Fulfilling its potential?

How well does the careers information, advice and guidance serve the people it is meant to support in England?

Niamh O Regan
Aveek Bhattacharya

SMF | Social Market Foundation

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FOREWORD

Change in any young person's life can bring challenge as well as great opportunity. Thinking about what's possible and what the future could do can be inspiring, exciting and frightening.

At Unite Students, the UK's largest provider of purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA), we offer homes to 74,000 students across 172 properties in 25 university towns and cities and partner with over 60 universities across the UK. Our annual student research programme helps us understand how students feel, what's important to them and provides us with guidance on how we can better help them when they come to live with us. Our parent research tells us what worries parents and where the stresses and strains can be in navigating the best next steps for their young person as they make the vital transitionary steps out of school and towards the future.

However, our interests lie far earlier than when young people simply walk through our doors. We know that the advice, support and guidance that they receive earlier in their school years can help to shape their decision-making, their actions and who they become. In a drive to deepen our understanding about the student experience, we have sponsored this research on improving educational advice and guidance in England. We also wanted to know about the quality of the current provision of careers advice and have a better understanding as to different options on offer.

What we do know is that supporting students before they make the transition to higher education is important, and can make a real difference to how easily they are able to navigate this really important time in their lives. We hope that this research will further inform how we can help to do this whilst using it to develop our Leapskills programme. Endorsed by the Department for Education, Leapskills is a free resource focused on helping students leaving home for the first time whether to study at university and/or thinking about moving out of home. It aims to prepare them for independent living and be better prepared for the transition that will come. We believe being prepared helps to support the building of resilience and greater success. We already have 3,000 young people who have taken part in the programme and moving forward recognise that there is a wider opportunity to support young people utilising Leapskills.

We believe that all young people should have the best opportunities in life, which is why we hope that the Government duly considers and implements the SMF's recommendations in order to make careers advice as helpful as possible for all students.

Richard Smith

Chief Executive

Unite Students

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Six actions policymakers could take to improve careers provision in England
1. Ensure every school leaver receives a minimum level of personalised careers support by offering an entitlement to three one-to-one sessions.   2. Add careers provision to the four 'key judgements' on which schools are graded in Ofsted inspections.   3. Set the Careers and Enterprise Company the objective of tackling inequalities between schools in the level and quality of information, advice and guidance.   4. Aim to ensure all apprenticeship opportunities are listed on the UCAS system, perhaps by establishing and integrating local platforms.   5. Partner with trusted private apps and websites to ensure official government data and information is easily accessible.   6. Engage in a large-scale outreach programme promoting adult education and careers services.

- Careers information, advice and guidance (IAG) looms large over much of education and labour market policy: people need the skills and knowledge to navigate their options.
- Not only is good careers provision associated with lower unemployment and greater career readiness among young people, it also has the capacity to help millions to achieve their potential by finding the route best suited to them.
- This report presents new evidence on the way that people engage with IAG as they make key decisions about further study, training and employment. It draws on focus groups with school leavers, adult learners and parents, plus discussions with experts and practitioners.

The shape and quality of school and college IAG services is patchy

- People value IAG that is more personalised, and feel more comfortable accessing help if they have a sustained relationship with an adviser.
- Yet what they are offered varies substantially from school to school, college to college, ranging from infrequent and optional group sessions to mandatory, regular, personalised support.

Support for those pursuing vocational options tends to be weaker, with students carried towards university by inertia

- Despite legislation to try and put vocational options on an equal footing, in many places, university remains the default option in the eyes of teachers and families alike.
- This bias can also be institutionalised, for example in schools that expect all students to fill out university applications but only provide detailed information on apprenticeships on request.

People tend to favour anecdotal information over hard data, but even those using formal information avoid official government sources

- The people we spoke to had greatest confidence in 'experiential' knowledge, gleaned from conversations and visits, over impersonal information.
- Hardly anybody used the Government's 'Discover Uni' website – its neglect is further symbolised by the fact even the gov.uk website refers to it by a previous name.
- In contrast, many made use of third-party apps like Unifrog, and online resources brought up by simple googling.

There is a mismatch between the grand ambitions of IAG and the reality of what people expect and can be delivered

- Careers professionals envisage careers as a deep, holistic process of building general skills and self-knowledge that sets people up for the rest of their lives.
- Young people receiving IAG tend to see it in more pragmatic, functional terms, just wanting help with the next step into education or employment.
- That can lead to some confusion, with young people particularly unsure about the purpose and value of IAG at younger ages when it seems less relevant.

Adults are largely unaware of IAG services, and face significant barriers to accessing them

- Most of our adult focus group participants had never heard of the National Careers Service, which is intended to support them, let alone used it.
- Negative childhood experiences with careers services, as well as stigma around IAG as being for the directionless and unemployed, prevent people from taking it up.

Policymakers need to think more strategically about IAG

- Policymakers should be realistic about their expectations for IAG and provide appropriate resources to achieve them. Specifically, school leavers should have a minimum entitlement to three one-to-one sessions with an adviser.
- Schools and colleges should be better incentivised to improve their IAG provision: careers provision should be added to the four 'key judgements' on which schools and colleges are rated by Ofsted inspectors.
- Addressing inequalities in the level and quality of IAG should be a priority, for example by tasking the Careers and Enterprise Company to reduce inconsistency in provision as part of its Grant Funding Agreement with the Department for Education.
- More should be done to interrupt the inertia that leads young people to default to university by setting up local platforms for apprenticeships and integrating these into the UCAS system, which should ultimately list all apprenticeship opportunities.
- Recognising that its official sources have little traction, the Government should partner with established trusted private brands such as Unifrog to ensure reliable information is easily accessible.

- The Government should engage in a large-scale outreach programme promoting adult education and careers services through both traditional advertising and word-of-mouth ambassadors offering reassurance that IAG is for "people like them".

CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Careers information, advice and guidance (IAG) looms large over much of education policy, and indeed labour market policy. There is little benefit in creating pathways and opportunities for personal, social, and economic advancement if people lack the skills and knowledge to navigate them well. Not only is good careers provision associated with lower unemployment and greater career readiness among young people, it also has the capacity to help millions to achieve their potential by finding the route best suited to them. Given the seemingly ever-increasing complexity of the education system and the economy, supporting people through the key life decisions that lead them to study, work and ultimately build their career, has never been more important. Yet as an area of policy, IAG does not always receive the attention it deserves.

The purpose of this report is to investigate how IAG functions in England today, with a focus on the perceptions and experiences of those that stand to benefit most from effective careers support: young people and adults at key moments of educational and career transition. We also seek to build on existing research in two ways. First, by investigating the extent to which academic (university) and vocational[i] (further education college and apprenticeships) options are presented as equally viable and legitimate options in IAG. Second, by extending our focus from young people in school and college to adults returning to education – another group who may also need information, advice and guidance, but who may be institutionally less well-served.

The IAG landscape in England

Pre-Coalition: Connexions

Between 2000 and 2010, the lead agency for IAG in England was Connexions, which established a helpline and centres all over the country offering young people access to personal advisers to help them with a broad range of issues, including drugs, sexual health and financial matters, as well as careers. This was layered on top of a curriculum-based programme of careers education in schools.[1] Connexions was mandated to prioritise helping young people at risk of becoming 'NEETs' (not in education, employment or training). However, this led to it becoming identified with "problem groups" and created a perception that it was less focused on or suitable for the mainstream of young people.[2]

The shift of responsibilities towards schools and colleges

In 2010, the new coalition government scrapped funding for Connexions and shifted responsibility for IAG to schools and colleges. Since 2013, all local authority-maintained schools and FE colleges have had a statutory duty to provide impartial careers guidance for pupils from years 8 to 13 (i.e., ages 12-18). The picture is less

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[i] We recognise that in reality university courses can also be 'vocational' – for example, medicine, engineering or fashion design – and that many universities offer degree apprenticeships. We do not intend to present the academic/vocational distinction as in any sense fundamental, but rather as convenient shorthand to distinguish different types of institution. See Higher Education Policy Institute (2021), Boosting higher education while cutting public spending. for more discussion of this point.

clear-cut for academies and free schools, but many of them have similar obligations under their funding agreements, and those that do not are encouraged to follow the Department for Education's (DfE) guidance as a matter of good practice.[3]

The DfE's statutory guidance to schools sets out an expectation that the careers guidance they offer to students is[4]:

- "presented in an impartial manner, showing no bias or favouritism towards a particular institution, education or work option"
- "includes information on the range of education or training options, including apprenticeships and technical education routes"
- "guidance that the person giving it considers will promote the best interests of the students to whom it is given"

This guidance also sets out the requirements of the 'Baker Clause', an amendment made to the Technical and Further Education Act 2017 by Lord Baker in an effort to secure equal access to information about vocational options. Under the Baker Clause, every state school is required to give training providers and colleges access to pupils to discuss technical education and apprenticeships. It also places a duty on schools to publish a "provider access statement", detailing how they are meeting this requirement.

Following DfE's 2017 Careers Strategy, schools and colleges have been expected to work towards achieving the 'Gatsby benchmarks', a set of indicators of good careers guidance. There are eight benchmarks[5]:

1. A stable careers programme
2. Learning from careers and labour market information
3. Assessing the needs of each pupil
4. Linking curriculum learning to careers
5. Encounters with employers and employees
6. Experiences of workplaces
7. Encounters with further and higher education
8. Personal guidance

The Careers Strategy also made it a requirement for every school and college to appoint a named careers leader: "a dedicated person who is a member of the senior leadership team, or works directly with them, and who is responsible and accountable for the delivery of the school or college careers programme".[6] Careers leaders do not necessarily deliver IAG directly, but rather their role involves developing and running programmes, managing budgets and staff, coordinating across the institution and networking with outsiders.

