

Managing the Reality Gap - Reconciling Student Choice with Employer Demand

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Central London's voracious labour market demands a constant supply of new recruits to meet its needs. Over one and a half million people work here – more than half of them commuters travelling in from the suburbs and beyond. A quarter of jobs change hands every year, and employment has been growing steadily since 1993. Employers recruiting in this dynamic market have access to highly skilled, highly educated and qualified people, half of them qualified to NVQ Level 4 or above. So they can generally afford to be choosy.

Most young people currently at school in the capital will ultimately make their entrance into this labour market. There will be plenty of opportunities – and plenty of competition. How well are educators and guidance professionals preparing them for the reality of this challenging market? Are young people working towards jobs they can hope to attain – or are they chasing dreams?

This paper draws on various pieces of research, in particular studies undertaken by FOCUS Central London exploring demand for labour and skills, employers' recruitment practices, and the expectations and aspirations of young people working towards their GCSE exams.

The view from the market-place

There is no doubt that job-hunters in central London face tough competition. Each job advertised in the press attracts 28 hopeful applicants on average – more than one in ten has over 50 people eager to fill it. Candidates can expect at least one interview – most likely face-to-face, and nearly half of them will be interviewed a second or third time. One in ten will face an 'away-day' and almost one in twenty, a psychometric test. Though qualifications and at least some work experience will be important to get through the first sift and be invited for interview, what clinches the job will nearly always be the employers' views as to the candidate's skills and attributes. This mix of qualifications, experience, skills and attributes characterising successful applicants needs to be borne in mind by those involved in developing careers education and guidance and work-related learning.

The view from the classroom

The view from the classroom is overwhelmingly optimistic. Young people are ambitious for their future – and appear confident about success in their exams.

A recent study looked at the ambitions and expectations of Year 11 students in twenty-five central London schools, the majority of which were identified as having pass rates below 30% A*-C GCSEs in 1998. Twenty-two of the schools returned a total of 1,413 completed student questionnaires; telephone interviews were held with 21 careers co-ordinators.

The schools were culturally mixed, with up to sixty different languages spoken by pupils attending them. Languages quoted included Bengali, Punjabi, Turkish, Arabic, Portuguese, Spanish, Greek and Russian. Many schools had recently enrolled refugee children and a high percentage of

pupils were on free school meals (e.g. 60% or more). Not surprisingly, high proportions of students were from low paid, low skilled and/or one parent families – many had parents on social security, some of whom were unable to work because of language difficulties.

As well as exploring students' expectations about their forthcoming exams and their career aspirations, one of the main research objectives was to determine their awareness and understanding of non-traditional post-16 options – in particular Modern Apprenticeships (MAs).

The results reveal a picture which is both reassuring and worrying.

Basis for optimism?

The young people had extremely high expectations about their GCSE results. 70% of those who answered the question about their forthcoming exams expected to get five or more A*-Cs. On average, the young people predicted that they would gain five to six GCSEs.

Sadly, this optimism was likely to be unrealistic in many cases since the participating schools' average performance was 27% achieving 5+ good grades. Which begs the question why so many had so clearly unrealistic expectations about the chances of exam success. Whilst the evidence that students are aiming high is encouraging, expectations surely need to be tempered with realism?

Fewer than half (41%) had heard of MAs. Students who had expressed an *interest* in MAs were rather less optimistic about their results; roughly a half (53%) expected to gain 5+ A*-Cs; least hopeful of all were those who had *chosen* the MA route – just 22% anticipated this outcome.

Expectations varied according to ethnic group: Asian students were the most ambitious, with 78% anticipating 5+ A*-Cs; white students the least – 60% expected to do well. The figure for black students and for 'other ethnic groups' was 72% and 65% respectively.

It will come as no surprise that most (79%) expected to go on to study for A levels or Advanced GNVQ, and over 40% were hoping to take a degree in future. A quarter were looking to continue on an academic route even though they were unsure what course they might eventually pursue.

Classroom to boardroom

Career choices reflected exam expectations. Students were extremely ambitious in the kind of job they were hoping to land, especially compared with the skill levels of their parents' occupations.

Over half who named a specific job were aiming at an occupation which could be described as professional (39%) or managerial (14%). Only a third of fathers and a quarter of mothers were working at this level. Girls were especially ambitious. A little over three out of five girls wanted a professional or managerial job, compared with just over two in five of the boys.

