

Crucial impacts on career choices: Research to understand the influences on young people's choices in primary and secondary schools

Executive summary



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Introduction

The crucial decisions that young people make are often influenced by family traditions, friends, role models, media and their social situations. This Erasmus funded project has explored new responses to these issues. This report sets out the findings of European research undertaken by five project partners (The Czech Republic, The United Kingdom, Denmark, Greece and Spain) and lead by a team from the International Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby in the UK. The research was conducted between September 2018 and July 2020.

The main aim of the research was to develop an understanding of the influences on young people's career decision making. There were five research questions which the research explored.

1. How do young people make career decisions?
2. What are the influences on young people's career decision making?
3. How do young people learn about themselves and the world outside?
4. How do young people apply knowledge about themselves in their career decision making?
5. What professional career guidance interventions have been useful in challenging and supporting them to move on?

The research considered the experiences of two groups of young people aged 13-14, and 15-16 about the choices they have to make. The research involved four phases of research each of which was undertaken by the five primary partners:

- A rapid review of existing literature including both published and unpublished works (grey literature)

which provided evidence about the influences on young people's career decision making.

- A quantitative phase involving online and paper surveys of pupils, students and parents.
- A qualitative phase involving focus groups with young people.
- Research circles which reviewed the data through the lens of practitioner insights.

A note on the terms used within this report.

The field of career development uses many terms to describe the activities and interventions associated with helping people plan for the future. In writing this report, and to bring clarity, the authors use the following terms:

Career refers primarily to the sequence and variety of work roles, paid or unpaid, that individuals undertake throughout their lives; but it is also the construct which enables individuals to make sense of valued work opportunities and how their work roles relate to their wider life roles. (Career Development Institute (CDI) 2017).

Career guidance is an *umbrella* term which describes a range of activities which support people to make and implement career decisions. UDACE produced a list of seven activities (Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education, 1986) to help define guidance including information; advice; coaching; education:

Careers education is the delivery of learning about careers as part of the curriculum. Careers education is often closely related to work-experience and other forms of work-related learning (Business, Innovation and Skills and Education Committees Sub-Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy 2016).

Careers information is the provision of information and resources about courses, occupations and career paths (Business, Innovation and Skills and Education Committees Sub-Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy 2016).

Careers advice is more in-depth explanation of information and how to access and use information (Business, Innovation and Skills and Education Committees Sub-Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy 2016).

Career coaching (also referred to as personal career guidance in some EU countries) - a formal definition from the International Federation of Coaching (ICF) states that a career coach “partners with you in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires you to maximize your personal and professional potential. It helps people to reflect on their ambitions, interests, qualifications and abilities. It helps them to understand the labour market and education systems, and to relate this to what they know about themselves. Comprehensive [career coaching] guidance tries to teach people to plan and make decisions about work and learning.”

(Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004b)

Personal career guidance is a process which enables individuals to consider their circumstances, values and aspirations; confront any challenges; resolve any conflicts; build resilience and confidence; develop new perspectives; justify their thinking and reach a decision in the light of relevant career and labour market information (CDI 2017)

Context

The first phase of the research explored the macro-economic context for the project. The participating countries had unique features of their economies and responded differently

for example in the way they focussed on the issue of social mobility. Similarities existed between the partner countries in terms of the focus given to the development of skills although in some instances this was managed in a regional manner rather than as a national strategy. In all partner countries the response to the need to develop skills has been the development of vocational educational programmes including apprenticeships. In all countries there was mandatory access to personal career guidance for secondary school pupils (although not all young people receive this service). Career guidance is provided by specialist career guidance practitioners in all countries however the training which these individuals undertake varies by country.