IAG is covered by the education inspection framework. In its school inspection handbook, Ofsted says that it assesses schools on the quality of their unbiased advice and guidance, their implementation of the Baker Clause, their use of the Gatsby benchmarks, and their provision of encounters with the world of work.[7] Since 2018, Ofsted has also been required to comment on the quality of careers guidance provided in inspections of colleges.[8]

The Careers and Enterprise Company

In 2015, the government established the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) in order to coordinate schools, colleges, and employers to support the provision of IAG. The CEC does not deliver services directly but supports careers leaders in their strategy and planning. It also offers information, resources, tools and training, and tests different approaches to careers in order to identify and scale good practice.

In particular, the CEC is responsible for organising Careers Hubs, groups of schools and colleges in an area, funded by government grants to collaborate to support one another in delivering IAG. Around 65% of all state-funded schools and colleges – approximately 3,250 – are part of a Careers Hub at present.[9] The CEC also maintains a network of 4,000 Enterprise Advisers – senior business volunteers from local companies – that work with schools to help schools ensure that their careers provision is informed by local business needs.

The National Careers Service

Launched in 2012, the National Careers Service (NCS) provides IAG to people aged 13 and over through face-to-face and telephone advice, web chat, and email. In-depth, in person, community-based support is reserved for adults aged over 18, though 13-18-year-olds may use its website or a dedicated telephone service for young people.[10] In 2016/17, the NCS website received 20 million visits and 474,000 individuals received face-to-face advice.[11] The Government's 2021 *Skills for Jobs* White Paper pledged to revamp the NCS website to make it an authoritative "single source of government-assured careers information for young people and adults", and instructed the Careers and Enterprise Company to encourage people to use the site.[12]

UCAS

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) is mainly known for operating the application process to universities across the UK. The vast majority of university applications are made through its centralised system. However, it also maintains Careerfinder, an online portal listing apprenticeship, graduate jobs, and internship opportunities.[13] Moreover, UCAS also offers advice and education services – its website hosts tools, including a Careers Quiz, which has been used over 500,000 times since its launch in September 2021. Around 4,000 school and college advisers are signed up to be part of UCAS' network. It also organises physical and virtual events and exhibitions – for example, 5,000 people attended its Discover Apprenticeships event earlier this year.[14]

Other IAG organisations

In addition to schools, colleges, the CEC and NCS, there are two other bodies that offer IAG support. In 2015, the government announced the creation of Jobcentre Plus employment advisers, whose role is to link jobcentres with schools and colleges, providing labour market advice and work experience support targeted at 14-17-year-olds to help them find work. As of October 2019, 1,400 schools (around the half the total) had participated in the programme.[15] The Education and Skills Funding Agency also provides the Apprenticeship Support and Knowledge Programme, which trains teachers to improve their understanding of apprenticeships.[16]

What do we already know about how well IAG works in England?

A number of studies have explored the impact of good careers provision on education and labour market outcomes. Analysis conducted by the CEC shows that schools that achieve more of the Gatsby benchmarks have more students going onto education, employment and training, controlling for student demographics, attainment, school type and location.[17] Their estimates imply that an average school that fully completed all eight benchmarks would reduce the number of its students failing to reach a positive destination by 10% relative to one that achieved none of them, cutting the share of NEETs from 7.2% to 6.5%. Moreover, they find that the effect is twice as large in the most disadvantaged schools. Overall, they calculate that this implies that the current level of careers guidance leads to 3,700 students a year finding education, employment or training, saving the taxpayer around £150 million a year.

More broadly, evaluations of careers programmes have found that young people that receive more careers support rate themselves as having greater career readiness – being more likely to say that they understand different jobs, their own attributes, and their fit with different pathways.[18] They have also found that such students are perceived by teachers as being more engaged and by employers to be better able to talk about themselves and their career goals.[19] International studies tend to find careers education has a positive effect on educational attainment and wages.[20]

It is worth emphasising that such research, which by its nature focuses on the more measurable outcomes of IAG, only scratches the surface of its potential benefits. Only a fraction of those that get value from careers support are at serious risk of unemployment. For many more, IAG is about helping them find the right position or way through life for themselves, based on a fuller understanding of their options and their own preferences and attributes. At the very least, that can help them find their way sooner, without having to spend time and money pursuing things that do not work for them. At its best, it can place them in a job or career path that makes them happier, more productive, and able to thrive.

The general perception of IAG in England is one of gradual improvement from the early to mid-2000s, but with substantial progress still to go.[21] There have been relatively few dedicated studies of user experiences of careers guidance, hence the need for this research. By contrast, there has been greater focus on the role of career guidance in influencing post-16 and post-18 educational choices, as well as its role in improving outcomes and career readiness.

Moote and Archer's examination of "the current status of career education provision in England" paints a mixed picture. They suggest that IAG as presently constituted focuses too much on subject choice rather than post-school careers and that it comes too late, with many school students having to wait until age 16 to receive any substantial guidance. They also noted that guidance may be failing certain student demographics who need it most (girls, ethnic minorities, working-class and low-attainting students) and that the distribution of careers education may be socially patterned.[22] Though published in 2018, Moote and Archer's survey and interview data comes from 2014, and so provides a useful benchmark against which to compare

changes since the launch of the Careers Strategy in late 2017 and the introduction of the Baker clause.

Some research has looked into the effectiveness of guidance services since these changes were implemented. An IPPR evaluation of the impact of the Baker clause a year after it came into force, suggested that it had been poorly implemented, with only 38% of schools judged as being compliant. Providers of technical education on the whole said they were finding it difficult to access schools and where granted, their access could be rather limited, sometimes only being able to meet with a selected group of students, rather than a whole year group.[23]

More recent research is more encouraging. A 2021 Government-sponsored study found that those aged 18-19 are, by and large, receiving careers guidance, and 95% say the IAG received was "suitable for their needs". The majority of students hear both about academic and vocational pathways: 78% of respondents reported being told about university, 64% about apprenticeships, 34% about vocational programmes and 31% about traineeships.[24] Another survey from last year, this time conducted by the Sutton Trust, produced similar findings. According to it, 46% of final year school and college students in the UK said that they had received a large amount of guidance about university and HE, compared to 10% who said the same for apprenticeships or paid work, and 7% that said so regarding FE. By contrast, over half of respondents said they had received – at best – only a little guidance on vocational options.[25]

The results of a recent UCAS applicant survey, which covers the whole UK rather than just England, corroborate this picture. It found that just over two-thirds received information on apprenticeships. It also revealed a desire for more information and advice, with two in five suggesting that this would have led them to make better choices.[26] Although 28% of those surveyed said they were seriously considering an apprenticeship, those opting to apply only for traineeships or apprenticeships (and not to university or college) are not captured in this data. These students may have different experiences of IAG.

Reporting from the CEC also indicates that IAG services in schools and colleges are improving. In March 2020, the average number of benchmarks achieved still remained relatively low at 3.75, and June 2020 saw this drop slightly to 3.70. However, this figure has increased since 2016, when it was 1.87. The efforts of the CEC appear to be paying off: schools and colleges which are part of the CEC network are performing better than those which are not, and schools and colleges which are part of a Careers Hub are performing better again. Even among institutions which are part of Hubs, not all benchmarks are equally likely to be met. While "encounters with employers and employees" and "experiences of work places" are achieved by a high percentage of those in Career Hubs (75% and 65% respectively), "encounters with further and higher education" are noticeably lower at 47%.[27]

Despite this progress, the social patterning that Moote and Archer found still appears to persist. Schools in deprived areas are less likely to have access to a specialist careers adviser, rather than a staff member that has to juggle careers with other responsibilities.[28] Those attending a state school are more likely to report being told

about apprenticeships and those attending an independent school are more likely to report being told about universities.[29]

While much of the literature looks at how schools discharge their guidance responsibilities, there is less focus on the adult experience of guidance services. Research concerning adult learners generally focuses on their access to further and higher education rather than IAG. The 2019/2020 National Careers Service annual survey therefore provides a valuable insight into both the user experiences and demographics of adult learners. The results of the report suggest that overall experiences are positive, with 93% of telephone and face-to-face customers agreeing the quality of the service is good, and the majority of users reporting progression in learning (69%) or employment (53%) six months after using the service. However, satisfaction levels vary. Among face-to-face and telephone customers, those with qualifications above Level 4 tend to find services less helpful and older users are less satisfied than younger ones.[30]

One of the major challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the adjustment in schools and colleges to online teaching, which has also included a shift for careers services. Looking at the experiences of students in the Black Country and Telford and Wrekin, the Centre for Education and Youth found that the move to online teaching has had significant negative impact on the quantity and quality of IAG received, and those suffering from the digital divide are at particular risk.[31] While teaching has now returned to a classroom environment, this research is important to remember when thinking about online and digital career services, and the role they have in the future. The report also found an increase in the attractiveness of vocational options – not as a result of formal IAG provision, but rather as a result of student concerns around job security following the pandemic.

These feelings of uncertainty about the future are also echoed in the Youth Voice Census Report for 2021. Similar to the UCAS report, this is a study of the UK as a whole, rather than just that of England, but in this case covering 12-24-year-olds. As such, it may not reflect more recent developments in IAG provision. Like other surveys, it presents a mixed picture of guidance. According to it, 43% of school and college students report having access to a career advisor. Many of the surveyed felt that there weren't adequate job opportunities for them in their local area, and only 33% of those in school think they understand the skills employers are looking for. Encouragingly, 86% of respondents had apprenticeships discussed with them, but traineeships and T-levels received much less attention, with only 34% and 27% of respondents respectively. In both cases, the highest proportion of students had only had traineeships and T-levels discussed with them once.[32]

Report outline

The structure of this report is as follows:

- **Chapter Two** describes our research methods in investigating careers IAG in England.
- **Chapter Three** explores how users interact with IAG: what services are users aware of, how does perceived provision vary between different groups, and how accessible do they find it?
- **Chapter Four** investigates what users want from their services, and what they feel could be improved.
- **Chapter Five** looks at users' evaluations of the services they receive: how well they feel they serve their needs.
- **Chapter Six** concludes with implications and recommendations for policymakers.

