

Mind the gap between the policy announcements and implementation: The Youth Contract and Jobcentre Plus advisers' role as careers educators for 18–24-year olds

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Access to careers education for young people has been in decline under the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government due to changes in regulations and funding. Therefore it has become vital to deliver the commitments made in the Youth Contract to provide careers advice through Jobcentre Plus advisers. At the same time, other policy changes have put Jobcentre Plus advisers increasingly in the role of benefit enforcers. This paper explores how these two roles interact with each other and influence the experience of young people trying to access careers advice. We propose a framework that would encourage the development of a Jobcentre Plus fit for the purpose of the Youth Contract.

Keywords: careers education; jobcentre advisers; policy implementation

Introduction

On coming into government in May 2010, the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition faced many challenges as a consequence of the global financial crisis of 2007/8. One of those challenges was the level of youth unemployment, and especially of long-term youth unemployment. While youth unemployment (or the level of those not in education, employment, or training – NEET) had been a concern for some time before the financial crisis, the recession had led to a renewed interest in the issue, as those aged 18–24 appeared to have been disproportionately affected. The coalition faced youth unemployment levels above one million, with long-term youth unemployment above 250,000. Of those in the labour market 22 per cent were unemployed (Bivand *et al.*, 2011).

The government's response was to launch the Youth Contract, an active labour market policy aimed explicitly at young unemployed people. It was announced in the Autumn Statement in November 2011, heavily publically promoted by the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, and became an active policy in April 2012. This was not the first attempt within the UK to design policy to address youth unemployment. Under the previous New Labour Government the New Deal was the flagship scheme. The Labour Government had also attempted to target the young unemployed after the global financial crisis with their own active labour market policy, the Future Jobs Fund. This was launched in 2009 and was ended in March 2011 by the Coalition Government. In the recession of the 1980s, the Youth Training Scheme was the then Conservative

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Government's attempt to address high levels of youth unemployment. This paper will focus on one aspect of the Youth Contract, that of the changing role of Jobcentre Plus advisers, who were now expected to act as 'work coaches' for 18–24-year olds, and to be met weekly rather than fortnightly. A work coach was to act as a careers educator and mentor, supporting the young person to navigate his or her way successfully into the labour market. We will consider the effectiveness of using Jobcentre advisers as careers educators in light of observations gleaned during our research work in a London Jobcentre Plus office and in light of the other policies implemented at the same time as the Youth Contract.

Policy environment affecting the development of the work coach

The youth contract is not the first policy to focus on young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET). New Labour's New Deal for young people was the largest aspect of the New Deal programme, focusing on those under 25. It consisted of intensive initial compulsory consultation sessions with a New Deal adviser at the Jobcentre after six months of unemployment. The adviser supported the applicant through a range of options to develop job-search skills, and where that was not successful helped the young person select one of the gateways into a subsidized job, more education and training, or work in the voluntary sector or with the environmental task force. It was funded by a windfall tax on the privatized utilities. While it appeared successful when economic times were favourable, the New Deal proved expensive and less reliable during the financial crisis. It was replaced as the main focus for targeting youth unemployment with the Future Jobs Fund, which provided up to six months work experience, often in the public sector, to those who were defined as NEET. This was abandoned by the Coalition Government and replaced with the Youth Contract, which aimed to make better use of the private sector in work placements. At the same time, the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills was pushing hard at developing apprenticeships.

