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Navigating post-16 careers guidance: supporting learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds

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Executive summary

High-quality careers guidance is crucial for improving students' confidence in decision-making, helping them to align their educational choices with their career aspirations, and improving employment outcomes in early adulthood.[footnote 1] Research has shown that careers guidance benefits students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may not have access to the same levels of social capital as their peers.[footnote 2] Young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are still more likely to be claiming out-of-work benefits by the time they are 27, compared to their peers.[footnote 3]

Our recent studies on careers guidance have focused on the quality of careers education in schools, further education and skills providers, and specialist

settings.[footnote 4] They highlighted concerns about the level of support that pupils in more deprived local areas are receiving. Further education colleges, in particular, play an important role in helping students who were previously eligible for free school meals to transition from school to employment. But there is not enough evidence about the quality of careers guidance for these students.

To help fill this gap, the Department for Education (DfE) asked Ofsted to carry out a third study on careers guidance, focused on the quality of careers guidance that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds receive from further education providers. We were particularly interested in how students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are being identified and supported, and the barriers college leaders face in providing them with coherent and impactful careers guidance. During the 2024 summer term, we carried out research visits to 3 secondary schools, 19 general further education colleges and 6 sixth-form colleges. We also carried out interviews with 7 local authorities, 2 focus groups with employers, and a survey of parents from the schools and colleges we visited.

We found that many general education careers programmes in colleges were designed with vulnerable and disadvantaged students in mind. In the further education colleges we visited, the programmes were designed in this way due to leaders' awareness that many of their students come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Targeted support was often provided for certain vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, particularly those that had specific funding streams allocated to them, because students in those groups had already been identified. For instance, college leaders knew which of their students had high needs, were looked-after children or were unaccompanied asylum seekers speaking English as a second language.

However, it was rare for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to receive careers guidance that was tailored to their needs. College leaders told us that these students often belonged to other vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and were therefore likely to be receiving additional careers support via those routes. But they felt that information provided by feeder schools about their students when they transitioned to college was often poor, and all the colleges we visited relied on students to declare any additional needs so they could receive targeted support. Although they regularly promoted information about support services for disadvantaged students, they could not guarantee that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were accessing it, particularly those from the most deprived 20%. This meant that they could not be sure that all students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were receiving the tailored careers guidance they needed.

College leaders placed a lot of emphasis on school collaboration for identifying these students. They said that the limited information schools provide was one of the main barriers to providing targeted careers guidance for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. On the other hand, however, none of them specifically told us that they were using the DfE's Get Information about Pupils (GIAP) tool.

The quality of the general careers guidance varied considerably. In a few colleges, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds felt the careers guidance they received was too generic to meet their specific needs and was often delivered by support staff without the necessary expertise. Other colleges provided a greater range of activities for students to engage with employers, such as careers fairs. But even these more varied programmes of careers guidance were often rudimentary and lacked coherence.

Careers guidance worked best when it was not an isolated aspect of college provision but was integrated into a course of study. Several of the colleges visited had an overarching strategy in place that allowed for collaborative working between curriculum staff, careers advisers and employers. This ensured that strong links could be made between students' career aspirations, the knowledge and skills they were learning, meaningful work experience, and their transition into further study or employment. This appeared to benefit all students, not just those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

This worked particularly well when a level 6 careers adviser was assigned to a particular subject or vocational curriculum. However, all of the colleges and local authorities we spoke to were struggling to recruit qualified level 6 careers advisers due to the lack of availability of suitable applicants. Most leaders were finding other ways to plug the gaps of dedicated careers staff, such as by using untrained but experienced staff from industry or level 4 qualified staff. There was general agreement among our interviewees that the shortage of level 6 careers advisers was hindering the quality and quantity of careers guidance they could deliver.

As we found in our previous research, colleges were struggling to find enough work placements for all students. Virtual working has become the norm in some sectors, restricting the availability of placements. Despite fewer opportunities for work placements in some areas, all the colleges visited were making sure that vulnerable and disadvantaged students had at least some contact with employers via other means. These included careers fairs, workshops, visits to workplaces and universities, and networking events. The students we spoke to generally found these engagement activities helpful for thinking about their career pathways.

The majority of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds told us that they could not remember receiving any careers guidance while they were at school. In most cases, they chose their college due to its convenient location or because their peers did, rather than because of the courses on offer. College leaders told us that they were seeing more students starting college without any idea of the courses or careers they wanted to pursue. This was placing pressure on college staff to provide more careers support for students from the outset.

Despite these challenges, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were generally positive about the careers guidance they received from college staff and associated activities. Most said that their careers guidance had raised their confidence and that they now had a better idea of the next steps they would take at post-18 transition. This was the case even where the general careers education programme available to students was less coherent.

Introduction

Careers guidance is crucial for helping young people to make informed decisions about their education, training and career paths. Increased exposure to careers guidance during secondary school is associated with improved employment and educational outcomes in early adulthood.[footnote 5] Evidence from schools that integrate personal guidance into broader career education programmes suggests that these improve students' personal effectiveness, career readiness and educational outcomes.[footnote 6] This guidance has been shown to build students' confidence in making decisions and help them align their educational choices with their career aspirations.[footnote 7] Less familiar options, like workplace visits and careers fairs, have also been shown to be effective ways to deliver careers guidance.[footnote 8]

Research has shown that students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have lower levels of attainment by the time they finish 16 to 19 education.[footnote 9] One study showed that around 24% of individuals eligible for free school meals in Year 11 were on out-of-work benefits at age 27, compared to only 8% of those who had not been eligible.[footnote 10] And despite the increasing participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education over the last decade, persistent barriers remain.[footnote 11] According to the Careers & Enterprise Company, despite improvements in the proportion of schools and colleges fully meeting the personal guidance benchmark (Gatsby benchmark 8), some colleges highlighted that a minority of their students had not received direct advice from trained careers advisers by the end of their programme of study. [footnote 12] Without adequate career guidance, these students remain at a disadvantage when transitioning to the labour market. For example, they are more likely to attend universities with lower employability outcomes than students from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.[footnote 13] For learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, therefore, careers guidance serves as an essential tool for opening doors to meaningful career opportunities.