CHAPTER TWO – METHODS

This report seeks to better understand the experiences of users of Careers Information Advice and Guidance services. As education in the UK is a devolved matter, policies on IAG vary across the different nations, and as such the scope of this report focuses on careers IAG service and experience in England.

Through our research we aimed to answer three main questions:

- How do users *feel* about the services they receive?
- How do experiences of adult learners differ from school leavers?
- Do experiences differ based on the type of pathway (academic or vocational) they are pursuing?

As detailed in the literature review, existing research generally focuses on the level and type of information, advice and guidance provided to students. However, there is less information on the subjective experiences of users, and how they feel about the IAG on offer. Similarly, while there has been analysis of the implementation of the Baker clause and student access to information on vocational training programmes, there has been little evaluation of *how* vocational pathways are presented in comparison to academic ones, and if experiences of guidance are different for those interested in vocational programmes.

Focus groups

The main body of research in this report comes from focus groups conducted with service users. Over the course of October and November 2021 we carried out five 90-minute focus groups with current and prospective students on both academic and vocational pathways. As parents/carers are often also influential in shaping educational decisions, we also conducted a focus group with parents of children currently in their final or penultimate year of school/ sixth form college. In total, we had 45 focus group participants.

As we were interested in the differences in experience between those who are pursuing academic pathways and vocational pathways, and also interested in the difference between school leavers and adult learners, the groups were split accordingly and were as follows:

- *Focus group 1:* School and college students planning on/currently taking a university route
- *Focus group 2:* School and college students planning on/currently taking a vocational route (apprenticeship, traineeship, FE college)
- *Focus group 3:* School and college students who were undecided as to which route they should take
- *Focus group 4:* Adult learners (25+) opting for a university route
- *Focus group 5:* Adult learners (25+) opting for a vocational route
- *Focus group 6:* Parents of current school leavers (year 12, year 13)

We sought to achieve a balanced mix of participants across our focus groups, in terms of prior attainment (as indicated by whether or not a standard pass was achieved in Maths and English at GCSE or equivalent), socioeconomic status (proxied by Free School Meal eligibility) and gender balance, recognising the importance of such factors for a person's educational and careers guidance experience. While we maintained a good gender balance throughout our groups, we had less success in recruiting lower-income (1 out of 22 school or college participants were FSM eligible) or those with lower prior attainment (all but one adult learner and school or college student participants had achieved a standard pass at GCSE Maths/English). This is a limitation that should be borne in mind when interpreting the research. Across the groups we also sought an even split between prospective and current learners, which was usually upheld.

Those in focus groups 1 and 2 were a mixture of year 13 students in schools and sixth form colleges, as well as those in their first year of a degree or a training programme/apprenticeship. Those in focus group 3, undecided school leavers, were all in their final year of secondary education, whether pursing A-levels or BTECs. We felt this third group was necessary because there is not always a clear split between academic and vocational career paths; they can intersect and overlap. For example, some school leavers were pursuing A-levels with intention of progressing to an apprenticeship afterwards, while other school leavers were undertaking a BTEC and were as yet unsure if they wanted to pursue an academic or a vocational route.

Across all focus groups, we aimed to have a geographical spread of participants from across England. For school leaver participants, this was based where they had completed their secondary school education, irrespective of where they were planning on being at their next stage. For adult learners, the requirement was based on where they currently live.

Expert interviews and roundtable

While focus groups formed the largest element of our research, we also conducted a number of expert interviews, speaking to researchers and practitioners in the careers field. This allowed us to better understand the policy context and helped to inform the focus group questions. Speaking to careers leaders in what are regarded as benchmark achieving schools allowed us to test our findings and reflect on what can lead to good outcomes in their schools. Following the focus groups, we held a roundtable to discuss the main findings of our research with researchers, policymakers and experts in the careers sector. This allowed us to delve into some questions which had arisen from the focus groups and inform our policy recommendations.

It is important to note that all the school leavers we spoke to will have had their education disrupted by COVID-19 and this includes their experience of career information advice and guidance. However, this is something they normally explicitly accounted for themselves. It is also important to note that the interpretation of IAG by focus group participants may not necessarily match with what IAG is and consists of from a policy perspective (e.g. the inclusion of guidance in subject lessons may not be noted, even if it is present). To mitigate against any misunderstanding, effort was

made in each group to explain the broadness of IAG and prompt wider thinking beyond one-to-one interview style guidance.

CHAPTER THREE – HOW DO USERS INTERACT WITH IAG?

A precondition of benefitting from careers IAG is having high-quality services readily available, and knowing of their existence and how to make use of them. Consequently, we begin this chapter by examining awareness and accessibility of IAG services for school leavers and adult learners, drawing on our focus groups. Our findings indicate that while school and college students are generally aware of services available to them, the way services are structured can make accessing them difficult. In stark contrast, adult learners are largely unaware of the services available to them and face severe barriers to accessing them.

Services available to school and college students can vary substantially

School and college students report a wide range of services available to them, although the specific services and their structure vary greatly between different institutions, and this variation may be socially patterned. Some school and college students reported receiving regular structured guidance sessions, often weekly or monthly, usually in a group setting for which they were automatically included, though in some cases attendance was optional. The majority of school leavers also had some element of one-to-one guidance as part of the services available to them. In some cases, this took the form of regular structured sessions. However, more often, students received a mandatory one-off appointment with an advisor, and then where available, could self-refer for further one-to-one sessions.

> *"We had a careers adviser who was always in the school, so if you ever needed anything you could just go to her and I think that really helped a lot of people because her office was constantly busy with people. Most of the time it was a one-to-one and then every few months she'd sort out for a few groups of people to go and meet someone or have people come into the school" (group 1)*

> *"We had a woman we still do, who comes in every other Tuesday to talk for an hour about the post year 13 thing and it's not mandatory either, so if you want to talk to her you have to do it in your own time" (group 2)*

Other students also described the same offer of group sessions, one-to-one appointments and so on, but on a much more sporadic rather than scheduled basis. Many current school and college students also mentioned the inclusion of online career platforms, both internal online resources provided by their institution and third-party sources, such as Unifrog.

> *"I had a website where you put like your hobbies your interests and it gave like a list of courses or apprenticeships that would like suit you and you had to go through that and have a look and you could decide through that" (group 1)*

Discussions with recent school leavers were dominated by the services utilised post-GCSE or during their GCSE exams year. This may reflect decisions made by schools and colleges to focus their efforts and resources on older students. However, it is also possible that as they begin to be more aware of needing to make guided decisions, school and college students engage more with the services available to them.[33]

Some students reported that their school or college tended to push students toward a vocational rather than academic pathway, recommending undertaking an apprenticeship, going directly into work or applying to an FE college, without detailing an academic pathway. The students with this experience tended to be attending college, and included the only student who was entitled to free school meals.

> *"Yeah I feel like my college, they kinda wanted you to do an apprenticeship for some reason, they just mention apprenticeships all of the time" (group 1)*

> *"I don't think anyone in our college has mentioned uni to be honest. It's either you carry on to the next course or you go out and get a job kinda thing" (group 3)*

We are reluctant to make strong generalisations on the basis of such a small sample. However, this contributes to a concerning impression that careers services are socially patterned – with schools with more affluent intakes promoting university over vocational options, and schools with more deprived students doing the reverse.

Schools and college students have mixed experiences when it comes to ease of accessing services

Many school and college students reported easy access to their careers service; they knew what was available and how to go about using the service. However, this did not always translate into use of the services. The self-referral nature of one-to-one sessions ranged from an "open door" office policy where students could drop in at break times, after classes and so on, through to the formality of online booking systems or the more limited support of communication from a careers leader by email.

Regardless of format, students found it easier to access services where they had a good relationship with the careers leader or appointed tutor. In many cases, though, such a relationship did not exist, with careers leaders varying in their responsiveness, capacity, or visibility within the school:

> *"To be honest I don't really think I knew who they [the careers adviser] were. I knew we had one, but it wasn't like they were made present" (group 2)*

Prior research indicates that self-referral systems work less well, as some students may lack the confidence to engage with them.[34] Focus group participants put off by self-referral systems often prefer instead to discuss their options with a form tutor or subject teacher; someone with whom they had an established relationship, even though they may lack training, experience, and responsibility for IAG. This was particularly true of students looking to pursue a vocational pathway.

> *"I kind of had a bit of help from classroom teachers, specifically like PE teachers who taught me construction so he had an idea of people in the engineering department and like how they started out and just sort of showed me which colleges do what, different ways you can study and just kind of helped me out I guess" (group 2)*

> *"...it wasn't until I was talking to my politics teacher that I realised there was more than just the apprenticeships you find on Google, there's a lot more out there to actually follow." (group 2)*

Other students said they were discouraged from making use of IAG because of negative previous experiences:

> *"I feel as if there's, like, people to talk to you and then there's people you can always go to they all kind of seem to say the same thing. And it's just not really helpful. They just repeat themselves." (group 3)*

By contrast, school and college students almost universally appreciated online services because they found them straightforward and were able to use them in their own time, at their own pace. Use of online platforms has been recommended in previous studies as a means of expanding service provision, but should act in conjunction with in-person guidance rather than replace it.[35]

Adult learners' use of IAG services is limited, despite evidence of need

On the whole, adult learners we spoke to made limited use of the careers services available to them. We do not expect adult learners to have the same exposure to formal career services in their day-to-day as compared to school or college students. However, private careers services are available and some workplaces will provide a form of guidance in support of career development, for example, Continuing Professional Development (CPD).[36] On a much larger scale, there is the National Careers Service, a publicly funded careers service available in England for both young people and adults.

