The students who demonstrated positive progression outcomes (with no 'switching' or drop-out), and were happy with the choices they had made, were more likely to have experienced interventions (in their school and from associated career service staff) that supported them to develop their career exploration (or research) skills, and to be able to consider their strengths and weaknesses when considering the opportunities open to them. Liu *et al.* (2014), in their meta-analysis, argue that job search interventions were most effective when they addressed practical transition skills alongside behavioural and motivational issues. Activities that were most effective included:

- teaching job search skills

- improving the presentation of their CVs and other recruitment documents e.g. covering letters (see also BIS, 2014; Dodd and Hooley, 2015)

- improving self-presentation and career image (see also BIS, 2014; Hooley and Yates, 2015) encouraging proactivity and goal setting, where goal setting was included in job search activities.

In addition, other research highlights these additional strategies:

- encouraging direct engagement with the world of work (see Eley *et al.*, 2007; McIlveen and Pensiero, 2008; and Taylor and Hooley, 2014). This may be through employer talks and mentoring but appears most powerful when it includes a variety of different forms of engagement, including substantial experiences such as structured work experience (Mann and Dawkins, 2014).

Studies suggest that each of the transition support interventions listed above have an impact but note that they are most effective when combined (Liu *et al.* 2014; Mann and Dawkins, 2014; Meadows 2006, McCrone *et al.* 2013). In addition, Meadows (2006) reported that the most effective programmes for those not in work were those that covered multiple options. She noted that, by addressing other issues such as childcare and transport issues, a more holistic approach could be adopted and would support progression. McCrone *et al.* (2013), in their study of young people not in employment or education (NEET), identified that the combination of vocational skills tasters, employability skills and one-to-one support provided a strong basis to support the participants to progress.

The studies examined a range of interventions that support people to progress, including, job search activities, action planning, self-presentation, work related opportunities and career guidance. The evidence suggests that all interventions are useful but multiple activities are most successful, especially if they focus on building motivation as well as job search skills.

On-going support

Once an individual has been supported through a transition they may continue to have ongoing career-development support needs. The literature highlighted the importance of such ongoing support and provided a number of insights about how this could be provided effectively.

- **utilising social support networks**. Blustein *et al.* (1997) argue that practical and emotional support from family and friends is central to a successful transition. Conversely, when the support is absent it acts as a barrier for people to progress (McCrone *et al.*, 2013). Liu *et al.* (2014) argue that the career professional needs to enlist, actively, social support from family and friends who are able to provide encouragement and assurance, as well as practical support such as childcare. Building support networks with family and friends can help to provide on-going motivation and encouragement that professionals may not have the time to provide.

- **peer group support.** Some studies identify the value of using the unemployed person's peer group to provide both collective learning (e.g. the collective reviewing of CVs) and ongoing support (Braddy and Gray, 1987; Sampson *et al.*, 2011).

- **ongoing professional support**. Ongoing professional support was identified as supporting progression (Walton, 2003; Graverson and van Ours, 2008; and McCrone *et al.*, 2013). Graverson and van Ours (2008) found that ongoing monitoring and counselling increased the likelihood of successful job outcomes by 30%. For those who are making the transition into work, Walton *et al.* (2003) also reported that regular phone calls from the professional to the individual to check how things are going is helpful in ensuring the sustainability of their progression.

Conclusions and implications

This review of the literature provides a summary of the strategies that have been demonstrated to be effective in supporting individuals to progress to positive learning and work destinations. The studies suggest that there is good evidence that career guidance interventions can have an impact on an individual's progression. Top level findings suggest career services are more likely to be effective if they are provided quickly and by experienced professionals. Beyond this, the review highlights the importance of fostering positive behaviours, supporting transitions and providing ongoing support.

Issues for the National Career Service to consider:

- The National Careers Service needs to ensure that it sees its customers in a timely fashion. To achieve this, a number of foundation activities need to be in place, including ensuring public awareness of the service so that individuals know it is available to help them; and working with referring agencies that include a range of local partners (including Careers Hubs) as well as Jobcentre Plus to ensure that those who have recently dropped out of learning or work are signposted to the National Careers Service.

- There is evidence to suggest that the experience and skills of practitioners are important in establishing and managing effective on-going working relationships with customers. The National Careers Service may want to consider how the level of skills and experience of practitioners can best be monitored and quality assured.

- The National Careers Service needs to enable its advisers to foster positive attitudes and behaviours in customers. The research suggests that (1) professionals should be approachable and willing to discuss a range of issues; (2) that they should encourage their customers in both self and job exploration and problem solving; (3) that providing career assessments may be useful in supporting customers to become more self-aware; and (4) that professionals should explore the customers' wider experiences as an aid in understanding them.

- The research suggests that advisers need to support the transitions of customers. The evidence suggests that this should include (1) teaching job search skills; (2) helping

customers to improve their CVs and other recruitment documents; (3) helping customers to improve their self-presentation and career image; (4) encouraging proactivity and goal setting; and (5) encouraging direct engagement with the world of work. This requires an assessment as to how confident and capable all National Careers Service advisers are in delivering these activities and considering what is the most effective mode of delivery and environment in which they can be delivered. Given the widespread move towards online activities as a result of the Covid pandemic, this is particularly pertinent.

- The research suggests that is important that customers get ongoing support for their career building. Such support can come from (1) their existing social network; (2) their immediate peers; and (3) professionals. To achieve this, more emphasis may be needed to help customers understand their support network better and to develop strategies to maximise the range of help available for their progression. There is also a need to consider whether the Service should be providing further ongoing support for customers.

- The National Careers Service may want to consider the issues raised concerning social justice and how the service may be made more accessible to those who do not meet the priority group criteria (especially in the changed economic landscape arising from Covid) and who lack the digital literacy to maximise effectively the full range of services on offer. Customers need to be given the options, where possible, of accessing support and guidance through their preferred medium, be it face-to-face or virtually. Many customers accessing the services lack the necessary digital skills to access virtual appointments and so there is still a need for a physical presence of advisers and telephone guidance.

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Annex A: Sources

The search terms were applied to the following **indexes, databases and search engines**:

- Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)

- ASLIB Index to Theses

- Australian Education Index (AEI)

- British Education Index (BEI)

- EBSCO Business Source Premier

- EBSCO Electronic Journals Service

- Emerald

- ERIC

- Expanded Academic ASAP (via InfoTrac)

- Greynet (The Grey Literature Network Service, including the OpenGrey repository, containing over 700,000 bibliographical references to grey literature produced in Europe)

- Library Plus

- Proquest Database Collection

- PsycArticles

- PsycINFO (EBSCO)

- Social Policy and Practice (http://www.spandp.net/)

- Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) 1970-

- Social Science Research Network (SSRN)

- Sociological Abstracts

- Taylor and Francis

- Web of Knowledge

- ZETOC (Electronic Table of Contents from the British Library)

Some of the above list were searched at the same time using Library Plus and other multiple search tools.

Following the database searches, added additional references were added from previous literature based studies and from researchers' own bibliographic databases e.g. CiteULike.

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