Studies suggest that young people from different socioeconomic groups have similar levels of aspiration – instead, it is often the expectations of teachers and parents that limit the careers options considered by students from disadvantaged backgrounds.[footnote 14] Evidence suggests that interventions designed to raise students' aspirations have little effect in narrowing gaps in educational attainment.[footnote 15] Careers guidance and support play a more important role. The implication for teachers (and parents) is that they need to support young people not just in raising their aspirations, but also in understanding how they can work towards fulfilling them.[footnote 16] Expanding students' understanding of careers they could pursue can be more impactful than just raising their aspirations more generally.[footnote 17] It has been argued that the process of meeting expectations needs to begin earlier in the education of young people from lower income backgrounds.[footnote 18]

In response to these challenges, several initiatives have been introduced in England to increase access to careers guidance for disadvantaged students. These have focused on ensuring that students have effective guidance about the

full range of careers options open to them, including a balanced view between academic and technical/vocational routes. The government's careers framework for schools and colleges since 2017, called the Gatsby benchmarks, has been used to promote the development of a high-quality, structured careers programme in schools and further education providers.[footnote 19] The Careers & Enterprise Company was established to foster partnerships between education providers, employers and career professionals, supporting institutions in delivering high-quality guidance. This included the creation of local careers networks that aim to connect disadvantaged learners with regional employers, enhancing access to career advice and opportunities. Similarly, the National Careers Service's community-based and digital offers provide young people (13+), including disadvantaged young people, with access to free, impartial advice on career planning, job applications and interview preparation. The National Careers Service also offers in-depth, tailored support to 18- to 24-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), who are one of the Service's 6 priority groups. And Digital Skills Partnerships have sought to address the digital divide by equipping learners from disadvantaged backgrounds with the technical skills necessary for the modern job market.

The current statutory guidance for schools and colleges on providing careers guidance specifies that young people have different needs at different stages and that opportunities for advice and support need to be tailored to the individual student.[footnote 20] The guidance specifies that targeted careers support is particularly vital for vulnerable and disadvantaged students. Although it does not specifically mention students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, eligibility for free school meals has long been an important metric for measuring disadvantage in schools, and is the primary basis for the additional funding that schools receive through the pupil premium. However, findings from our previous reviews on careers guidance highlighted concerns about the level of careers support received by students from deprived areas.[footnote 21] In particular, while further education colleges play a major role in facilitating the transition of students previously eligible for free school meals from school to employment, there is a dearth of evidence available about the transition of this disadvantaged group from school to college and about the quality of careers guidance colleges provide.

To address these evidence gaps, the DfE commissioned Ofsted to undertake a third phase of careers research. This time, we focused on the careers support available for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in further education providers. We were interested in answering the following questions:

- How do further education providers define and identify students from a lower socioeconomic background?
- How do further education leaders ensure careers guidance is effective in providing learners from a lower socioeconomic background with the correct support to progress to sustained employment, further study or training?
- What barriers prevent careers guidance from being delivered effectively for this group?
- How are further education leaders ensuring collaborative working between secondary schools and further education colleges to ensure that students are

receiving the most up-to-date careers guidance to make effective choices to support transitions?

- How are local authorities and employers supporting these students with careers guidance to prepare them for their pathway from further education providers to employment?

- What are the perspectives of parents on the effectiveness of the careers education, information, advice and guidance their child has received?

During the 2024 summer term, His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and researchers from Ofsted's research and evaluation team carried out 28 research visits. We visited 19 general further education colleges, 6 sixth-form colleges and 3 secondary schools. During these visits, we held discussions with leaders, staff and 251 students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. We also gathered evidence from: interviews with 7 local authorities, 2 focus groups with employers, and a survey of 241 parents from the schools and colleges visited. Full details of the methods used, including the limitations of this study, can be found in the annex at the end of this report.

Main findings

Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were not always considered a priority for targeted careers support

Recent analysis suggests that a higher proportion of students in further education colleges come from disadvantaged backgrounds than in school sixth forms or sixth-form colleges.[footnote 22] This aligns with the perception of many leaders at the further education providers we visited.

Many leaders told us that the general careers guidance programme they offer was designed to meet the needs of disadvantaged students. Several said that they did not have specific careers guidance for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds because most of the 16- to 18-year-olds attending were disadvantaged in some way:

> "They are not targeted differently. We have an inclusive careers service that is designed to meet the needs of all. We take a view that the majority of students will be vulnerable."
>
> (Careers lead, general further education college)

Some leaders told us their definition of disadvantage was broad and did not just focus on socioeconomic background:

> "The cohort is predominantly disadvantaged in a variety of ways. [Around] 95% of young people are disadvantaged, [in ways that include] safeguarding, receiving student support, have counselling, receive bursary, free school meal eligibility, etc. We don't have a special college strategy for disadvantaged."
>
> (Leader, general further education college)

Furthermore, several leaders expressed concerns about providing targeted careers approaches for specific groups, including those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, because they did not want to label their students and potentially lower expectations.