Of the adult learners we spoke to, only one had contacted the National Careers Service. While they were happy with the support they were receiving from the service, the majority had not only never used the National Careers Service but were unfamiliar with it, or the availability of such services for adults. This was true across learners who were training or studying to improve their position within their existing industry or occupation, as well as those who were undertaking a course with the aim of switching to a new career entirely.

This is despite the fact that many of the adult learners we spoke to said things that suggested they could benefit from professional advice and guidance. One of the main concerns they had around returning to education was about programme reputation and suitability. In particular, since many of them were exploring smaller independent training providers as well as accredited universities and colleges, some felt vulnerable to scams (see Chapter Four). In such cases, formal IAG services could establish the appropriateness and legitimacy of courses, and so can protect and reassure people that they would not be ripped off.

Another significant barrier to adults in accessing IAG were the negative experiences that many had in earlier period with less effective careers services. Such legacy attitudes and perceptions were common not just among our adult learners, but also the parents we spoke to, suggesting that this may well be a generational issue.

> *"...it was very much 'what subjects are you good at? Maths, right a maths degree, accounting, maths teaching'. There was no sort of consideration outside of those academic pathways and nothing about what I enjoyed doing, just what I seemed to be good at. Completely useless." (group 4)*

Moreover, another obstacle is a perception among the adult learners that IAG services are only available and relevant for those in secondary school, for students who are trying to figure out their next steps:

> *"I had already made up my mind what I wanted to study, but I don't think that careers advice is available anywhere for the mature student." (group 5)*

Linked to these perceptions of "it's not for me", adult learners suggested there is a stigma associated with accessing career services as an adult, which are associated negatively with unemployment, or those regarded as directionless:

> *"I've always perceived career advice as kind of for the 18-21-year-olds, the college sixth form crowd and for us adult learners, kind of expected to "should have figured it all out by now etc, once you're over 21" (group 5)*

> *"I think sometimes there's a bit of, I don't want to say a stigma but an association with careers advice for being aimed at people who are out of work, something you might find maybe at your job centre which, you know, I don't want to say it in so many words, but some people do stigmatise that as you don't really know what you're doing with your life." (group 5)*

The National Careers Service does have a strong and valuable link with employment services. The majority of their users hear about the service through Jobcentre Plus, and a large proportion of people contacting them do so with a focus of moving into employment.[37] However, NCS is also used by many who are currently employed and looking for information on courses and training opportunities.[38] There may therefore be overall misunderstanding of the function of IAG services, and what they can provide to adults, something which we explore in more detail in Chapter Five.

Participant experiences of workplace CPD tended to be quite narrow, focusing on particular training courses which may be required for the role. However, this training does not tend to be accompanied by guidance, for example on how to move into a career field more directly related to the training, or other roles where the skills and knowledge may be useful. Some participants did say that their workplaces are supportive of career training with a positive attitude towards progression, even if means moving away from their current role – this seems to be a function of the particular manager and their generosity rather than being institutionally sanctioned.

> *"In my workplace CPD is a key requirement for most of the qualified staff so we've always had to do a lot of stuff to do with anti-money-laundering and short courses that are like topical, to us being at work" (group 4)*

> *"…my manager said, 'look, don't stay here forever, learn what you can and move on, otherwise you'll end up being here for 20 years doing the same job'… obviously I'm going to give as much as I can back but I am going to take these skills and I'm going to use them to find a more in-depth job a more technical job… Although they know what's going to happen there are no weird vibes about it." (group 5)*

CHAPTER FOUR – WHAT DO USERS WANT FROM IAG?

This chapter explores what users most value in IAG, the forms and formats that they find most useful. Young people, their parents and adult learners all indicate that they find informal, 'experiential' information sources most helpful in making their choices. In particular, there is a strong preference for more personalised information that can directly address their specific queries or concerns.

Information

Experiential information is valued above all else

Across all six focus groups, few people made any reference to official sources of information such as government websites and student destination data. None of our participants had used the official government-run university website 'Discover Uni', and only a few had used the government website for apprenticeships. Where official information sources such as league tables (usually unofficial ones, compiled by newspapers) are used they serve more as a shortlisting function rather than being a decisive factor in people's deliberations.

By contrast, 'experiential' information – information from friends, family, colleagues, current students or apprentices – is seen as far more valuable. Such sources of 'hot' knowledge were viewed as more reliable, up-to-date, and fundamentally more trustworthy than official sources.

> *"it's easy to sort of sit on your computer and scroll through all these facts that have been provided probably through universities but it's another thing to actually be in the university experiencing what life actually is like there" (group 1)*

> *"I think with people who come into school they're obviously, like, paid to big up whatever they're promoting whether it's uni or not, and talking to you from a standpoint of, like, before you go through it so it's always going to be useful to talk someone who has done it" (group 3)*

Some schools attempt to harness this desire for first-hand accounts. One of the career leaders we spoke to, found their school's alumni network to be an excellent resource to engage students, allowing them to hear from people they identify with and making it easier to visualise themselves on a similar path.

Adult learners shared a similar preference for information about their options that was based heavily in direct experience. That could come from students, graduates, friends and family, but also from potential employers:

> *"I just found it was more beneficial to speak to people in the industry currently to get their opinion on what the best pathway is into it really" (group 5)*

> *"I think I'd rather talk to family and friends about it because they know me better than somebody that I'd just sort of met, and they'd probably be able to help me with what I'm processing in my mind" (group 5)*

Some participants viewed their family as a grounding force, bringing a sense of realism and practicality to their plans, where students worried careers professionals and teachers may be overly positive and optimistic. However, this influence can be very powerful, with some students describing discussions with parents changed their choice of pathway. Discussions with career leaders indicate that there can be issues where there is a mismatch of ambitions between parent and child as well as possible misunderstandings of the labour market direction.

> *"…when I was leaving school, they was telling us about apprenticeships and stuff, and then I thought that's what I wanted to do. <um and dad were like 'no', just swayed me away from it completely basically. And then now, my dad would love me to go to uni." (group 3)*

> *"I'd go to my mum to get a raw honest opinion on her thoughts on it because I think my mum wasn't afraid to be honest, whereas sometimes teachers were sort of like 'Oh yeah, no, that could be a good idea'," whereas my mum was sort of like "'no that's a crap idea, what are you thinking?'" (group 1)*

The mistrust that young people felt towards IAG services was reflected in some of the attitudes we found among parents. While some parents felt that guidance in schools had significantly improved for their children compared to their own time, several expressed doubts and concerns. There is a scepticism regarding the impartiality of services received. In particular (and this relates to our broader finding that there often appears to be a bias towards university over apprenticeships and further education), some parents believed that schools were incentivised to promote academic pathways. Parents also worried that IAG provision was not adequately attuned to or informed by the labour market. This mistrust was most noticeable among participants who had not been given the opportunity to engage with the careers curriculum at their child's school. Where parents did have an opportunity to engage, there was greater confidence in quality of the support received.

> *"I know schools with sixth forms are duty bound to try and pursue as many of their students going to university, particularly Russell Group ones, as possible, so I think it's really challenging to get impartial information advice and guidance within schools" (group 6)*

> *"…in over 60% of London boroughs there's something like 1.3 jobs available for every 18-24 year old. On one hand that suggests an abundance of opportunities, on the other hand when you drill into the data you recognise that it's the kind of roles that [other participant] was talking about [HGV driving, health and social care], and none of this is communicated through schools." (group 6)*

> *"…the kind of notion of a job for life is a dim and distant memory in most spheres, it doesn't matter what kind of career pathway you embark upon… that sort of flexibility is going to be invaluable to them, the increased movement towards hybrid ways of working and the understanding that Brexit has changed the landscape of employment and employability has changed the landscape for the foreseeable future... That's something that I would like to see addressed within careers" (group 6)*

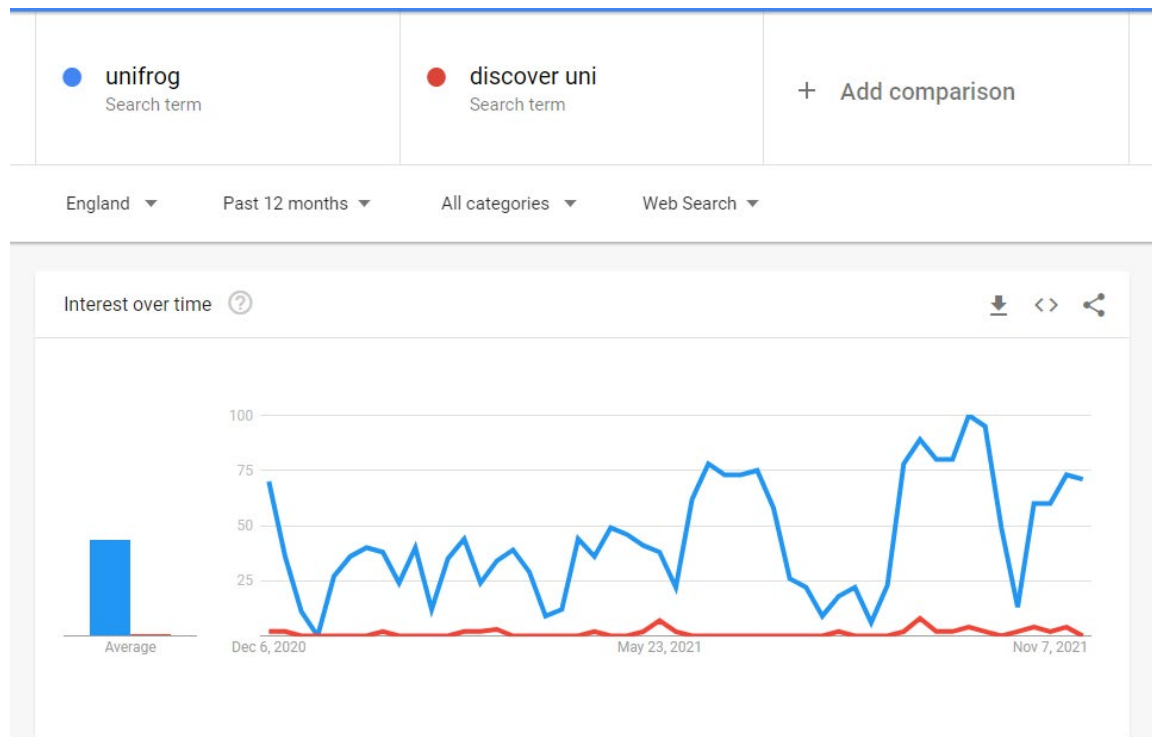**The internet is the dominant source of information**

Many participants reported accessing online guidance support services. While most were happy to do their own research, many reported having difficulties knowing where to look for reliable information. Often, they had to do their own digging, or wait for a formal guidance provider to introduce them to the resources available. Some adult learners report using online recruitment websites or online job boards as an information source by looking at a job an seeing which qualifications may be required for the role.