Research findings

Young people’s approaches to making career decisions

Young people begin thinking about their careers around the age of 12 however, in all countries some young people began to think about this much earlier. Early career thinking is less focused or ‘serious’ amongst the younger age groups. Some young people are excited about career decision making and the future, but this is not consistent across all partner countries. The attitude and feelings which young people bring to this important phase of their lives appears to vary by age and gender. One of the unexpected findings from the data is that anxiety appears to increase until the age of 15 when it suddenly drops off and young people become much calmer when contemplating the future. There could be a number of reasons for this, for example the timing of the survey coincided with the time when young people of this age often receive

personal career guidance and this intervention may help young people feel calmer about their career development. On the other hand, the data suggests that this apparent calmness coincides with a dip in interest or engagement with career decision making. There are of course many things on the minds of young people of this age and it might be that this lack of interest in career development simply coincides with a phase in their emotional and personal development. A final explanation could be that having already made one significant career decision for example in some countries young people have already chosen a school to study at, and some have made their first, post 14 subject choices, young people are drawing on their experience and draw confidence about dealing with the process from this. Whatever the explanation there are implications for those that develop programmes of career development in schools particularly because the age of 15 is also when most young people in the partner countries are approaching the second major career decision for post 16 study options and places to study them. Programmes need to offer opportunities to reflect on past decisions and use this knowledge in approaching decision making at age 15. This could be as part of the taught careers programme or through access to personal career guidance to all at age 15.

The research found that young people in Greece tended to be more anxious than their counterparts in other partner countries. One explanation for this is that traditionally, families stress the importance of career choice. Further to this, Greece has recently endured a significant recession due to the economic crash of 2010 leaving around 50% of young people

unemployed in 2017 and this may have had an impact on young people's focus on career development.

Young people approach career decision making in several ways. These approaches align to the dimensions set out by Blenkinsop et al (2006) which includes the extent to which young people have agency by exploring their own interests, experiences and abilities and linking these two options which will either give them pleasure or be fulfilling. Young people are driven to choose subjects which suit their academic ability, and, in this way, it can be said that school is an important contributor to the approach young people take. It is important in this approach that young people feel that they will succeed in line with expectations. Finally, young people consider the implications of their decision making on jobs which may be available to them in the future and adopt approaches which allow them to consider the positive and negative aspects of different career decisions.

The key findings are that

- Anxiety about career decision making rises until the age of 15 and then suddenly reduces.
- Not all young people experience anxiety about career decision making.
- The level of anxiety is not consistent across all partner countries.
- Females in the study are more anxious than males about career decision making.
- Young people have a range of models for approaching career decision making.
- Young people are largely satisfied with the career-related decisions and parents also think this to be the case.

The influences on young people's career decision making

Young people do not always feel well prepared to make important decisions about the future. They rely on a variety of sources of information to support them in career thinking but tend to value that gathered from parents over that from other sources. It is not unsurprising therefore that young people also state that parents are also the most influential people when it comes to making career decisions. Whilst this is largely helpful, it is important that educators recognise that this can sometimes prevent young people from making autonomous career decisions. This is widely reported in the research literature but as Oomen (2018) notes, parents may not always be aware of the extent of their role as influencers.

Parents are the most significant influencers, and schools will need to address this through programmes of information and support for parents so that they can influence appropriately.

Young people draw information on careers from the internet and this includes information about job roles, entry criteria and qualifications. Not only do they use the internet for this, but young people also use social media influencers in a range of ways to motivate and inform. Young people identify individuals to act as role models whom they look up to and emulate. The language around role models has changed and now includes social media influencers as well as the more traditional role models from family, community, sports and the arts.

Young people value the provision of careers programmes made by schools including work-related activities and would like this to start early from age

12. This is corroborated by parents and is linked to the age which young people suggest they begin seriously thinking about the future. This suggests that governments need to promote career guidance programmes for all students and not just specific targeted groups so that all young people have access to the information and support they need to. Young people also need to be well prepared in order to gain maximum impact from their school-based activities such as encounters with employers or careers fairs.

The research indicates that young people do not always recognise the importance of informal or extra-curricular activities in helping them to usefully develop career or employability skills. Programmes of career guidance should therefore help young people link these experiences to their own career development so that they can be utilised in decision making and during transition activities such as personal statements, CV's, applications and interviews.

The key findings are that:

- Young people do not always feel prepared to make decisions about future careers.
- Young people use information from a variety of sources but value that gathered from parents the most.
- The internet is a big influence on young people's career decision making.
- Parents mis-understand the extent to which young people use the internet to influence their career choices.
- When researching their career options, young people tend to look for information based on a set of criteria which is consistent across partner countries.