When our interviewees mentioned targeted or additional careers support, it was often prioritised for groups of students considered disadvantaged by other parameters. Interestingly, despite our study being focused on students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, college leaders and staff tended instead to highlight the bespoke support they were providing for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or high needs, care-experienced or local authority looked-after children, and persistent absentees at risk of being NEET. Many also highlighted the growing number of asylum seekers – especially unaccompanied minors and students of English for speakers of other languages – who needed extra support. Leaders felt that these groups were the most vulnerable in their cohort and required more targeted careers provision. Some noted that students with disadvantages that had funding streams attached were easier to target, as they had already been identified in the process of allocating funding.

Several leaders told us that many of their students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often belonged to other vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, and therefore would be receiving additional support in terms of funding or careers guidance anyway. However, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds should not be seen as a single group with identical characteristics, because some of these students will be more economically disadvantaged than others. The intersection with other disadvantaged groups means that some learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are receiving bespoke careers support. However, we are concerned that many of these students are only receiving generic careers guidance, which is of variable quality and does not meet their expectations:

> "Although information was useful, it has been in tutorial and very general."
>
> (Year 12 student, general further education college)

"Also, would like more input from outside. Seems that some areas have this, and others don't. Would like more people to come in and talk from outside in tutorial session."

(Year 12 student, general further education college)

"Mentorship was really helpful for me but if it's not been made accessible to you then it's no use."

(Year 13 student, sixth-form college)

Recent evidence suggests that the funding available for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is over a third lower in post-16 education than in schools.[footnote 23] Many of the leaders we spoke to expressed frustration at the lack of funding for this group of students. They explained that this lack of funding makes it harder to support all their students, and cited it to justify their decisions to target bespoke careers guidance at vulnerable and disadvantaged groups for whom funding is provided:

"[We] no longer [receive] funding for university partnerships. Universities get it to promote [higher education] – however, it should be the other way around. For example, I previously funded a staff member who specifically targeted learners [from lower socioeconomic backgrounds] and worked with them to widen participation. This was very effective and got students placements and introduced those who had not previously considered it to higher education."

(Careers lead, general further education college)

Despite this, a few colleges we visited told us that they were targeting students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with bespoke careers support. In these cases, students tended to be identified using postcode information, matching this to the Index of Multiple Deprivation data (which is used to assign additional funding), and previous eligibility for the pupil premium.[footnote 24] These colleges usually had stronger links with feeder schools to help identify their lower socioeconomic cohort and better understand their needs.

Identification and knowledge-sharing on students' backgrounds was variable and has implications for post-16 transition

Most of the college leaders we spoke to said they found collaborating with some of their feeder schools difficult. Several told us that this hindered their attempts to identify students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds on entry so that they could put in place early careers support and ensure they were on a course that would meet their aspirations.

These leaders generally understood the circumstances in schools that make collaboration difficult, including limited resources (time and capacity) to collaborate, and competing priorities for school leaders. College leaders said that the burden often fell on them to proactively go out to local secondary schools to promote the college's educational pathways and careers guidance and support. Also, not all schools responded to their requests to come and speak to pupils about the courses they offer, or actively promoted the careers events that the colleges organised.

This was a more common issue with schools that had a sixth form. College leaders said that these schools tended to focus their careers guidance on level 3 qualifications and their own post-16 offer. They felt that these schools had limited interest in offering information on vocational and technical education pathways.

College leaders were particularly concerned about limited data sharing from schools, which they told us sometimes prevents effective collaboration. The careers leaders that we spoke to said that some schools were more willing than others to share information about their pupils. They often attributed this to school leaders' misunderstandings about the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) or to their not having reliable systems to share information securely. However, it is also worth noting that none of the college leaders mentioned that they had used the DfE's GIAP tool to find information about their students, and only a few had matched students' postcodes with the Index of Multiple Deprivation data.[footnote 25] This aligns with recent evidence suggesting that GIAP is not widely used in the sector, with colleges preferring to undertake their own assessments of students on entry in direct collaboration with schools.[footnote 26]

Other collaborations between schools and colleges were more successful. Some college staff indicated that introducing the college at school careers events and assemblies was increasing engagement from pupils. Several colleges had an outreach team to carry out these activities and had a strategy to target disadvantaged pupils. Staff that were able to work more closely with schools said that effective collaboration helped them to identify students from wider disadvantaged backgrounds before they joined the college. This allowed them to plan additional support in advance:

> "We are clear about where they come from educationally, where they live, if they received free school meals – we get a pretty clear picture from day one."
>
> (Careers lead, general further education college)

> "Schools do tend to offer information about students due to the strong links we have. It can be a range of issues and challenges that young people are facing."
>
> (Leader, general further education college)

Staff from a few colleges highlighted other types of activity they had used to develop good relationships with local schools. For instance, one partnership between a school and college for 14- to 16-year-olds also included employers. They created a scheme where disadvantaged pupils could attend college for a few days and participate in work experience. At the end of the scheme, they were guaranteed an interview for an apprenticeship. College staff felt that this helped pupils develop their knowledge and skills in areas relevant to their future career prospects.

Another college highlighted how they had invested in support for local schools by supplying additional maths and English teachers to support pupils who were predicted to achieve grade 3 or 4 at GCSE. The college staff followed this up by working with these schools to identify potential barriers for students before they started at the college. Such barriers included attendance, safeguarding issues, mental health issues and SEND.

Successful post-16 transitions were also a focus for the local authority careers leaders we spoke to. They were clear that their having strong, collaborative relationships with schools was pivotal for helping students who needed extra support to successfully transition to college. They used networking and inclusion meetings to support pupil transitions and share important information about pupils. One college was working closely with local authorities to pilot a data-sharing programme between schools and further education providers to help identify students in need of additional support. When data was shared effectively, local authorities were able to track pupil destinations accurately and could quickly follow up with any individuals who were at risk of becoming NEET.