The Youth Contract launched in 2012 set out the following measures:

1. The Apprenticeship Grant for Employers of 16–24-year olds (AGE 16–24): payments of £1,500 are available to employers with less than fifty employees that take on young apprentices.
2. Work experience: placements are available for 16–24-year olds who have been claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) for at least 13 weeks through Jobcentre Plus.
3. Support for 16- and 17-year-old NEETs: payments of £2,200 are made to providers who take on 16- and 17-year olds who are not in education, employment, or training and who have low or no qualifications, and those from other disadvantaged backgrounds.
4. Sector-based work academies: some 18–24-year-old JSA claimants will be offered a mixture of training, work experience, and a job interview at a local firm through Jobcentre Plus.
5. Extra support at Jobcentre Plus: 18–24-year-old JSA claimants will be offered weekly rather than fortnightly signing-on meetings at the Jobcentre Plus.
6. Funding for localized Youth Contracts: localized Youth Contracts are available in Leeds City Region, Liverpool, and Newcastle. These cities designed their own local schemes using national funding.
7. Wage incentives: payments of up to £2,275 were available to employers who took on young people (aged 18–24) claiming Jobseeker's Allowance for more than six months. Enrolments for this scheme ended on 6 August 2014.

(Mirza-Davies, 2015: 1)

Looking at these measures highlights the crucial role of the Jobcentre Plus adviser as the gatekeeper and guide to many of the opportunities proposed in the Youth Contract, especially for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and those who are most distanced from the labour market. The weekly appointments with the same adviser should in theory have helped the young person and the work coach to develop a relationship that would help the young person to navigate the various options available and select the most appropriate one.

For those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, navigating the transition to work can be very challenging. With 48 per cent of NEETs leaving education with no work experience, it is clear that many have little practical knowledge of the labour market to draw on when looking for work (Sissons and Jones, 2012). Therefore, the role of the work coach is a crucial aspect of the Youth Contract in ensuring that the young person is able to access the various opportunities available to them. It becomes important therefore to look at the role of the Jobcentre Plus adviser as a careers educator for unemployed young people. The focus on those defined as NEET has been challenged in the academic literature since the New Deal for Young People. Furlong (2006) highlights the issues of pulling together this diverse group of young people and suggesting that one policy can work for all. This has been as much of a challenge for the Youth Contract as for the New Deal, except that given the economic downturn many more of the less disadvantaged also found they were workless and so the NEET population has become more diverse. In response to this diversity Berkel and Valkenburg (2007) have advocated more personalization in services such as youth employment services. This was to be achieved in the Youth Contract through the development of the relationship between adviser and client.

At about the same time that the Youth Contract was launched, three other key policy changes were challenging the role of the Jobcentre Plus adviser as a careers educator. These policy changes resulted from these developments in 2011: the Education Act 2011, the changes in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Performance Management of Jobcentre Plus, and the Work Programme.

Firstly, the Education Act 2011 led to a reduction in local authority careers guidance, such as Connexions, across England and the added pressure on schools to provide careers guidance without extra funding or staff training. The experience in Scotland and Wales was different as this was a devolved issue. Another article in this issue highlights the impact on schools of this change in the responsibility to provide careers education from local authorities to schools. At the same time, the National Careers Service became a service that was only delivered online. This loss of local authority responsibility led to the closure of many local services, with local authorities feeling the burden of austerity. In our study area, the local services dedicated to those aged between 18 and 24 closed as a result of this change in responsibility, adding to the need for the Jobcentre Plus advisers to be effective careers educators.

Secondly, changes in the DWP Performance Management of Jobcentre Plus had wide-ranging impacts on Jobcentre Plus advisers: 'The new Jobcentre Plus Offer was designed to change the way that Jobcentre Plus operates by placing an increased focus on outcomes rather than procedural targets' (Coulter *et al.*, 2012: 1). This move towards being outcomes focused led to Jobcentre Plus advisers being judged on the achievement of a high 'off-flow' rate. The off flow is defined as the end of a benefit claim, which is not necessarily a move into work, education, or training. Early evaluations of jobseeker experiences have suggested that this change of focus has embedded the perception that meetings with the Jobcentre Plus adviser have little additional benefit beyond ensuring the continued payment of welfare benefits. There are also considerable differences in the experience of the jobseeker depending on the Jobcentre Plus adviser they are allocated (Coulter *et al.*, 2012). It is clear that a focus on off-flow rates has limited the development of the work coach role for the adviser as defined by the Youth Contract, resulting in jobseekers tending

to perceive the main purpose of weekly appointments to be the continuance of benefits, rather than having a conversation with a careers educator.

