

CONNEXIONS AND TOMLINSON a bridge too far?

The recent Government White Paper has not finished Tomlinson off; it was probably not meant to. And Connexions? We don't know what will happen, but it seems unlikely that its underlying community-linked strategy can be abandoned. Both initiatives propose advances that will not easily be thwarted.

And careers work should welcome them. It is for enabling people to improve their life chances. And, together, Tomlinson and Connexions offer our work its biggest and most realistic opportunity to do that.

They are useful for the way in which both sets of proposals reposition careers work. And there are life-long possibilities here: the two initiatives are directed immediately to the most vulnerable 14-19 years olds; but they can lead to the development of more effective programmes for all young men and women; and that will establish a basis for genuinely life-long learning and career-planning help for all. We won't get there in a single bound; but Tomlinson and Connexions offer a chance to move forward.

Why so? Careers work enables learning; it is, therefore, best positioned in learning settings. Whatever happens to Tomlinson and Connexions in the short-term, in the long-term the trends they reflect will offer careers work more effective partnerships with a deeper and expanding range of learning help. We need day-on-day links with those resources.

But we need more. We know that, of the people we should be able to help, a good many just do not use careers work in its current settings. There is a credibility issue. And dealing with it may prove to hang less on claims to professionalism, expertise and impartiality; and to depend more on demonstrating accessibility, trustworthiness and usefulness.

These are the building blocks in the Tomlinson-Connexions bridge. For the moment, it is a bridge-too-far for Government. But enough is in place to allow us to move forward.

The White Paper on Tomlinson, and the forthcoming Green Paper on Connexions cannot spell the end of either initiative. The social trends to which the initiatives respond are too marked. Their actions are supported by a pretty-well unanimous understanding of the needs they serve. Both initiatives have big implications for careers work. Some of these are obvious, some are - for the moment – unwelcome; but some are more radically constructive for careers work than, at first sight, appears.

The much-postponed green paper has been postponed again (it will not appear this month). But leaks suggest that future Connexions funding might be channelled through schools and colleges and as part of local-authority work in children's trusts. We don't yet know on what terms funding will be distributed – and many devils lurk in that detail. But, however it works out, the move would relocate careers work closer to the communities it serves. In particular, advisers could find themselves working with a more local yet more expanded range of

partners. Despite worries on the part of some careers-work people, this would be far-from-bad news.

The best of Connexions' intentions are socially integrative – the launch report was entitled 'Bridging the Gap'. Tomlinson is also socially integrative: when Mike Tomlinson defends his committee's proposals he speaks of 'an end to snobbery'. Snobbery is to social class what prejudice is to race and gender. These proposals are for a single bridge, taking both 'vocational' and 'academic' traffic on a shared learning route. It all gets professional applause. But, for the politicians, it is a bridge too far. The white-paper response leaves A-levels and vocational diplomas signposting divergent routes - anyway, for the time being.

Among the OECD countries, Britain ranks low on post-16 participation. Early-life upbringing is still a big predictor of working-life chances – life-long. Yet, it is hard to find anyone to blame, the problem is institutional - in the way our systems work. It is all deeply unfair; and it is not getting any better. That is why Mike Tomlinson's committee was commissioned - to find a better way.

Careers-work people have been quick to point out that the white paper will create a greater demand for helping learners with options. But, any commitment to improving the life-chances of learners can hope for something deeper and more important. Together, Tomlinson and Connexions can offer more recognisably usefully learning, more contact with communities and families, and better access to both school-and-college and community learning resources – they offer a fairer system in which people can have more trust.

We need strong versions of both Connexions and Tomlinson.

a case for integration

The leaks on Connexions open up possibilities for locating advisers in schools and colleges. They also suggest that schools and colleges can themselves be linked into local networks of help set up by local-education-authority children's trusts. One of the effects would be to extend the range of links advisers can make - for example with the professional and voluntary services associated with Sure Start (a pretty successful support programme for mothers-to-be, their toddlers and their families). It would also put advisers in a position to know and be known in that community of help and among its learners.

It would be a big change; but it seems the Connexions brand will survive. We will need it in some form – some back-up and coordinating services can only be managed from outside schools and colleges.