For post-18 transition, some colleges were timetabling lessons and extra support to make sure disadvantaged students were ready for employment. These lessons often included help with CVs, mock interviews and job applications. For students who wanted to progress to higher education, several colleges encouraged them to develop independence to help with the transition. They did this by providing sessions that focused on student finance or other financial support available, and on developing soft skills, such as resilience, timekeeping, confidence, analytical thinking, problem solving and oracy.

Too many students, however, were having to opt in to support services

Where collaboration with schools was poorer, college leaders and staff typically relied on students to self-declare their needs when they entered further education. All the colleges we visited had systems to make sure that information about students, for example if they were accessing extra support, was accessible. And they were promoting the support available for disadvantaged students, including students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, throughout the various stages of the enrolment process. However, several leaders told us that disadvantaged students did not always declare this status at registration.

Some colleges used more discreet ways of promoting support services available to make sure more students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds could access them, such as in tutorial sessions. Several college leaders also mentioned that they offered summer schools and taster days so that students, particularly those requiring extra support, could experience college life before they started.

Despite these various ways that information was regularly provided to all students, however, leaders said that they could not be sure they were reaching all students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. One said: "We rely on disclosures and there can be gaps." Several students made similar comments – for example:

> "I wish I had access earlier – I wasn't told I could get access to help until I had to be making decisions."
>
> (Year 12 learner)

The strongest careers guidance for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds integrated curriculum and employer needs into an overarching strategy

As noted above, all the colleges we visited provided general careers guidance to support the needs of their disadvantaged cohorts. However, for too many, the careers offer was ad-hoc and generic – more of a tick-box exercise than something designed to meet the career expectations of students, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

These colleges lacked an overarching strategy. They generally had not considered how careers guidance could be improved by integrating it with other important components of the college, such as subject curriculums and employer relationships. It was not generally embedded in lessons, but delivered separately, mainly through sessions with personal tutors. These sessions were often generic, covering topics like CVs, personal statements and student finance applications. There was little or no extra careers support for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, apart from the careers curriculum offered to all students. In these colleges, some students told us that the sessions were heavily focused on progression to university and not wider employment pathways.

A few colleges, however, were doing better work. Typically, they had a strategic plan which created an integrated curriculum by bringing together careers guidance with curriculum design, qualifications and working with industry partners. Importantly, this focused on making strong links between students' career aspirations, the knowledge and skills they needed, meaningful work experience, and options for transitioning into further study or employment.

These colleges tended to be more successful in collecting information about students facing financial hardship at enrolment. The contextual information they collected meant that support could be tailored to specific needs. For instance, some students were working part-time as well as attending college, in order to financially contribute to their families. This meant that they were not always able to attend college, which affected their learning, development and future opportunities. These colleges were decisive in adjusting the timetables of these students to work around their part-time employment commitments, ensuring they could continue with their education.

These colleges also had robust internal systems in place to make sure that all staff, not just those from the careers team, could share and update information about students throughout the academic year. Some of these colleges had effective systems for recording student information, such as a dashboard. This made it easier for teaching staff to identify students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, allowing them to tailor their careers support in the classroom or refer students to dedicated careers support teams. As several careers leaders suggested:

> "I think we personalise it and make it relevant to students – we know our students really well."
>
> (Careers lead, general further education college)

Generally, staff in these colleges worked with colleagues across departments to make sure that students were on the right course. If students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were on courses of study not best suited to their career aspirations, they had processes to identify this early on. This meant that both teaching and careers staff could advise students on changing their course to something more aligned with their preferences, or could help build their confidence to continue with the current course. Staff from these colleges told us that intervention early in the process made it more likely that the student would continue in further education:

> "We use a 'right learner, right course' approach. In the first 6 weeks staff check that learners are on the right course and are thriving. If not, we can apply speedy intervention to support learners or help them move [onto a different course]."

(Leader, general further education college)

"Welfare officers link with curriculum heads when learners want to swap courses. There is a campaign called 'Swap Not Drop'. The welfare officers are pivotal in discussing options with learners. We find that early conversations on this help."

(Student services lead, general further education college)

Students also spoke positively of the collaboration between curriculum, careers and industry staff. Some students highlighted that they were able to access mentoring and coaching opportunities through the links made with industry staff. This gave them the opportunity to network in the field they were studying. They said networking helped improve not only their connections, but also their communication skills and confidence. In one college, students from disadvantaged backgrounds were offered the chance to work with the in-house support and careers teams. This gave them the opportunity both to gain work experience and to act as a mentor and role model for students from similar backgrounds.

"The [support] staff in the team are care experienced, they can understand what young people are going through, they provide advice and guidance, contact them at school and contribute to the reviews."

(Student services lead, general further education college)

For many skills-based courses, support from employers ensured that the curriculum met students' current skill needs and that lessons included up-to-date industry knowledge. This included industry personnel working with staff to create up-to-date curriculums that included the latest practical skills and techniques relevant to the industry, or providing support in lessons and workshops. Having industry workers delivering lessons also gave students the chance to access work experience opportunities. This was particularly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they were able to access coaching opportunities they would not otherwise have access to. Teachers at these colleges were often asked by college leaders to go back to work in their industry for a few days per year as part of their continuous professional development. This was to make sure they kept up to date with the most recent knowledge and techniques in the sector. Employers told us they were keen on this collaborative approach as they saw it as a way of nurturing the future workforce:

"We are educating the educators. We brought people in from the different departments to talk to them about, you know, what we do as a bid writer, as

a pre-construction manager, as an estimator."