The focus on outcomes also involved the introduction of the use of sanctions. The Jobcentre Plus adviser was provided with the tool of removing welfare benefits, known as sanctions, for those who did not actively seek work. Of all the reforms introduced in 2011, the use of sanctions has often been a subject for heated debate. In a Work and Pensions Committee report in 2014 on the role of Jobcentre Plus in the reformed welfare system, sanctions featured strongly, with many in the public and voluntary sector presenting evidence either of the justness of the use of sanctions or of the damage caused to those to whom sanctions were applied. Loopstra *et al.* (2015) found that between June 2011 and March 2014, more than 1.9 million sanctions were imposed on people receiving Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), representing a 40 per cent increase on the previous seven years. Of those sanctioned, 43 per cent ceased trying to claim the benefit afterwards, with only 20 per cent reporting that the reason for this was that they had found work. The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), which represents Jobcentre Plus advisers, sees the push to use sanctions by the Department for Work and Pensions as a serious threat to the relationship between Jobcentre Plus advisers and their clients. In their alternative vision of the welfare system, they propose the removal of sanctions and a move towards a more supportive (work-coach type) model of the Jobcentre Plus adviser (PCS, 2013).

It is clear that the work coach approach proposed by the Youth Contract and the pressure from the new Performance Management System focused on off-flow rates and use of sanctions, suggest two very different roles for Jobcentre Plus advisers. We would suggest that it does not appear that there is much time to adopt both roles in a weekly appointment of thirty minutes with the Jobcentre Plus adviser. Evidence from customers for the Department for Work and Pensions (Coleman *et al.*, 2014) suggests that the experience is very varied across the system, both between and within Jobcentres. Jordan and Thomas (2013) interviewed staff about their experience of the Youth Contract. Here again the experience was very diverse, and the report suggested that having dedicated teams of Youth Contract advisers worked better as a way of managing the process locally. This suggests that the role of the Jobcentre Plus adviser as a work coach is far from developed yet.

Finally, the Work Programme was introduced to take on the responsibility for helping the long-term unemployed back to work. The Work Programme shifted the responsibility for the long-term unemployed from the Jobcentre Plus adviser to other organizations through the use of key contractors in all three sectors of the economy (public, private, and third sector). While the New Deal of the Labour Government had sought to keep support for the long-term unemployed with the Jobcentre advisers, supported by an education provider such as Further Education Colleges, the Work Programme sought to pass the responsibility for those furthest from the labour market to other organizations than Jobcentre Plus. Contractors receive payment by results, with the provider only receiving payment once the client has secured employment. Biggins (2012) identified four issues with the Work Programme in relation to young people. Firstly, despite being advertised as a diverse offer to promote individual needs, there was little tailoring to support young people. Secondly, although advertised as available for those unemployed for three months, most young people had to wait nine months to become eligible for support and this led many to feel quite detached from the labour market before support was received. Thirdly, the Work Programme focused heavily on job search skills and work-first activation, but many young people also lacked work experience and would have derived greater benefit from real work experience and first jobs than from more training. This need for work experience had been the motivation for the disbanded Future Jobs Fund. Finally, the Work Programme did not guarantee jobs as had previous Labour Government initiatives such as the New Deal and the

Future Jobs Fund, but instead offered the promise of an interview. The solution to many of these issues when the Youth Contract was launched was a six-month wage incentive to businesses, although this subsidy has subsequently been withdrawn. As in the case of the Work Programme, the Youth Contract relies heavily on the private sector to provide employment, unlike the Future Jobs Fund, which was largely based on public sector involvement. The role of the Jobcentre Plus adviser as a work coach and careers adviser was to act as a guide to various options available to the young jobseeker.