- Parents hold the most influence over young people's career decision making compared to all other groups of adults and peers.
- Young people have role models who they wish to emulate, however the language surrounding role models is changing. Social media-influencers now stimulate career thinking alongside more traditional role models.
- Young people value the support through schools' careers programmes including work-related learning activities
- Young people do not always recognise the value and impact of extra-curricular and informal learning opportunities may have for career decision making

Learning about personal skills and attributes

Young people's experiences of career assessments or testing is varied as is the extent to which they value this intervention. Testing amongst older students around aged 15 is most effective. Younger students find testing less effective in supporting career thinking. Career assessments or tests are valued when the test is given at a time associated with making career decisions and when it is supported by additional interventions where young people are helped to understand the outcomes. Career assessments or tests are not valued when testing is not contiguous with key decision-making points or is unsupported.

The key findings are that:

- Young people from all partner countries had some experience of career assessments although this was not the norm for most young people.
- Testing is usually voluntary.
- The extent to which young people found tests helpful in supporting

career decision making varied by country.

- Younger students find the test more helpful than older students.
- It is important that tests are timed to coincide with key decision-making points.

Applying knowledge about oneself in career decision making

Many countries recognise the importance of employability and personal skill development as an important component of career development and include reference to these as important learning outcomes of career development programmes. The research indicates that young people also value these skills and recognise the importance of developing them to advance their career. The provision of opportunities to understand these competences and to make links between them and future options are not always made available equally amongst partner countries with some-more than others providing opportunities for this type of learning. Even within countries the approaches used to embed employability skills varied with some schools having merit systems which reinforced employability skills and attributes such as indicators around attendance and useful behaviours. Where young people are provided with opportunities to learn these skills, they largely find these helpful although they are not unanimously endorsed. Schools provide fertile ground for young people to learn the skills and attitudes needed to move into higher level learning and work. Schools will need to consider ways of enhancing the important messages about employability and key skill development so that young people can include these in their goals for learning and their career decision making and transition activities.

The key findings are that:

- Young people understand the need to develop career and life skills and attributes to support them in their career advancement.
- Not all partner countries provide opportunities for young people to link information about themselves to career options.
- Some schools have systems in place which reinforce the development of employability skills and attributes for all students.
- Where young people are provided with opportunities to develop employability or personal skills and attributes, they regarded them as helpful.

Developing transition skills.

Young people begin making transitions from age 11 however they have different experiences of transition planning with some finding the process exciting and some finding it difficult. The research finds that schools offer transition education to varying degrees however, young people indicated that they want to develop transition skills, and this should start in plenty of time for them to make a successful transition. Schools will need to review their career guidance programmes to ensure that they include content on transition skills.

The key findings are that:

- Young people begin making transitions from age 11 although this varies by partner country.
- Some young people find this a time of anxiety whilst some enjoy the experience.
- Preparation for transition is of varying quantity and quality.
- Young people recognise the support they would like to receive to help them make successful transitions.

Making use of professional career guidance or counselling interventions

The extent to which young people participate in personal career guidance or counselling varies by country. It is a valued intervention however young people do not regularly discuss the outcomes with their parents. There could be several explanations for this. Firstly, the process of career guidance or counselling encourages young people to be autonomous in their career decision making. In some countries, the code of ethical practice which career development practitioners operate under explicitly underpin the need for this and stress the need for confidentiality. This leaves young people as the sole owner of the outcomes of these interventions and as we have noted previously, in some partner countries and cultures parents may have an over-developed sense of autonomy when influencing their child's career choices. In some partner countries, it may be that young people are trying to protect their role as the primary decision maker.

The key findings are that:

- Many young people who responded to the survey from across the partner countries have not received professional career guidance or counselling with the exception of those from Denmark where the majority had.
- Where young people have received personal career guidance or counselling, they value this as a useful intervention.
- Parents report that their children do not usually discuss the outcomes of personal career guidance or coaching with them.

Parents experiences and views of career guidance

Young people indicate that parents are the most important source of careers

information and are the most influential of all of the adult and peers surrounding a young person. The research finds that parents corroborate this finding as a large proportion across all countries believe that they have the responsibility over and above their child's school for supporting their child's career decision making. Parents value the careers programme which their children receive, and young people do discuss the career-related learning that they have taken part in. Parents undertake research themselves to support their child and generally feel well prepared to take on this role. Parents might not fully understand the impact that their role may be having on their child's career development. The literature review revealed that role of parents does vary by country with parents in some countries considering themselves the primary career decision maker for their child. Young people also spoke earlier in the research about wanting to please their parents. This does raise some important questions for example, do parents really have the most up to date and relevant information in order to help their child? What can schools do to support parents in developing the knowledge, skills and attributes to help their children most effectively? Whose job is it to support parents in this endeavour?