(Employer)

Leaders and staff in these settings also noted a continuing increase in the number of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who required extra support to access work placements. Staff highlighted that they were enabling access for these students by providing funding for work uniforms, subsidising the costs of travel to college or trips (such as visiting a university), and providing meal vouchers. Most colleges kept this funding option open throughout the year so learners could apply at any time.

Difficulty recruiting and retaining experienced careers advisers was affecting the quality of careers guidance

We found that having well-qualified careers advisers was central to the quality of colleges' careers provision and their ability to develop an overarching strategy for careers guidance. Gatsby benchmark 8 states that every learner should have opportunities for guidance interviews with a careers adviser. The adviser can be internal (a member of college staff) or external, provided they are trained to an appropriate level. Every learner should have at least one such interview by the end of their study programme, and they should have access to a level 6 adviser when needed.[footnote 27] However, even though a few of the providers we visited were employing qualified careers advisers, the majority of colleges were struggling. For them, the difficulty of recruiting and retaining high-quality careers staff limited the careers guidance they could provide to students.

The salary and benefits available for careers advisers was raised as a key issue, as careers advisers are paid less in further education colleges than they could earn in other sectors. Several college leaders specified that 'we can't match the wages, so we struggle to employ'. (This is not unique to careers advisers. Recruitment of other college staff was also identified as an issue, particularly for supporting the increasing number of students arriving at college without a level 2 qualification in English and maths.)

This skills shortage was also affecting local authorities. Most did not have enough qualified careers advisers to meet the demands of school and colleges. Careers leaders explained:

"The recruitment situation is fluid – there is a lot of chopping and changing. Once a relationship is developed, [that] person leaves and then we have to build it up again. Some have the job stacked on top of others – with this, it means careers can't be embedded."

(Local authority)

> "There are not enough qualified careers advisers. Pay is low and there is no QA [quality assurance] of their work."
>
> (Local authority)

This was leading to a constant cycle of short-term appointments across the sector, with limited time to develop expertise before advisers moved on. This affected the ability of local authorities to provide high-quality careers guidance, no matter the quality of the careers strategy they had in place.

The Gatsby benchmarks also recommend that the careers lead should work with other key staff in the provider to make sure careers guidance sessions are embedded into the subject curriculum. However, time pressures were regularly referenced as a barrier to delivering this, particularly as staff involved in careers provision also tended to have other responsibilities within the institution, such as being a subject lead:

> "I could spend all week on careers only, but I run a faculty also."
>
> (Head of faculty, general further education college)

Employers were aware that their point of contact within the college often had multiple roles. They shared concerns that careers guidance was not always given the priority it needs within the curriculum. Employers linked the issues to limited pay and progression and suggested it should be a ringfenced role and ideally part of the senior leadership team.

To deal with the skills shortage, most leaders were filling the gaps with either untrained but experienced staff from industry or level-4-qualified staff. These individuals were being provided with additional training to support them in reaching the standards expected of a level 6 adviser. However, this was time-consuming and expensive for colleges and was seen by most leaders as an unsustainable solution. One leader told us how they had attempted to recruit a qualified level 6 careers adviser 4 times before deciding to train their own staff to cover the role. Some of these staff were at level 2 or 3 before training, and it took time for them to acquire the knowledge and skills required to deliver their careers provision at the expected level.

The lack of qualified careers staff made it hard for students to access regular, bespoke careers guidance:

> "We need more than one careers person, more appointments and

availability."

(Year 12 student, general further education college)

"It is difficult to get a careers appointment to look at applications close to UCAS deadlines. Booking is online but unless you wake up early, all of the appointments are gone."

(Year 13 student, general further education college)

However, many students told us that the careers guidance they received directly, whether from a qualified careers adviser or a general member of college staff, included information about future destinations that they were not receiving elsewhere. This meant they could make more informed decisions that suited their preferences and aspirations. Many students said that they had changed their course direction to better meet their individual needs because of the quality of the advice they had received:

"Careers staff share the facts of the career opportunities linked to a course – sometimes you don't get this from family members."

(Year 12 student, general further education college)

"It would be good if people didn't sugarcoat it. When I was looking around at beauty, it was all nails/beauty, etc, but it's a lot more scientific. I needed to know the challenging parts [which the careers adviser provided]."

(Year 13 student, general further education college)

Traditional work placements remained challenging to implement, but other models of employer engagement were filling the gaps

Previous Ofsted research looking at careers guidance in schools and further education and skills providers has shown the important link between work experience and employment.[footnote 28] Staff and students highlighted the importance of work experience for helping learners to develop an understanding of the different types of industry available and shape their future careers path.[footnote 29]

The importance of work experience was highlighted by the students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds we spoke to. Some explained that they had decided on a certain career because of their work placement experience while at college. Others mentioned that work experience had improved their confidence and taught them workplace skills that they would not otherwise have learned at college. However, not all the students had had the opportunity to attend a work placement. They mainly attributed this to not being able to find a placement that was easily accessible, or to not being able to find one at all.

Most of the college leaders highlighted that there were challenges in providing meaningful and useful work experience for their disadvantaged students. It was difficult to find enough work placements for level 1 and 2 courses and to meet the number of hours needed for T level industry placements. The employers we spoke to mostly agreed that the current requirements for work experience were 'unattainable'. This was because too many young people required work experience at the same time in their local area and there were not enough employers to meet this demand. From the employers' perspective, the work experience week felt more like a box-ticking exercise for schools and colleges than something that actually prepared students for the workplace.