Considering the policy environment in which the Youth Contract was launched, it is clear that the Jobcentre adviser is expected to fulfil three different roles (shown in Table 1).

Table 1: Jobcentre adviser roles

Policy	Jobcentre adviser role	
Youth Contract	Work coach	Careers educator and mentor
Performance Management / sanctions	Off-flow monitor	Benefit enforcer*
Work Programme	Broker for Work Programme providers	Loss of direct responsibility

*The term benefit enforcer is used in this paper to represent the sanctions and other tools given to Jobcentre advisers to encourage active job search.

The concept of the work coach places the Jobcentre Plus adviser in the role of careers educator for the young unemployed person. With the loss of careers professionals in local authority services such as Connexions, the moving of the National Careers Service online, and the lack of funding for schools to teach careers education, it is likely that for many of our most disadvantaged young people the Jobcentre Plus adviser is now the only careers educator to which they will have been exposed. Beyond the struggle to balance all three of these roles in a weekly thirty-minute appointment, Jobcentre Plus advisers have been offered little training or professional development to step into the role of careers educator. This policy shift could be viewed as undermining the status of careers professionals. Careers professionals with experience in working with young people have been laid off by local authorities or moved online, while those providing careers advice in schools do not have the resources to do this well and those in the Jobcentre Plus have time constraints and little training to take on the role effectively. With many other Coalition Government policies, such as the expansion of the apprenticeship scheme and the raising of the school leaving age, changing the pathways to the labour market for young people, good quality careers support is needed to ensure that all have equal access to the opportunities around them.

The loss of local authority careers services and the change of the National Careers Service to an online-only service have led to the loss of effective career support for young people as well as the loss to the profession of the specific area of expertise of these displaced careers professionals. Together with the integration of careers advice in school teaching and within Jobcentre functions, we argue that these policy changes reflect a 'de-professionalization' of this important area of service delivery.

Observational insights from the local Jobcentre Plus

Between September 2011 and September 2013 we were involved with a Jobcentre Plus office in London as part of a youth worklessness project. We had started our programme of work in July 2010 using the British Household Panel Survey to understand the determinants of youth worklessness. It soon became clear that while this approach was generating interesting results

it did not answer the policy problem of how best to support young people in their transition to work (Cagliesi and Hawkes, 2013; Cagliesi *et al.*, 2015).

We managed to secure access to the local Jobcentre Plus team working with Young People (18–24). We first wanted to ask the young people themselves about their experiences of trying to find work, to confirm with primary data the results from the secondary data analysis. We built a questionnaire based around labour economics, social connections, and behavioural economics. This questionnaire was administered by an interviewer to three groups of young people: our own third-year undergraduate students as a control group, young people volunteering at a local theatre group who were also unemployed as a comparator group, and the young jobseekers at the local Jobcentre Plus at the end of 2011. The results of this pilot survey can be found in Cagliesi, DeVita, and Hawkes (2013).

The results suggested a range of ways to help develop the role of the Jobcentre Plus adviser to support young people better. These included: supplementing the weekly adviser meeting with emails and text messages between visits to highlight possible job and training opportunities; more focused support around CV development and application preparation; focus on the wording used in written documents and by the Jobcentre Plus adviser, to emphasize opportunities rather than sanctions; and motivating the unemployed youth in terms of main life goals in addition to finding a job. All of these approaches would suggest a model of the Jobcentre Plus adviser more aligned to that of the work coach and careers educator than that of the benefit enforcer.

While setting up and conducting the interviews at the Jobcentre Plus office, it was clear that a closer look at the role of the adviser was needed. During this two-year period of engaging with the Jobcentre Plus staff, there were plenty of opportunities to observe the Jobcentre Plus advisers at work and have discussions with them about their role. It was clear from the discussions that while the Jobcentre Plus advisers knew they were expected to take on an educational role in the Youth Contract, the realities of the service delivery were very different.