The leaked proposals would also strengthen links with other helpers. There is more-than-one profession engaged in careers work. Advisers and teachers are among them, but - through both Connexions and Sure Start - there are others. And, as schools-and colleges and the trusts have demonstrated, there are also voluntary helpers – like mentors. With sensitive professional support mentors offer what often proves to be the most accessible and credible help.

This is professionally integrative for advisers. Connexions locates them where they can map a range of help, and signpost appropriate help to those at different kinds and levels of career-

development risk. It also puts them in a better position to fulfil their ‘universal’ task of supporting all young men and women.

They can do all of this on the basis of on-going contact with local social and cultural, as well as economic and professional, involvement. There is, in the Connexions community already, some sensible talk of organising provision around local ‘sub-regional’ structures.

cases for consolidation

Not all careers-work people are happy about this. Some want a clearly-separated service, with its own specialism in well-defined educational and vocational matters. It is a call for consolidation rather than integration.

And it is what movers and shakers in some of our professional associations want. They are getting some support from research-and-development organisations. However, not much of that argument has, so far, paid much attention to the damaging social stratification which made both the Tomlinson reforms and Connexions necessary.

It would be unfair not to mention that there are pro-consolidation arguments to be worked through: for example on the impartiality of a dedicated service, its ability to provide central back-up facilities, and the risks of separation from like-minded colleagues. All can be argued in more than one direction; but they should not be by-passed.

Meanwhile, a case for consolidation is also being put forward by the Conservatives. The party promises to scrap Connexions and replace it with a single all-age, specialised and business-oriented careers service. In these proposals social-and-emotional concerns would be contracted to the voluntary sector.

This is a reminder of neo-conservative economic assumptions: people act rationally; in a social-and-cultural vacuum; and with the right skills all but a small minority can navigate any institutional pathway - whatever its configuration; because we are freely-choosing individuals.

Connexions doubts all of that.

why worry about Tomlinson?

So – as a matter of fact - does Tomlinson.

But seeking more integration in a stratified society may be a problem for politicians of any political party. Stratification means that the advantages of the parents are inherited by their children – origin predicts destination. Private education is part of the dynamic; and parental choice is closely entwined with it. So is the ‘gold standard’ of A-levels – it buys career preferment. In what might yet turn out to be a closely-fought election, it would be surprising if any government’s white paper risked headlines about ‘damaging your kid’s chances’. It would fly in the face of what papers do, and what families are for. So, for the time being, the issue must remain open.

The issue for Tomlinson is this: curriculum-and-assessment pathways are too divergent to be fair to all. Once, between 14 and 19 years, a person makes his or her first career-related move, then the system allows that momentum to take its course – in what has too-often proven to be a life-long-lasting event. That is why the system is stratifying. The issue is not about poverty, it is about entrapment.

working together

And Tomlinson is not talking about minorities: the report intends to influence the learning of all 14-19 year-olds. And it assumes widely-spread damage in the way we currently set up opportunities. That career-development damage is too widespread and too deeply embedded for the conventional apparatus of careers guidance to repair.

It is the depth and breadth of the problem that requires integrative solutions. Both Tomlinson and Connexions argue for stronger links between learning and life. Both recognise the need for a wider range of help: Connexions looks to voluntary and community-based help; Tomlinson seeks to engage the whole curriculum. Tomlinson is strong on curriculum, Connexions is strong on community. We need them both. And they need each other: Tomlinson can bring life-relevance to a unified education system; Connexions can develop a trusted and accessible network of community resources.

A test of any policy for careers work is how well it positions helpers to help. Careers work is a learning process and it is best located in a learning setting. And none of the current round of proposals would cause advisers to disappear in a puff of smoke. On the contrary, it would re-locate them where they can most help, and to where they can most influence the network of help.

Networks need coordinators: to develop the network, to put it in touch with learners, and to support the range of help it offers. It is hard to imagine anyone in a better position than careers advisers to occupy that role. Indeed, there are trained careers advisers already creating the role. It gives further meaning to that emerging concept of ‘sub-regional organisation’ for Connexions.

It would, of course, mean re-jigging career advisers' range of contacts and drawing on their networking and feedback skills. It would call on the training they already have; but it would also point to new areas of training. The word ‘professional’ occasionally gets a bad press; but even the most determined defender of professional values would not expect to get away with the argument that professions don’t change.

how much of this is new?