This tended to put students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds at a further disadvantage. In several colleges, for instance, due to limited staff capacity and placement availability, students were expected to organise their own work placements relevant to their course of study. This was an issue for several reasons. First, these students often found it difficult to meet the costs of travelling to a work placement. This reduced the scope of possible placements to the limited area they can afford to travel to. Second, these students often lived in areas where it was already difficult to establish placements, which the reduced travel radius made even harder. College staff told us that psychology, performing arts and some vocational pathways were particularly difficult areas in which to gain work experience. Third, not all students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds could rely on family members to help them arrange work experience, due to parents' own limited knowledge and networks within their child's area of study.

> "We've asked parents to support with [work placements]… obviously the flip side of that is that people who are better off will have better connections and will find it easier to get those placements."
>
> (Careers lead, general further education college)

Despite these concerns, the response from our survey of parents indicated that it was still more common for the individual student or a family member to arrange work experience, rather than the college directly (see Figure 1). Several parents commented that they 'didn't see much help from the college with this side of things'.

Figure 1: Responses to the question 'Who arranged the work experience?'

(in percentages)

120 parents responded to this question.

Respondents could select multiple response options.

View data in an accessible table format.

Several college leaders also cited the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on finding work placements. Virtual working, for instance, has become the new norm for many businesses. They suggested that this contributed to the lack of available placements. While a few colleges had started to offer virtual work experience as an alternative option, the employers we spoke to felt that colleges were not well enough equipped to make virtual work a successful experience for their students. As one college leader noted:

> "The world of work has changed… people work from home; it is how we adapt our education and experiences of work to fit around this [that is important]."
>
> (Senior leader, general further education college)

Providing flexible work experience options aligns with the updated Gatsby benchmarks for post-16 students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.[footnote 30] Due to the challenges of providing work placements, some colleges had increased their capacity to provide meaningful interactions with employers and businesses via other formats, such as conversations with employers about their roles or observations of specific work processes. The employers we spoke to told us they preferred this model. As one suggested:

> "I would much rather have a student in the workplace for one day where we can make it a really meaningful experience and they can see the area that they're interested in than try and find things to do for a student for a week."
>
> (Employer)

Some of the colleges we visited were very much invested in providing more flexible ways to involve employers in careers guidance beyond traditional work placements. This included:

- working closely with employers when running careers fairs
- hosting talks by guest speakers from industry
- organising alumni-run workshops
- making visits to workplaces and universities

- holding open networking events where students could make useful connections with industry workers

Most of the colleges we visited also offered supported internships for students with SEND or high needs. When these were unavailable from local employers, placements were found in-house, for example in the college shop or canteen.

Despite the limited opportunities for work placements, most of the colleges we visited were making sure that disadvantaged students had at least some contact with employers, in order to develop their workplace knowledge and skills.

Students' careers guidance suffered when schools, colleges and parents/carers did not work closely together

College leaders generally felt that more students were arriving in further education without any specific career aspirations or ideas of what they would like to study. Incoming students frequently did not understand or were unaware of the different qualifications available to them and what they entailed. Consequently, most colleges were now providing more careers guidance and support at the enrolment stage to make sure students could access courses that would benefit them in the long term and meet their aspirations.

This aligns with the views of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds that we interviewed. Many told us that they could not remember receiving careers guidance in secondary school, or that their encounters with school careers advisers had not always been helpful:

> "Our secondary schools career adviser wasn't really the best. I mean, she was hardly ever in, and when she was in, she was over-busy or, like, she would hardly get back to you. So it was really frustrating trying to get work experience especially. To get my work experience, I actually didn't go through school. I went through my youth club."
>
> (Year 12 student, general further education college)

Many students told us that they had not developed particular career goals by the time they left school, and chose their college due to the convenience of its location or because their peers did, rather than to pursue a particular career pathway.

All of the local authority careers leaders we spoke to saw considerable variance in the quality of careers guidance being offered by schools. They felt that it worked well when there was a strong link between schools and local authorities. This included regular meetings with wider school support staff, including attendance officers, and events to support pupils and their parents/carers after they received their GCSE results. These links meant that individuals at risk of becoming NEET

could be easily identified and supported.

Where careers guidance was less effective, common barriers included issues with data-sharing and regular changes to careers staff and the job role. This made it challenging to build strong working relationships:

> "There are inconsistencies across schools in what you can get. You can go to one school and get a lot of input into careers and have it instilled from the beginning with lots of support, whereas in others it might not be as good."
>
> (Local authority)

Some colleges told us that they find engaging with parents difficult, and expressed disappointment with the level of parent attendance at open days and careers events. Conversely, in our parent survey, almost a third of parents said that they had not received any communication from their child's school or college about career opportunities. Many parents who responded said they were actively supporting their child with their career choices by attending careers events, helping their child with applications and researching career options (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Responses to the question 'Have you engaged in any of the following activities to support your child's education journey and the choices they make?' (in percentages)

240 participants responded to this question.

Respondents could select multiple response options.

View data in an accessible table format.

Despite the challenges, many students told us that they valued the careers guidance they had received

Many students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds that we spoke to were very positive about the careers guidance that they had received. Around four fifths said that they felt supported and well prepared for their next steps after college. This was despite the challenges raised by college leaders and local authority careers leaders around the lack of qualified staff and suitable work experience placements, and difficulties in identifying this group. Many students told us their careers advisers – whether specialists or other college staff – were central to them developing the knowledge and practical skills required for their next steps and future career pathways:

> "The careers staff have excellent subject knowledge. They are always

readily available to give help and advice."