The highlights of these discussions were threefold. Firstly, everyone was clear that a good adviser was one with a high off-flow rate. All the advisers knew who the best were according to this measure, as well as how it was determined. Some advisers were known as the sanction kings or queens, being effective at sanction applications and having few successful appeals against their decisions. This perception of a good adviser as one with a high off-flow rate is an inevitable consequence of policy (and policy discourse) at a national level. With the government characterizing unemployment as an individual motivational issue, and using key performance indicators (KPIs) to encourage activities to drive off-flow, this had inevitably shaped the behaviour of advisers. This perception of a good adviser was therefore the consequence of the policy language and direction rather than of the behaviour of individual advisers.

A small number of advisers more closely followed the work-coach model, taking a genuine interest in their clients, and already using text messages and emails between meetings to prompt their clients about upcoming meetings at the Jobcentre Plus office and job and training opportunities. While this was closer to the model of the adviser that most thought of as ideal, many considered that the benefit-enforcer model was more achievable in a thirty-minute appointment with existing workloads of clients. Again, this move towards 'a benefit-enforcement service' is likely to be an inevitable consequence of a high-level national policy agenda that assumes that individual behavioural deficits are the root of the problem, and that work-first activation is the only possible solution. In this policy environment it is clear that to consider the Jobcentre Plus adviser as being in the position to provide careers education and support for the Youth Contract is at best naive and at worst misleading.

Secondly, our observation at the Jobcentre Plus office showed that the use of language by the clients and advisers was usually curt and often aggressive or rude. One issue arose

when a jobseeker saw the same adviser every week. With the large number of young people coming back to benefits after only a short time on training or in work, there was often a long history between the adviser and client, which made it difficult for the adviser to operate as a work coach. This was especially the case for those young people considered to be from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who were the furthest from the labour market and had the longest history with the Jobcentre Plus staff. Many advisers viewed 'tough love' as the only option remaining in these cases. It appeared that making the visits to the Jobcentre Plus office weekly rather than fortnightly under the Youth Contract had made this worse, as these difficult conversations were had more frequently and little time was available for the adviser to adopt the careers educator role.

In one interview that one of the author's observed, the young person was five minutes late for their appointment. When the client sat down the adviser stated clearly that they would be sanctioned for repeated lateness, saying: 'late again; I will be forwarding you to be sanctioned'. The lack of a greeting was usual, as was the direct and curt address on starting a conversation. The conversation continued in this curt style when checking the job search activity of the client, who now showed signs of annoyance. There was no time left for the work coach role and the young person left, annoyed and no wiser about the opportunities available. This was not an unusual event and in two years at the Jobcentre Plus office we only witnessed a handful of careers professional interviews, all by the same adviser with new clients who were likely not to be claiming for long. With such ways of speaking with each other being the social norm, conversations of a more constructive nature about future careers options would be highly unlikely.

Finally, the most troublesome issue faced by the Jobcentre Plus advisers was the non-attendance or lateness of the young people for appointments. The advisers frequently found themselves waiting for a client to appear, adding to their annoyance when the client did appear with little reason for their tardiness. This was especially an issue with those who were late regularly, as can be seen in the example above. For those not attending and those who were persistently late, sanctions were common and with such packed diaries of appointments there was little time to explore why the young people were not engaging with the service. In such an environment even the best work coach would struggle to engage the young person. Again, the policy direction towards a benefit-enforcement service not only drove the advisers' work practice but also the engagement of young people with the service. One young person ended a conversation with: 'I did not come here to be insulted'. This environment was hardly conducive to providing careers education and guidance, and the lack of engagement meant that if there were times when this was possible, they could very well be missed by the clients.