This research does not seek to make this judgement however in the next chapter of the research the role of parents is explored further through a research circle case study.

The key findings are that:

- The majority of parent respondents expressed a belief that they have primary responsibility for supporting their child's career decision making.

- Generally, parents feel prepared to take on this role.
- Parents recognise the important role that the internet plays in their child's career exploration.
- Parents themselves seek out information and use the internet to undertake research about their child's career options.
- Young people talk to their parents about the careers curriculum activities which they have engaged in.
- Young people often initiate conversations with their parents about career choices.
- Parents value the programmes of career guidance provided by their child's school although this was not consistent across the partner countries.

Research circles

The research partners adopted a research circle approach to exploring the data further (Klindt Poulson, Boelskifte Skovhus, and Thomsen, 2018). This approach encourages researchers and practitioners to come together to share and explore their own experiences. In this democratic process the members create a space in which they search for new knowledge and this in turn may result in new action and outcomes. In the case of this project, the research circles identified areas of interest from the primary data to further explore.

Two of the teams chose to explore the data about parental involvement in young people's career decision making. The team from the UK, recognised that the data suggested that parents are not always confident about supporting their children despite recognising the important role that they play generated a discussion about what competences parents needed to be effective in this role. The group

prepared a set of parental competences which will be piloted as a way of helping schools to support parents. The Danish team chose to explore the methods which practitioners might adopt to engage parents and noted that there were a specific practitioner skill set required to do this effectively. The Danish Team also concluded that parents do not always possess the competences to do this effectively. The Danish team are now piloting new approaches to evaluating the impact of activities which are aimed at engaging parents.

The Spanish Team found two themes to explore. In the first they recognised that in Spain, despite a holistic approach promoted as good practice, the reality in Spanish schools is that the emotional and social dimensions of career development are often overlooked. Given that adolescence is a time of emotional development and sometimes, turmoil, it was felt that there was scope to explore and embed these dimensions into programmes of career development and the team have agreed to undertake further research to determine the balance of the three dimensions in existing programmes before going on to make further recommendations.

The research data had suggested that young people in Greece had a high level of satisfaction with their career decisions and the Greek team chose to focus on what factors young people used to identify satisfaction. They applied a new survey and found that there were three factors which young people used to judge the success of their career decision. These were:

- The chance I will do the work I do best.
- The money I will earn from the job I will do.

- The chance to be important in the eyes of my co-workers.

The Greek team were surprised by this finding given that in Greece, parental influence is very strong. It was posited that young people might feel that pleasing their parents was the main reason for their satisfaction with their career decision. The findings from this research circle underpin the need to reinforce the autonomy of young people in their career decisions.

The team from the Czech Republic used their insights into the school curriculum and the results from the research to focus on the need to help young people make links between curriculum subjects and future career options. This has been challenging due to changes in the national curriculum which excludes specific mention of careers education unlike previous frameworks. The team wanted to focus on the use of the internet to support career exploration and were able to commission the support of an IT teacher to develop an activity linking IT lessons to career exploration. There is a recommendation that this activity should be piloted widely and be used as a basis on which to develop further career-related activities in other curriculum subjects.

Conclusion and recommendations

This project has illuminated the similarities and differences in the way young people approach career decision making and the influences which prevail. Whilst there are some differences between the partner countries, largely due to the economic or social conditions which prevail, there are many similarities. The findings from this research will help those tasked with developing

programmes of career development and support to identify and focus on specific aspects of their programmes suggested by the research. The recommendations suggested by the research are:

- To ensure that the emotional, social and cognitive aspects of career decision making are addressed in programmes of career education.
- To ensure that processes are developed which help parents to develop their ability to support their children effectively.
- To ensure that young people can connect their learning from both formal and informal curriculum activities to their career decision making.
- To increase the profile of employability and enterprise learning in school programmes.
- To increase access for young people to professional personal career guidance /counselling.

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