> *"I think I literally just googled apprenticeships" (group 2)*

> *"I've found, almost a reverse engineered qualification search, going on Indeed, what qualifications do I need… Accidentally I think Indeed almost became a careers advisor" (group 4)*

It is striking that official government-collected or endorsed data rarely came up when discussing online sources. Indeed, few of our participants had even heard of the official 'Discover Uni' site. In fact, this is unsurprising give how poorly Discover Uni does on Google searches – it does not appear on the first page of results for the search terms "Which university should I go to?" or "Which university course should I do?". Indeed, Google Trends data shows that Discover Uni receives a dramatically lower share of searches than Unifrog.[39] This neglect extends to the government itself: at the time of writing, the GOV.uk website linking to the Discover Uni page still referred to the website as Unistats, despite this being replaced by Discover Uni in 2019.[40]

Figure 1: Google search interest in terms "unifrog" and "discover uni", 12 months to November 2021

Source: Google Trends

Figure 2: Gov.uk guidance on finding and applying for Higher Education

Higher education courses: find and apply

You can search and apply for most higher education courses online.

You usually have to be 18 or older to take a higher education course. They're usually taught in:

- universities
- colleges
- specialist institutions like art schools or agricultural colleges

Higher education qualifications include:

- diplomas
- bachelor degrees
- foundation degrees
- post-graduate degrees

Full-time courses

Unistats compare official course data from universities and colleges, including student satisfaction and jobs after study.

Source: Gov.uk

The internet is clearly useful and convenient, but there are potential risks to using it as a sole source of careers information without expert guidance or support. Some adult learners referred to the dangers of misinformation and scams, and one of them described almost falling victim to a fraudulent apprenticeship. Indeed, this was one of the reasons adult learners gave for valuing experiential information – they felt it gave them a better sense of the reliability and trustworthiness of a course.

> *"I did a little bit just on websites through Google, which, was actually quite misleading because I ended up almost falling for a scam. There's quite a few shortcuts advertised to apprentices not wanting to do the full three years" (group 5)*

> *"I went with what I believed to be a trusted provider and I sat very comfortably with that because I did check them out fairly thoroughly... credibility came into it in a big way" (group 5)*

Fragmentation is another issue with online careers information, with many participants bemoaning the lack of an authoritative consolidated clearing house. This was seen as a particular issue for apprenticeships, where the disparateness of advertised roles was contrasted unfavourably with UCAS, which acts as a 'one-stop-shop' for university applications. Some of the adults we spoke to suggested things would be better if information were held in a centralised source, such as a national careers app.

> *"Once I've found it* [information]*. Yeah. I think it's pretty easy just the issue is, actually coming across it." (group 3)*

"…the push needs to be at any time in life, you want to change your career, here's where to go. That's what's missing, where do you go… I don't think there is much out there, there's not one place to go to, that's for certain." (group 4)

"…there isn't enough information available to parents, and even more than that you don't know where to source it, and when you find that resource you have to really look at the granular detail… the independent impartial advice is very difficult to identify" (group 6)

Appropriate/personalised support

Personalised and more directed provision

One-to-one guidance and career assessment remains a central element of IAG provision in most cases. Despite mixed experiences of this one-to-one guidance, as outlined in the past chapter, students tend to value it and would like to see more of it. The students we spoke to recognised the realities of resource constraints: not all had careers teams in their schools and colleges, and among those that had them some felt the teams should be expanded. In most cases, though, there was a clear desire for more personalised attention:

"There was no careers team in my secondary school, so it wasn't particularly helpful but, yeah, I wish there was a team there that would sit down with you one-on-one and have a chat with you, your interests, and possibly tell you what subjects or topics there are out there that you could possibly study." (group 2)

This desire was also reflected in the frustration some students expressed with broad-brush career talks they received that they felt had no relevance to them. Instead, they said it would have been more worthwhile and efficient to group students according to broad interests and tailor the IAG they received accordingly.

"…whenever I would speak to them [careers adviser], it was sort of very generic" (group 1)

"…sort of organise people in to categories, like people who don't know maybe, people who like medicine, people who like engineering, things like that" (group 2)

Parents, too, want IAG to be personalised. Those that were most disenchanted with what their children had received were those that felt the support was not sufficiently suitable or relevant to their goals and needs:

"My son, he's doing BTEC sport science… that hasn't got anything to do with what you want to do, how did you come to this arrangement when you want to do accountancy… he goes off meets with this person, they make their plan and he shows me this option… and I've had to ask him, if this is what you want to do, let me know, but it seems a far, far way from what your ending goal is" (group 6)

The personalisation of guidance also extends to work experience. Students we spoke to valued experiences of workplaces, usually as this gives them a better, more practical sense of a particular route they are considering – whether to confirm their instincts, or to discover they are misguided. Discussions with career leaders echoed this sentiment, adding that work experience also helps students to see how their interests and skills could fit into a workplace, as well as showing a variety of careers, since most workplaces will display a number of different roles.

> *"We did a couple weeks work experience in year 10 that made me realise I didn't want to do the career I had wanted to do" (group 2)*

On the other hand, some students described work experience as something of a box ticking exercise and, as a result, found it a bland and unhelpful experience, merely going through the motions. Once again, in these cases, the main frustration was that the placements were not appropriately personalised, and therefore not relevant to the student's goals and interests. Some students did not have the option to undertake work experience, or did not mention any work experience. Other students explained that while they expected work experience to be a part of their guidance, due to the disruption caused by COVID-19, they missed out on the opportunity.

> *"…the work experience of my secondary school it was mainly like as long as you went to a business and worked for week it didn't really matter what you were doing or if it was relevant to you" (group 3)*

> *"So I unfortunately was part of the year group that didn't get to do that [work experience] because of covid, so I kind of missed out on it" (group 2)*

Career leaders indicate that appropriate experiences of workplaces can be difficult to arrange. If students undertake work experience in the traditional sense of spending a week or two weeks in a work place, they can be limited by their personal network (raising obvious equity concerns, since more socially advantaged people will tend to be better connected), or only have experience in family workplaces, which does not always provide the breadth of experience that may be required. Careers leaders we spoke to speak of the value of a network between local enterprises and schools which can facilitate experiences of workplaces irrespective of a pupil's personal network.

While students may not have been familiar with the Baker clause itself, participants across groups welcomed the opportunity to hear about a range of pathways and equal presentation of options, even if they themselves were set in their pathway plan. Roundtable discussion also echoed this sentiment with the need to emphasise to students that there is not always an either/or pathway; vocational courses can be used to then access university programmes and it is possible to complete a vocational programme after having attended university.

> *"I just think making all the options very clear to everyone, rather than apprenticeship or uni, because that's what I feel a lot of it is" (group 2)*

> *"I wish that my school showed each option equally." (group 2)*

A few of the students said they felt they had been under too much pressure in choosing between different academic pathways, that the stakes had felt higher than they actually were. They said they would have preferred it if it was made clear that they did not need to have made a plan for what to do with the rest of their life and could have done with reassurance that it was okay to be uncertain, and that their decisions were reversible.

> *"I think they should also let people know that it's okay to not have a plan straight away because when you're like 16, 18 you're still so young and they put so much pressure on you to do three really good A levels, go to a really top uni when that's not the case for everyone and people sometimes feel like they're failing." (group 1)*

> *"…say I went to uni, and I then left like a year later, it's not the end of my opportunities" (group 3)*

Timing and Relevance

A complaint raised by some of the student participants was that the timing and content of IAG support did not always seem to them appropriate to their life stage. Some seemed to come too early, feeling irrelevant at the time. In other cases, guidance arrived too late when key decisions had already been made or were so close at hand that the process seemed rushed and stressful. Many students said that the end of year 11 would be a good time to start with guidance, as this is a key moment in determining whether to continue with A-levels, pursue a BTEC or start an apprenticeship at 16. However, they also note that career plans can change significantly post-16.

> *"I feel like in year 11 your perception of things is really different to now, you don't really know what you want to do. I changed my mind about what I wanted to do last minute so it's helpful if you're completely certain but sometimes it can be confusing" (group 1)*

Timing and nature of guidance is something that was acknowledged as important by experts, with the standard view that there is a need to start as early as possible, with age-appropriate supports. According to this argument, whether they notice it or not, school and college students are already thinking about their futures and career paths from a young age. Thus, their perception that IAG is irrelevant to them may not be accurate, but may merely reflect inadequate explanation of the purposes of the intervention.

At the same time, as we see in the next chapter, students (and adults) tend to regard IAG in quite short-termist, instrumental ways. This disagreement may therefore reflect a lack of a shared understanding of the fundamental purposes of IAG. That said, not all participants shared these frustrations. Some students, especially in the "undecided" focus group did express a desire for guidance to focus on longer term goals, rather than immediate next steps.