Therefore, although the rhetoric in the Youth Contract suggested a weekly appointment with a work coach, the reality was frequently a missed, difficult, or rushed thirty-minute appointment. The advisers knew improvement was needed, but did not have the time or the motivation to do better, given the off-flow target. They were clear that a work-coach style appointment was needed, but the capacity to develop this did not exist in this much-stretched service with KPIs attached to off-flow. Finally, it is worth noting that this situation was not unique to this Jobcentre Plus office, as presentations of our research at conferences, or even a quick search on YouTube, provided further, anecdotal evidence of a much wider problem within the Jobcentre Plus service.

With the loss of careers education obligations for local authorities, a retreating National Careers Service, and schools faced with providing careers education with no additional resources and guidance, it is clear that the Jobcentre Plus service is not in the position to fill the void. It would seem that careers education lost its way under the Coalition Government at a time when many young people need it the most.

What next for careers education?

For the incoming Conservative Government in 2015 it is clear that there is a need to develop a strategy to improve careers education for young people, especially for those most disadvantaged who are likely to access Jobcentre Plus offices and not go on to university or straight into apprenticeships after completing compulsory schooling. If the expectations of the Youth Contract, including the adoption of a work-coach role by Jobcentre Plus advisers, are to be reflected in the reality of service delivery, there are three key aspects to the careers education strategy that need to be developed:

1) Developing a new identity for the Jobcentre and the role of the Jobcentre adviser

Akerlof and Kranton (2010) developed a new branch of behavioural economics that looks at the role of identity in how we behave with each other. It is clear that for its clients the Jobcentre Plus service has the identity of a benefit enforcement service. While this may have helped to promote off-flow from welfare benefits, such an identity is not useful in developing the role of the adviser as a work coach and deliverer of careers advice and guidance. If the Jobcentre Plus adviser is to operate as a work coach, the separation of the 'sign on' function and the 'careers advice' function could be the starting point in helping to establish a new identity. That is, the thirty-minute meeting is divided into a ten-minute sign-on session and sanctions conversation followed by a twenty-minute conversation with another member of the team to talk about careers opportunities.

2) Providing training and resources to improve Jobcentre Plus advisers' skills as careers educators to improve the quality of weekly appointments

From our own study, and additional work undertaken by the Behavioural Insights Team in other RCT trials in different Jobcentre Plus offices, the use of language by time-pressured and off-flow targeted advisers can be improved through training, which can have positive effects in terms of off-flow and engagement with job search. Reducing the number of confrontational meetings will also help the advisers to focus on the role of work coach. The reduction of such meetings is also likely to promote the engagement of the young people with the Jobcentre Plus adviser. There is definitely work to do around the language used in written and verbal communication by the Jobcentre Plus advisers.

3) Professionalization of Jobcentre Plus advisers

With more demands being placed exclusively on Jobcentre Plus advisers to act as careers educators, it is timely to consider the professionalization of this group of civil servants, just as Celia Whitchurch (2012) did for 'third space' professionals in higher education. For the development of the work coach model, and careers education in the Jobcentre, it is vital to make an investment in the people who are to be the work coaches, both financially and in terms of training. It also provides a role for institutions such as UCL Institute of Education to step up and develop programmes that could be used to help develop the advisers to fulfil the rhetoric of the Youth Contract and provide new life for careers education in the UK.

Conclusion

It is clear that the Coalition Government's track record on careers education is poor. Local authority services have been dismantled in England, schools have been tasked with providing careers education without additional funding and training, and Jobcentre Plus advisers have been tasked with the impossible role of being both benefit enforcement officers and work coaches. These changes taken together have left a generation of young people with little careers education

and guidance, a loss not just for these five years at a time of high youth unemployment, but a lost opportunity to help young people understand the world of work they are entering for the next forty to fifty years. It is clear to the authors of this paper that, to help these same young people, careers education and guidance need to be considered in detail by the incoming government in 2015, and if that responsibility is to stay with Jobcentre Plus advisers then a rethink of that role in terms of professionalization is needed. Finally, future governments need to take more care to ensure policy announcements and decisions are also evaluated in terms of service delivery, especially in areas such as careers education that span multiple government departments.

Notes on the contributors

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