That said, few of the proposals now on the table are new. We have recent memories of successful community schools and colleges - representing wider purposes and more diverse resources than have become conventional in recent years. Community outreach work by careers advisers is certainly not new – it is often made to happen by networking professionals, learning as they go. The same is true of school-and college-based careers advisers.

And, on classroom uses of learning method: we know a lot about how learning is enabled through focussed and credible work-related tasks - drawing on more-than-one academic

discipline, as well as on links in the community. It is true that there have been wishy-washy versions of such integration. But we know how to avoid them.

I know of no direct evidence that would discredit a more integrated approach to careers work. Indeed, there is evidence to support it. Where such integrative strategies have been discarded, it has not been because they don't work, it has been because they conflict with dominant policy imperatives.

And policy imperatives are not categorical – they change.

don't miss the chance

Tomlinson and Connexions present the biggest opportunity realistically to contribute to society that careers work has yet been offered. We should welcome it.

But, as you know, every opportunity is also a threat! And this one will involve massive adjustment on our part. The people who must make Connexions and Tomlinson work will need stamina for a prolonged re-alignment of their networks. That development will reach far beyond any concept of 'partnership' – too many useful players.

It will also need new underpinning thought: on the cause-and-effect links between upbringing and opportunity, between culture and learning, and between working-life and quality-of-life.

Careers work in general has had some daunting claims made on its behalf. Among these is the enabling of life-long learning. Work of this depth and complexity needs more resources than careers services – or careers education – can muster. The Connexions-Tomlinson bridge puts that kind of work within our reach. It supports a broader and more effective path for progress.

All of this will expand the scope, deepen the expertise and enhance the contribution of all careers workers – which includes advisers and their many partners. Such developments often start with a concern for the most needy; careers work did. But – as careers work has already shown - that learning can be extended to the needs of all. The career-learning needs of the majority are not so different those of the minority – 'tho they may be less troublesome to other people. And – like Sure Start – career learning can be further extended into the whole community. Basic learning needs don't change that much over the years, Putting advisers in a position to help means putting them where they can draw on the resources needed for offering effective help; but it also means bring them from the margins, to where they can influence the expansion of help – for majority's as well as minorities, for older people as well as younger.

One of the most significant features in this repositioning of the work will be the opportunities it gives - to advisers in particular - to know all of these people at all these life stages - and to earn their trust. None of this will erode anybody's 'professionalism' - 'tho it may change what we mean by the term.

do we know where we're going?

There is a long way to go. Senior civil servants, speaking of Connexions, have been heard to declare that nobody is looking for a quick fix. An education minister, speaking of the white

paper, has declared ‘nothing is set in stone’. Learning from experience may need more than one incarnation of Connexions. And Tomlinson was always understood to be a decade-long programme.

It will be a bumpy ride: few such reforms offer everybody on board a guaranteed ‘win-win’. Concessions will have to be made. But the higher priority might be to avoid ‘lose-lose’. Withdrawal to the margins of the action would be a lose-lose.

There are at least three sets of integrative connections interwoven here:

***social integration* means a shared system for working on who-gets-to-do-what in our society:**

- > enabling people low in the pecking order to improve their life chances;
- > extending from that, to all who need career-planning help;
- > developing a sustainable strategies for enabling life-long career planning.

***professional integration* means recognising the authority of other sources of help:**

- > access school-and-college curriculum resources;
- > ... in careers education and from wherever they are found to be useful;
- > access other sources of help in the community:
- > ... among professional workers and voluntary help;
- > offering feedback on what works - and why;
- > coordinating and signposting networks of help.

***community integration* means respecting the locality:**

- > understanding local beliefs and values concerning working-life and quality-of-life;
- > appreciating what that means for what people do about work;
- > seeing how that is changing;
- > developing help that can be recognised and found accessible;
- > building trust in what is offered;
- > enabling people to know what of their culture they must hold to and how they will move on.

There is room for much variety here. In an activity as personality-based and as culturally-sensitive as careers work, helpers need to be able to find locally-appropriate ways of helping. The CPI papers (BL70-BL74) are designed to support that process. A problem for policy is the urge to standardise. You can see what there is to be gained from that, but there are also significant losses. And, in this encounter between careers work and policy, there is more-than-usual at stake.

One more thing - about that other ‘bridge-too-far’: Arnhem was not the end of that story either.