"I believe it should have been quite a bit earlier to be honest because I think if I could have gone back I maybe would have changed a few options at GCSE or especially at A-level and aim everything towards that career I wanted to do, but at the same time you've got to take in consideration you can't put all your eggs in one basket" (group 2)

CHAPTER FIVE – USER EVALUATIONS OF IAG

Reflecting on the content of IAG received, a number of themes arose, particularly across the school and college students focus groups. Comparing the responses of younger participants with the adult learners we spoke to, it is apparent that today's services are much improved from earlier times. Yet they remain patchy, with quite different experiences for different students in different types of schools and colleges. Moreover, the grand ambitions of careers services do not always match the more pragmatic realities of what users want. Finally, while many students are open to vocational as well as academic pathways, inertia carries many school and college students and adult learners towards an academic pathway by default without giving vocational pathways due consideration.

Patchiness

Though there was substantial variation in their accounts, almost all school and college participants reported receiving at least some form of IAG during their time at secondary school and/or college, and at least some of this guidance which was valued and was considered to be in some way useful or helpful. This contrasts heavily with the experiences of the adult learner focus groups, many of whom report negative or very basic experiences of careers guidance while at school as evidenced in Chapter Three, which colours their perceptions of IAG to this day. Thus, there is strong reason to believe that things have improved over time, albeit the extent of that improvement has not been the same everywhere.

Patchiness in type of provision

There is patchiness in what comprises IAG in different schools. Students referred variously to one-to-one personalised guidance, work experience, alumni talks, employer presentations, university visits, college and university open days, careers days, presentations on apprenticeships from colleges, assistance with UCAS applications, and provision of online resources. Individual participant experiences of these areas range from broad and varied in-depth, consistent provision, to broad-brush career talks, or a one-off personal session on future plans. The experience of the majority of participants appears to lie somewhere between these two ends of the spectrum, which matches quite well with CEC research findings that schools on average achieved 3.70 Gatsby benchmarks.[41]

Patchiness can also be seen within schools, and some people in our focus groups believed that certain students receive preferential treatment. For example, those aiming for more prestigious universities apparently receive extra assistance, in some schools:

> *"They haven't really given much help to anyone else outside of people that applied at Cambridge or Oxford or anything like that" (group 3)*

> *"…my school had it, they got someone in externally, but it's only aimed at people who are going to Russell Group unis I think and it's like free tutoring and things like that. But you can't access it, there's like 10 people out of my whole year that have been given the chance to do that, it's quite selective" (group 2)*

Patchiness in delivery

It has been a requirement since September 2018 for schools to have an internal careers leader, though this does not need to be a dedicated careers specialist.[42] In practice, there is great variation in who delivers guidance in different schools and colleges: focus group participants mentioned internal advisers, form tutors, subject teachers, and external advisers, as all being points of contact or offering advice and guidance. The mix of delivery in and of itself is not an issue, though many believe that specialised careers professionals are necessary to ensure effective services.

Indeed, the experiences of the participants indicate patchiness in the consistency of provision. Several participants described receiving well-structured, co-ordinated and timely guidance, with regular sessions. Others felt let down by more ad-hoc provision. On some occasions, this left students ill-prepared and rushed in their decision-making. Students report more consistent guidance beginning from year 11, with little recollection of the support they received before this.

> *"I think there was sort of a mad rush once you started year 13. It was almost that pressure to be like 'okay so what are you doing' and it was like 'I don't know' and if you didn't know you weren't shamed for it but it was sort of like 'oh you should have been thinking about this by now'" (group 1)*

Many reported positive experiences with external personnel brought in for one-to-one sessions, but a common complaint was that they were able to offer too little follow-up support. Others bemoaned a lack of consistency, being unable to deal with a single named professional.

> *"My school brought like, external personnel to just come in and talk to students, I think it was a half hour session and it was one-on-one and it kind of did what I wanted but... I feel like the half hour one, wasn't long enough." (group 2)*

> *"I've had like three meetings in year 11 with like three different advisors. Whereas some of my friends only had like one after the initial meeting, he didn't hear anything. By then you will have another one, and you just did the same thing again. I found that the organization of the whole system, I'd say it was a bit messy." (group 3)*

Greater consistency in online delivery

One area of delivery which seemed consistent across all three student groups is the use of online career platforms and applications that helped students to navigate the different fields they may be interested in. Those using such services were broadly happy with online services, especially when narrowing down options, but did not view it as a replacement for personal one-to-one service. Online delivery is also being used to fill gaps where physical access is difficult. Some schools made use of online platforms more than others, especially across the course of the pandemic. For example, one careers leader we spoke to mentioned the use of their alumni network to create "experience videos" describing their career trajectories and how they reached their current position.

Schools are not expected to follow an identical careers curriculum; current policy offers them discretion over how to meet their statutory requirements. This flexibility is important and is appreciated by careers leaders so that they can shape a programme in line with the needs of their pupils and their location. However, in practice, inconsistency in careers provision between schools and colleges does not seem to reflect differences in approach and context, so much as differences in the level of resources and priority different institutions are willing to give to IAG.

Ambitions vs realities

Careers guidance has high expectations of itself. According to many practitioners, done well, it should not just be a narrow, instrumental service getting people from A to B, making the next step from school or college to a job or further course of study. Instead, the idealised picture is of a much deeper and holistic process, helping people to better understand themselves, their place in society, build their confidence and develop their skills.[43] Yet as it currently operates in schools and colleges, there appears to be a disconnect between the grand ambitions of guidance in theory and the realities it faces in practices.

What students want

Rather than developing their skillset or exploring career fields, many of the students we spoke to take a pragmatic and short-termist approach to IAG. At GCSE stage this meant choosing subjects for A-level or BTEC, and at the post-GCSE stage, IAG is viewed primarily through the lens of applications for work or further study, focused on assistance with personal statements, UCAS deadlines, apprenticeships or FE colleges. This was especially true for those school and college students that had a clear idea of their preferred pathway. Those that were undecided were looking for broader support in order to better understand their options.

> *"…long term I want to get into aesthetics [aesthetic medicine]. It's like nowadays you need nursing to properly do it, so I just think, I'll have to do that if that's what I want to do in the end what if not quite so let's just figure out if that sounds like what I want to be doing the end because I could just do something that's a bit less like, you know, technical and just stay on in college instead"* (group 3)

> *I don't know what my end goal is, it's like could I get there without uni, like do I actually need it. But it would help if I knew I wanted to end up but I don't."* (group 3)

Misunderstanding the aims of provision

This mismatch between what students expect out of IAG and what careers leaders attempt to provide can lead to some confusion and frustration among students. At present, it is a statutory requirement to provide guidance to all students in years 8-13. As discussed already, there is strong support for guidance beginning as early as possible to allow students to explore more fields and develop 'soft skills' in order to allow them to make more informed choices. This long-term, early start approach to guidance, however, is not widely understood by students. With so much else in their educations being instrumentalised, with the ultimate focus for many being UCAS

applications, this is hardly surprising. It does mean, however, that when guidance opportunities arise at a younger age, they can feel a little ad-hoc and students struggle to appreciate their relevance.

> *"I think I remember having some like meetings with alumni…. It wasn't overly common but I sort of recall throughout the years every now and then, like it seemed quite out of the blue, randomly. There'd be an assembly and we had to sit in it and listen to their career path, story which was sometimes interesting but as sort of a year 7 or 8, I mean year 7 or 8 I'm not really thinking about university yet"* (group 1)

Work experience, for example, is viewed by many as an experience to help determine whether to pursue that particular career field, rather than taken as an opportunity to experience a workplace more generally and explore the roles and skills that exist in a particular workplace.

> *"…when I did work experience in year 10 was it wasn't actually very realistic to what it would be like when you're older like I felt it was a bit more because you're a younger age, they wouldn't really put you through the same thing they'd actually do if you were working there."* (group 1)

Adult learners also had misconceptions about IAG. A common refrain among the adult learners was that knowing what they wanted to study, they would not need IAG services. However, delving deeper, many of the adult learners were uncertain on the details of fees, funding, availability of programmes, type of delivery and course reputation, all information which services like the NCS can assist with. Not understanding the aim and the facilities of the service means that there could be many adults not accessing the support they need and are entitled to.

Academic options as default

Lack of exposure to vocational options

As some previous studies have found, academic pathways and options dominate the student experience of IAG.[44] When asked about IAG, the first thing most school and college students mentioned was support with university personal statements, the completion of which was sometimes mandatory – sending the message that university is the default path. Vocational options were not necessarily discouraged, but in most cases they received significantly less attention. In line with previous analyses of the Baker Clause, we found that its implementation continues to be weak.[45]

> *"My school was definitely more focused on uni, because we talked about it pretty much every form time every day. We did have one form time on apprenticeship options, so we have been told about the apprenticeship option but my school focuses on going to uni, they expect everyone to have a UCAS application for uni."* (group 2)

> *"I would say my school was really like, they didn't speak of doing BTECs, they didn't speak of doing apprenticeships, it's very like 'you're going to uni'. Despite saying how I wanted to do an apprenticeship I was made to write a personal statement, they tried to like really really push making a UCAS account."* (group 2)

"It was kind of just assumed that you wanted to go to uni unless you knew you wanted to do something different" (group 3)

"I think it should definitely be made more known that there are other options besides uni, because it wasn't until I got to year 12 that I realised there was other things you could do," (group 1)

"I just thought that was the career [path] *you kinda went"* (group 1)

Some students we spoke to couldn't recall any exposure to non-academic post school options. Many others only got a brief mention rather than detailed discussion of the option. Some of those that wanted the pursue vocational options described having to proactively advocate for their own interests in order to receive useful support:

"…our school do say, 'oh yeah we'll help you out with apprenticeships and stuff' Like someone said before, you kind of need to put yourself out there to get that help you don't really, it's not really given to you as it is like to people who want to apply to uni." (group 3)

However, this picture is not universal. A number of students told us their school or college had presented academic and vocational options as equally viable. Indeed, some students reported preferential treatment given to vocational options, with relatively little discussion of academic pathways, although this is clearly concerning for other reasons, as it may limit the accessibility of university for those that want to attend.