(Year 12 student, sixth-form college)

"My careers adviser was helpful. They encouraged me to think about alternatives if my first plan does not work out."

(Year 13 student, sixth-form college)

Several students said that they had received bespoke coaching and mentoring through their college. These programmes typically involved meeting and networking with people in the field they were studying, including monthly meetings, usually online, and opportunities to visit the workplace. Students told us that they preferred the personalised one-to-one approach, which made it much easier to build a relationship with their coach/mentor compared to a group setting. These students highly valued this approach and felt that it was improving their communication skills and confidence.

"Because of the college partnerships, they give us people from different companies to be our coach. It's optional, so not everyone gets it, but if you want it then you can sign up for it. I've been meeting with [my coach] throughout the year and she's been helping me with, like, my CV and just my future basically. So, it's nice to have someone that specifically knows everything about you."

(Year 12 student, general further education college)

"My coach was helping me more with, like, university options and with my CV, but also careers and what to do later in life as well. Because I initially thought I wanted to get into computing and then I changed careers options, my coach has helped me realise that there's a lot of places that do maths… instead of just going into finance or accounting you can go into, like, business analysis or marketing."

(Year 12 student, general further education college)

Students told us that careers fairs and talks from guest speakers contributed to the decisions they were making about their future. Some of the larger colleges we visited hosted very big careers events alongside specific taster sessions for careers in areas such as science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) and the armed forces. Most students said that they found these helpful, because they

were attended by lots of employers, higher education institutions and apprenticeship providers. This helped them better understand the available career paths, particularly for apprenticeship routes. A few students noted that careers fairs and guest speakers allowed them to learn about alternative options they had not previously considered. As one student remarked:

> "[The careers fair was] very useful as I didn't realise how many careers there were available in the industry."
>
> (Year 12 student, sixth-form college)

Many students also mentioned that these events allowed them to better understand the subject combinations needed for certain career options, helping them to make the right choices about courses of study.

Conversely, some students felt that careers fairs did not meet their needs. Several mentioned that the more general careers fairs showcased a limited range of careers options. This suggests that there is no single careers activity that will benefit all students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and that a range of different engagement opportunities ensures better access to valuable advice and guidance:

> "Sometimes, [there are] quite limited options if you want to go into something more specialised."
>
> (Year 13 student, general further education college)

> "Attended careers fair at college. Unis handed out leaflets. It was very busy, and so tricky to have detailed conversations."
>
> (Year 12 student, sixth-form college)

Several students mentioned that the careers guidance that they had received helped them to develop softer skills to prepare them for future employment or higher education:

> "I found managing time in the work environment difficult, but [the careers adviser] supported me with working on time management. I wasn't initially well prepared for it but now I feel I can interact more professionally with people."

(Year 13 student, general further education college)

"The work here is so independent. I'm not worried about that though. I know how self-motivated I will have to be."

(Year 13 student, general further education college)

"We've had skills lessons and what that did was it kind of helped boost my confidence and getting prepared for the working environment such as presentation skills, talking skills. We've had a couple of industry partners come over so we could present to them, and I feel like I'm writing much more confidently in specific areas."

(Year 13 student, general further education college)

Furthermore, not all advice was considered helpful. Some students felt that it was sometimes not impartial or in their best interests. This was particularly the case when information was biased towards a particular destination:

"We only had one session for those who didn't want to go to university."

(Year 13 student, general further education college)

"The college staff were pushy trying to get me to go back into college and not full-time employment."

(Year 12 student, general further education college)

Overall, however, many students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds spoke of being more confident and resilient due to the careers guidance they received at college. Many said they now had the ambition to get a job or to continue in education, whereas they didn't when they joined the college. Several highlighted they were, indeed, ready by showcasing they were taking those next steps:

"I did pantomimes last year and got a junior stage crew contract afterwards as a part-time job. The college has supported me, as long as I completed my work."

(Final year level 3 BTEC student, general further education college)

"I've done 2 years in a salon as work experience and also have a part-time job alongside college."

(Third year, level 3 student, general further education college)

Conclusion

The colleges we visited are very much aware of their responsibility to provide careers guidance, and all had put in place measures to provide this for disadvantaged students. But the quality and quantity of these measures was variable. The most successful providers had found ways to identify students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This ensured that the careers education programme could move beyond general content to meet the specific needs of these students. Despite the challenges of recruiting high-quality careers advisers, these providers were making sure that careers guidance was integrated with subject and vocational curriculums. They were also developing ways to engage with employers beyond traditional work placements. This was something that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds really valued, especially in terms of thinking about other employment routes they had not previously considered.

For more providers to achieve these successes, they should consider the following:

- Further education providers need better definitions and guidance to help them identify students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who are in need of extra support. One way to identify such students, for example, is by matching student home postcodes to the Index for Multiple Deprivation. The evidence from this study suggests that most students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who do not have the status of being students with SEND or high needs, care experienced or local authority looked-after children, persistent absentees at risk of being NEET, or asylum seekers, are not being offered bespoke support compared to other vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. This is particularly important given differences between groups within the lower socioeconomic cohort.[footnote 31]

- Further study is needed on what types of careers interventions work best for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. While students and college staff told us what they found valuable, our study has not been designed to assess which interventions have long-term benefits in terms of stable employment.

- Schools and colleges need to improve their collaboration to aid the post-16

transition. Clearer roles and responsibilities for sharing student data would help colleges provide direct careers support to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds earlier in the process. Providers could also consider using the GIAP tool more.

- Our evidence suggests that careers advisers have a positive impact on the quality and quantity of careers guidance delivered in colleges. It would be worth investigating how more careers advisers can be recruited into the sector, given current pay levels and lack of applicants.