"We had people come in from different apprenticeships talking about how it is and stuff, I'd say like once every month" (group 2)

"There wasn't like any sort of pushing on 'oh you should do this, you should do that', whatever you fancy just go for really. There was no 'uni's the best' or 'apprenticeships are the best', everything was sort of on an equal level." (group 2)

Inertia towards academic options

Our evidence suggests that in at least some cases, the decision to go to university is taken because it is the easy one, going with the flow, taking the path of least resistance, rather than an active choice made after thorough guidance and consideration. This inertia is not helped by some students feeling pushed or expected to complete university applications, despite being unsure of what they mean to get out of it. Many of those in the university pathway groups (both adult and school and college student) said that they had never really considered a vocational pathway before deciding on university.

"I always just thought that uni was something that I would definitely do. I didn't think I wouldn't do it." (group 1)

Many school and college students seemed to believe that vocational options are only for those with a very certain specific career or trade in mind. University (with the exception of some courses like medicine) is viewed as the opposite; a more flexible opportunity to explore new areas, keeping options open to figure out a more defined career as you go.

> *"I didn't know specifically what I wanted to do, but I felt like uni would help me get to somewhere near kind of where I thought I would want to be"* (group 1)

The lack of exposure to vocational pathways was reflected in the limited understanding and misperceptions held by many participants. Vocational options tend to be equated with apprenticeships, rather than consideration of FE colleges. Some students mistakenly believed that they would not receive a qualification if they took a vocational option rather than going to university:

> *"I think it was just getting an actual qualification, like an actual diploma that states I've been prepared for this particular, you know particular path. I think that's very important and again yeah, I agree experience is a big part, but still I feel like, a diploma just makes you a bit safer"* (group 1)

At the same time, many students saw the value of the work experience that could come as part of a vocational route. However, the preference was still to combine this with a degree – for example, by choosing a university course with a 'sandwich year' or work placement component.

The cultural cachet of university is strong, to the point that some that were unsure about it see it as an opportunity that cannot be passed up if they can get in.

> *"I never really thought I'd actually go to uni. I just wanted to keep my options open, and my grades were never actually that great, but I got into my first choice uni first year so it kind of was a moment I thought I couldn't really turn it down"* (group 1)

One explanation for this bias towards university lies in the knowledge and experience of those delivering guidance in schools. Teachers, who will by and large have gone to university themselves, are mostly very familiar with UCAS, but less acquainted with apprenticeships, for example.

Parents also play a role in the bias towards academic pathways. Though most of the parents we spoke to agreed that the ultimate decision should lie with their child, several mentioned discussing university with their children and encouraging them towards it from an early age. In some cases, this was due to their own positive experiences with university that they wanted their children to share. In others, it was due to a belief in the superiority of university for networking, personal growth, and independence. Some parents echoed the sentiments of students that university could be a space to figure out what to do later in life. This reinforcement from an early age transmits the idea that university is an idea for 'people like them' – an idea that schools and colleges would have to do much more to displace.

> *"I have been having a conversation with my son about university since he was young, giving a lot of advice that I wish I had been given"* (group 6)

> *"I've really encouraged my children to get a degree and have that social aspect and have loads of great fun, because they're going to have to work forever aren't they."* (group 6)

CHAPTER SIX – POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter draws on the existing literature and our original research to produce a set of policy recommendations, in order to create a more user-friendly and effective careers service. Specifically, we discuss in turn what might be done to address the issues we have identified in the IAG system:

- A mismatch between the holistic ambitions of careers specialists and the more pragmatic expectations of those that use their services.
- Patchiness of provision between different schools and areas.
- Students carried by inertia towards academic rather than vocational pathways.
- The modest profile and usage of official and formal information sources.
- A lack of awareness and willingness to use IAG among adults.

Recommendation 1: Policymakers should be realistic about what they expect from IAG and resource it appropriately – including an explicit entitlement to personalised support for all school leavers

As we have seen, there is something of a mismatch between the grand holistic ambitions of the careers sector on one hand and the expectations of those they serve, with the resources they receive on the other. The temptation for policymakers is to continue to pay lip service to IAG, endorse the lofty goals, but fail to commit the time and money necessary to achieve them. The risk for careers professionals is that they continue to try and do everything, but fail to focus and prioritise effectively, or to get the buy-in that they need.

It is subtle, and quite possibly benign, but careers has an imperialistic streak: given the opportunity, it will spread its influence over more and more of the education system. One expert we spoke to said that, at most, IAG accounts for 0.5-1% of educational time, but to achieve what it wants to achieve would require more like 5-10%. Those ambitions should be recognised and debated more widely. IAG need not necessarily come at the expense of other elements of the education system. It is perfectly possible to integrate careers relevant information into everyday lessons – for example, by highlighting the skills developed in an assessment, or the sorts of jobs that would utilise the material covered in a lesson. However, some may want to resist this sort of instrumentalisation, and it is surely inevitable that some things will have to be squeezed out to make way for IAG.

Policymakers need to confront the trade-offs involved, and judge for themselves how far they are willing to back the ambitions of the careers sector. If they buy in to the vision of careers as a deep, thoroughgoing exploration of a person's attributes and objectives, rather than a more functional process of getting them to the next step, policymakers must take responsibility for providing the resources necessary: money, trained staff, and time in the curriculum. What they should avoid doing is adding to the expectations on schools and colleges without commensurate funding or support.

In this context, the Education (Careers Guidance in Schools) Private Member's Bill, proposed by Mark Jenkinson, which is currently making its way through Parliament, should be taken as an opportunity for discussion and reflection rather than uncritically welcomed.[46] The Bill, which has the support of both Government and opposition, would require all state schools in England to begin careers guidance in year 7, rather than year 8 as it is at present.

This fits with a broader trend within careers discourse to emphasise the importance of providing information earlier, in order to broaden children's horizons and counteract negative stereotypes.[47] This is a laudable ambition, but as we have seen, simply making something a statutory obligation does not mean that obligation will be discharged effectively.

In particular, in this report, we have found that many young people are uncertain of the value and purpose of careers information that they receive when they are relatively young and the worlds of tertiary education or work seem distant. At the very least then, a concerted effort is needed to persuade them of the relevance of such activities to ensure they are maximally effective.

More fundamentally, there is the problem that policy attention is directed towards a form of IAG young people are relatively ambivalent towards (early in their school career), even as they continue to feel neglected in the crunch period of years 11-13. The risk, then, is that this agenda appears out of touch or a distraction from the 'bread and butter' of supporting young people into post-school learning or work. Perhaps this is unfair: much of the careers activity focused on younger students is relatively resource-light, for example, getting volunteers to speak to students or integrating careers-focused material into classes. Yet it also speaks to the need to address the frustrations of older students.

For that reason, the Government should offer young people an explicit entitlement to the sort of personalised support so many of them want but do not currently receive as they try to navigate the world beyond school or college. Toby Perkins and Matt Western, Labour's shadow ministers for Skills & Further Education and Higher Education, recently proposed an amendment to the Skills Bill that would place a statutory obligation on schools to provide face-to-face career guidance for every pupil.[48] The amendment was voted down, but in fact the Government should go further. It could, for example, commit to ensuring every year 12 student receives a one-to-one guidance session of at least 30 minutes, and that everybody has the right to at least two follow-up sessions with the same adviser in their final year. This is already the norm at some schools and colleges, but it could be made a target and tracked with the expectation of achieving it in full in a few years' time.

Recommendation 2: Make IAG a more prominent part of school and college inspections and evaluation

One of the points that emerged from our expert roundtable was the observation that the incentives for schools and colleges to prioritise IAG are limited compared to the emphasis placed on, for example, exam results. As noted in the introduction, accountability for school and college careers services exists through Ofsted inspections. However, this is a relatively recent development, so it is not clear what effect, if any, the updated guidance has had on IAG provision. The inspectorate only explicitly called out a school for failing to meet its Baker clause obligations for the first time in 2020.[49] The fact that the Government felt the need to promise "tougher formal action against non-compliance" in its recent skills White Paper indicates it recognises that it is not operating effectively at present.[50]

In any case, it is debateable whether the current Ofsted inspections guidance covers the full extent of what we should expect from IAG, focusing primarily on compliance with specific features such as the Baker clause. It may be better to make IAG a more prominent feature of Ofsted inspections, ensuring that schools and colleges are assessed more holistically on their provision.

At present, Ofsted inspectors are expected to grade institutions on a four-point scale (outstanding, good, requires improvement or inadequate) in terms of their overall effectiveness but also their performance in four areas: i) quality of education, ii) behaviour and attitudes; iii) personal development; iv) leadership and management.[51] These ratings appear on the front cover of Ofsted reports.

Careers information, advice and guidance provision could be added as a fifth 'key judgement' to sit alongside these four, with its own explicit rating. This would highlight the centrality of IAG to an institution's performance, and thus encourage them to take it more seriously. It would also ensure that IAG is one of the first things students, parents, or other interested parties learn about when they research a school's effectiveness. Alternatively, the category of 'personal development', which already in principle covers quality of careers advice and guidance, compliance with the Baker clause, work encounters, and use of the Gatsby benchmarks could be relabelled 'personal development and careers support' to emphasise the centrality of careers.

To some extent, Ofsted already assesses IAG provision with reference to Gatsby[52], in line with departmental guidance that recommends that schools work towards its achievement. In carrying out such evaluations, it could build on the fact that many schools already engage in self-assessment against the Gatsby benchmarks with the help of the CEC's Compass tool.[53] We could, for example, envisage a process by which schools were required to submit a self-evaluation to Ofsted, perhaps based on Compass, which would then be independently validated by Ofsted. At present, participation in Compass is voluntary, in an effort to ensure it does not become a mere tick-box exercise – yet the system has been criticised for being entirely based on institutions' own perceptions of themselves. Incorporating these assessments into the independent inspection process could ensure they are taken seriously and receive outside verification. The Quality in Careers Standard, an independently evaluated award, aligned to the Gatsby benchmarks, which accredits schools and colleges in

terms of their careers education, information, advice and guidance could also be accepted as a recognised component of institutions' self-evaluation.[54]

Recommendation 3: Prioritise reducing inconsistency in the level and quality of IAG and make it an objective for the CEC

As we have seen throughout the report, patchiness is a recurring feature of England's IAG system. It is hard to imagine things improving without greater coordination and harmonisation. We recognise that over-centralisation can be counterproductive, limiting institutions' ability to flexibly utilise their local knowledge. We are also conscious of the risks of 'levelling down': discouraging schools and colleges that have invested greater resources and energy than most to their IAG provision, who are often the source of the best and most innovative practice as a result. All the same, the differences we see at present are too often the consequence of neglect or poor practice rather than genuine contextual differences in what represents the best approach.

There is evidence that sharing knowledge and participating in networks leads to more effective IAG provision. Data from the CEC indicates that schools which are part of a Careers Hub have better outcomes in terms of benchmark achievements.[55] Anecdotally, we also learnt that bigger schools tend to have an advantage in providing IAG due to economies of scale. Interschool coordination could help with resourcing of specialist careers staff, as well as helping with pooling and harnessing 'hot' information sources through alumni, parent, and local employer involvement. Given the importance we have seen that young people place upon such information and given the problems of individual schools relying on their own networks (which will reflect the socioeconomic makeup of the school and local area), this could help produce more effective and equitable IAG.

The CEC are well placed to take on responsibility for this coordination and harmonisation, with extensive experience of doing so already through their Career Hubs. However, more can be done to ensure no school or college is left behind. To make this a more explicit priority, reducing inconsistency in careers provision could be added to the CEC's objectives in its Grant Funding Agreement with the Department for Education. At present, the agreement sets out three objectives: building networks such as Careers Hubs, providing training and support for careers leaders and helping to implement the Gatsby benchmarks. To this, a fourth objective focused on reducing disparities between schools and colleges could be added. The CEC should be given budget and discretion on how best to do this, but activities could include targeted outreach to focus on schools that perform less well on Gatsby benchmarks, peer advice and evaluation and tailored resources. As the Sutton Trust has suggested, Careers Hubs could be expanded to cover all schools, with disadvantaged schools given priority.[56] The key is to make equity an explicit priority.

Recommendation 4: Interrupt the inertia that carries people towards academic pathways and ensure all apprenticeships are listed on UCAS

While the Baker clause is a good and important starting point, we remain some distance from academic and vocational pathways everywhere being presented on an equal footing as equally viable options. This is an issue increasingly recognised by policymakers. In a recent debate over the Government's Skills Bill, Robert Halfon, chair of the Commons Education Select Committee, reported that "the most depressing thing" about meeting apprentices is how few of them came to apprenticeship through their schools. He argued that "We have a culture that is university, university, university, when it should be skills, skills, skills".[57]

Lord Baker himself proposed an amendment to the Bill for a 'super Baker clause' which would entitle school pupils to access information from a range of FE and training providers at least three times, but this was rejected by the Government in favour of one mandatory encounter from at least one provider.[58]

Halfon has been even more ambitious in his efforts, tabling an amendment that would require schools and colleges to provide each pupil with nine interactions with a range of education and training providers, including access to vocational providers, over the course of their compulsory education. Three of these would have to be in years 8 and 9, three in years 10 and 11 and three in years 12 and 13.[59] However, this too was rejected by the Government.

This renewed focus of the efficacy of the Baker clause is welcome, and increasing schools and colleges' statutory obligations in this way would likely represent an improvement on the status quo. However, we have some reservations over whether it represents the best way to achieve these goals. In particular, increasing the requirements of IAG in earlier school years may not be the best use of effort and resources based on our findings in this report – 13 and 14-year-olds may not benefit as much from encounters with colleges as older peers. Indeed, the Sutton Trust's survey of school pupils shows that prior to their final year, they are considerably more likely to have had an encounter with a vocational institution than a university. Over a quarter of year 11s have been to a college or apprenticeship visit, talk or event, compared to 5% that have been to a university. It is only in year 13 that HE outstrips vocational options, with 42% visiting a university.[60] Moreover, making this a minimum requirement risks encouraging a tick box approach in some institutions, unless backed up with stronger incentives and accountability (as we have proposed in our discussion of Ofsted's inspection frameworks above).

In addition to reviewing the requirements on schools and their implementation of the Baker clause, we argue more needs to be done to disrupt the inertia that carries many young people towards university. UCAS is the application system for both universities and colleges, but it was strongly identified with universities among the people we spoke to. The "C" in UCAS needs to be as strong as the U, and there may be scope for UCAS (and indeed schools and colleges in discussing UCAS) to reflect on the way further and vocational education is presented. There are encouraging signs here: UCAS has added an apprenticeships tile to their website, aiming to "act as a digital Baker clause", in response to UCAS' applicant survey data showing a lack of adequate

information on apprenticeships for potential applicants.[61] Nearly half – 46% – of people who set up a UCAS account in the six months prior to February 2022 said they are interested in apprenticeships.[62]

One of the greatest difficulties in applying for apprenticeships is the disparateness of information and application opportunities. Unlike higher or further education, there is no single central system for applying for apprenticeships. All those applying for university in the UK have to use UCAS for their application; it is a system that schools and teachers are very familiar and comfortable with. An equivalent system – a central clearing house - that they can become equally familiar with ought to be established for apprenticeships.

UCAS is well-placed to take on this responsibility, and the ambition should be for all apprenticeship opportunities to be listed on the UCAS platform. Teachers and students who are already familiar with the website would not need to negotiate a whole new system, and all pupils could explore the options available to them in one dedicated space.

It is not clear how easily achievable this is in the short run, given the fragmentation of apprenticeships. However, it is likely that if the Government made funding for apprenticeships conditional on listing opportunities on UCAS, this would likely drive a substantial number of providers to use the system.

If this is not immediately possible, it may be that a practical and pragmatic short run step is to develop local systems which will in the end be combined at a national level. Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority have both established online platforms designed to help young people with pursuing at vocational pathway; *GMACS* and *Be More* respectively.[63] Both websites have details of current apprenticeships that are available locally, and guidance on how to apply for one. The GMACS service also includes information on other education and training pathways such as T-levels and BTECs as well as health and wellbeing support. While directed at young people, the website has specific sections for schools, parents and carers, and employers, detailing how GMACS can help them, and how they can get involved.

Other mayoralties or local authorities should be encouraged to produce similar platforms of their own. Where they lack the capacity to do so, UCAS could take the lead in filling in the gaps, perhaps working with the CEC to leverage their existing networks and local partnerships.

To reiterate, the ultimate ambition should be for these local platforms to "plug in" to the UCAS website and application process, so that people applying for apprenticeships would go through the UCAS and be able to identify the opportunities in their area.

Recommendation 5: Partner with trusted private brands to ensure reliable information is easily accessible

As we have seen, most people make little use of official government sources, which leaves policymakers three options when it comes to information provision: invest, drop, or endorse. One of the issues with information at the moment is how spread out it is, and how unreliable and untrustworthy it may be. Policymakers could make the most of the inherent credibility of government-badged resources and choose to *invest* in the official information channels they have created – in particular, the Discover Uni and the apprenticeships website, in order to make them easily accessible and the go-to information sources. As well as encouraging CEC, schools and colleges to promote them, this could also involve refreshing the tools and interfaces and perhaps spending money on online search advertising to make them more prominent on search engines.

However, developing and promoting a new brand is likely to be expensive and challenging. Given how little value most people place on such hard data, it is questionable whether such an initiative would be worth the effort and resources. Despite decades of refinement and publicity, only one in three English parents consult secondary school league tables and most view them with substantial scepticism.[64] That might be taken to represent the ceiling or 'best case scenario'.

Therefore, it seems better for the Government to withdraw from trying to provide official information – to *drop* the idea. That is not to say the data should be hidden or deleted, just that its neglect or lack of promotion should be a deliberate policy decision, acknowledging what it entails, and recognising that this clears the field for unofficial providers.

That may not be a palatable option either, though, and so the best option may be for the Government to *endorse* a third party. It could partner with trusted private information sources and applications such as Unifrog, piggy-backing on the tools and brands that have emerged on the market in recent years. This would allow them to save on the cost and effort of building new brands and give those tools the credibility of official approval.

Recommendation 6: Promote adult education and careers IAG through a large-scale outreach programme

The lack of engagement with IAG among adults is reflective of a broader disengagement from education and support, with educational participation falling in recent years.[65] Yet as we found, even among adults that have already decided to return to education, awareness and understanding of the potential benefits of IAG were limited. As the SMF has previously argued, there should be a large-scale outreach campaign to demonstrate the benefits of adult education.[66] This should include both advertising in traditional and digital media, but also personal contact from ambassadors going to people where they are (for example, the school gates).

Promoting IAG should be central to this campaign, as it is critical to ensuring that people end up on the right sorts of courses for their needs. Media advertising can help build awareness of the National Careers Service, which as we found is little recognised and understood. Ambassadors can help overcome the stigma associated with adult careers guidance, demonstrating to potential users that 'people like them' can benefit. Adult education ambassadors are also providers of the 'hot' knowledge that have we found such strong appetite for, especially for those who do not have the support of friends or family, or have a network with the relevant experience. Ambassadors can also respond to questions which formal services may not always be able to answer – for example, questions about life as a mature student - as well as directing them to the most valuable and helpful formal sources.

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