- Further evaluation should be carried out of the benefits of work placements versus more flexible engagements with employers, particularly in terms of the impact this has on students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Our evidence suggests that employers find the traditional model of work placements restrictive; other types of encounters – such as careers fairs, one-off visits and networking events – may have additional benefits.

Annex A: further details of methods

Research questions

We worked with the DfE to determine the areas of interest for our study. This covers the following research questions, which can be found in the published terms of reference:[footnote 32]

- How do further education providers define and identify students from a lower socioeconomic background?

- How do further education leaders ensure careers guidance is effective in providing learners from a lower socioeconomic background with the correct support to progress to sustained employment, further study or training?

- What are the barriers that prevent careers guidance from being delivered effectively for this group?

- How are further education leaders ensuring collaborative working between secondary schools and further education colleges to ensure that students are receiving the most up-to-date careers guidance to make effective choices to support transitions?

- How are local authorities and employers supporting these students with careers guidance to prepare them for their pathway from further education providers to employment?

- What are the perspectives of parents on the effectiveness of the careers education, information, advice and guidance their child has received?

Methods

This was a qualitative study. We carried out 28 research visits during the 2024 summer term. This included 19 general further education colleges and 6 sixth-form colleges. We also visited 3 secondary schools to triangulate evidence from colleges and understand the transition of students from school to post-16 provision. We wanted to highlight variation in the quality of careers guidance delivered, so we selected a range of schools and further education colleges based on their location and most recent overall effectiveness judgement. Providers judged inadequate were excluded from the sampling frame.

These visits were led by His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), except for one which was carried out by a research lead. Other researchers attended most of the visits to support the data collection. On each visit, we spoke to the college leaders, careers and teaching staff, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In total, we spoke to 251 such students, either in focus groups or through semi-structured interviews. This included 23 school pupils in Years 9, 10 and 11 and 228 further-education students on post-16 courses. To avoid labelling these young people, we asked the providers to select students on our behalf, using the definition of students who were eligible for free school meals at secondary school.

A typical visit had the following structure:

- meeting with the senior leadership team
- interview with careers lead
- interview with head of curriculum
- interview with disadvantage lead/head of student services
- discussions with students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds
- informal meeting with senior leadership at the end of the visit

We also gathered evidence from: interviews with 7 local authorities, 2 focus groups with employers, and a survey of 241 parents from the schools and colleges we visited. This allowed us to triangulate with the college data to make more informed inferences from the findings.

Interviews with local authorities
We carried out interviews with staff who have responsibility for the careers guidance offered to young people in schools and colleges in 7 of the local authorities where we carried out research visits. The focus of these interviews was to understand how the local authorities support careers guidance and students' transition from secondary school to post-16 destinations within their jurisdiction.

Focus groups with employers
In collaboration with the Careers & Enterprise Company, we held 2 focus groups with 16 employers. We heard how they work with schools and colleges to support careers guidance by providing talks, attending careers fairs and arranging work-experience placements.

Parent survey

We sent a survey to all parents/carers from the schools and colleges we visited for this research. It was aimed at understanding how they find out about the careers guidance their children get. We also wanted to gauge their involvement in supporting their children in making career choices. We received 241 responses.

Analysis

We used a deductive thematic approach to coding the data collected during our research visits. The coding framework was developed using the available research literature and based on the key research questions in the terms of reference. We also identified new themes as they emerged from the data. Data was analysed using MAXQDA.

Limitations

Some caution is required when generalising the findings from the research visits. The sample design, while balanced to make sure that we visited a range of settings, does not include any colleges or schools judged as inadequate at their last inspection, in order to avoid increasing the burden of inspection on these schools. We only visited schools and colleges which agreed to take part, and our sample only includes a limited number of schools. We used these school visits to triangulate the evidence provided by colleges and students, but we advise caution when interpreting these findings.

We did not observe any teaching or careers guidance sessions during the visits. This was due to the difficulty of scheduling visits to match the colleges' different approaches to careers lessons. We designed our research questions so we could gather evidence by interviewing staff and students and then triangulate what we were told between participant groups. We found that many of the same themes were repeated, especially our key findings. Therefore, we can be confident that a level of saturation was reached.

Annex B: data tables for figures

Data for Figure 1: Responses to the question 'Who arranged the work experience?' (% of respondents)

Who arranged the work experience?	% Response
Family friend	7

My child applied directly to the employer they found through the school/college careers programme	8
Other	14
School/college	23
Family member	33
My child applied directly to the employer they found through researching work placement opportunities	33

See [Figure 1](#).

Data for Figure 2: Responses to the question 'Have you engaged in any of the following activities to support your child's education journey and the choices they make? (% of respondents)

Parental support activities	% Response
Other	12
I haven't engaged in any activities	17
Arranged paid extra-curricular and/or career-related learning experience	18
Filled application forms	43
Researched specific career options	46
Attended a careers event and/or open day	47

See [Figure 2](#).

1. Careers guidance is sometimes formally referred to as careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG), covering the range of potential activities for students. In line with the Department for Education's (DfE) statutory guidance on careers, we will use the phrase 'careers guidance' in this report to mean the full range of activities delivered under the Gatsby benchmarks. J Moote, L Archer, M Henderson, E Watson, J DeWitt, B Francis and H Holmegaard, '[More is more: exploring the relationship between young people's experiences of school-based career education, information, advice and guidance at age 14–16 and wider adult outcomes at age 21–22 in England](#)', in 'Research Papers in Education', 2024, pages 72 to 95; J Everitt, S Neary, M Delgardo, and L Clark, '[Personal guidance. What works?](#)', The Careers &

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