Again, choice of career varied depending on ethnicity. There are striking differences between the choices of Asian young people and those in other groups. Asian students were especially ambitious: two out of three (64%) wanted a professional or managerial role compared with 48% of white respondents. Accordingly, Asian students were in a majority choosing occupational fields such as finance and computing, law, medicine (i.e. as a doctor) and science/engineering. (Particularly striking, was the fact that a third of Asian fathers were working in hospitality but no Asian young people had chosen a career in this field.) Black students were keen on the finance/IT and medical field generally, though less likely to mention a

particular job - or in the case of medicine, tending to mention nursing. White students were more likely than other groups to be considering a career in the Arts, especially art and design and media/journalism.

Career choices by students who were opting for an MA were quite distinct (though to some extent these reflect differences in choice based on ethnicity). The would-be apprentices were more likely to have chosen a career in fashion and beauty, sport and leisure or maintenance/manual work than the sample as a whole. Specific jobs mentioned included hairdresser, beautician, footballer and jobs in the building trade such as plasterer or carpenter.

A sizeable minority (between 15-20%) did not know what they wanted to do for a living, including one in five of students who were considering taking up an MA.

Choice or Hobson's Choice?

'Interest' and 'good money' are the most popular reasons for career choice, though here too there are gender and ethnic differences. Girls had gone for 'interest', boys for 'money'. Black and Asian students were also more motivated by money than white students.

The MA students were more likely than others to have based their choice on availability or on knowing someone in the same kind of work or on the absence of entry qualification requirements. All of which suggest that very little 'choice', much less 'informed choice', was involved. In common with the other youngsters in the survey, the 'apprentices' were not especially confident that an MA would develop generic skills applicable to a wide range of jobs. These young people were simply opting for what they believed they could get.

Underpinning the choice of post-16 option, academic routes had overwhelming support as the best way to gain the key skills needed for work. Two-thirds of all young people (and just under half the MA students) believed that A levels and a degree would provide such skills. Two out of three students who were interested in (but had not chosen to do) an MA said that being able to go on to do a degree on completion would increase their interest. Choice of the academic as opposed to the vocational route was generally based on perceptions about the kind of work available through work-related training, the advisability of going for 'solid' (i.e. academic) qualifications, the need to keep options open and the lower value and longer timescale associated with MAs.

The view from the staff room

Careers co-ordinators believe that in this 'buyers' market' most of their students will stay on in full-time education. Percentages quoted were in the region of 70-90%.

At a practical level, delivery of guidance depends on the experience, knowledge, networking capability and personal approach of individual careers co-ordinators. The ethos of the school is also a factor. Varying degrees of liberalism in the attitude to education generally, and to choice, determine the level of intervention adopted - and willingness to encourage 'realistic' career ambitions.

Two schools serve as an example of the differences observed. In one, the co-ordinator had been in post for a number of years, was experienced and knowledgeable and able to refer to a range of information sources (including about MAs) built up over a long time period. He was prepared to intervene by offering a range of vocational options to the young people he worked with. In the other, the newly appointed co-ordinator knew nothing about vocational routes.

Lacking knowledge, she fell back on advising college and full-time study, options she knew and felt comfortable with. Believing young people should be free to make their own choices, she did not try – or believe it was possible – to influence this process. Students at her school were most likely to have chosen A levels as their post-16 option. The school's average 5+ A*-C pass rate was just 17%.

Careers as side-show to the business of teaching?

The teachers responsible for careers education – usually known as careers co-ordinators – were likely to have an incentive allowance equivalent to a head of department but not a senior management level post. This suggests that the schools viewed careers guidance as a relatively low priority 'add-on' to more critical curriculum delivery. We know that students enter the decision-making process with preconceptions about the kind of further education options they are prepared to consider; these preconceptions are based on parental and peer group pressure, self-image and group identity. In the face of such deep-seated attitudes, genuine attempts to encourage objective decision-making must involve schools taking the issue as seriously as any other aspect of learning.

The academic/vocational divide

As their job title suggests, co-ordinators were responsible for amassing materials and resources rather than actual delivery which was generally undertaken by non-specialist, conscripted form tutors who had no training for the task – and in many cases, no enthusiasm. The work was carried out during large group tutorial sessions or as part of a PHSE programme.

According to the co-ordinators, the consensus among teachers is that training routes are for those who are unable or unwilling to pursue full-time study; that 'good' jobs no longer exist for 16 year olds – and that apprenticeships are only available within traditional, gender specific fields.

The reasons cited for low take-up of training included GNVQs (now called Vocational A levels) which students take if they want to go down the vocational route; lack of employer/training organisation visibility at careers fairs; high staff turnover in training organisations which makes continuity of contact difficult; the small number of apprenticeships available with some employers which makes widespread promotion inappropriate; the pressure for colleges to increase numbers.

They also believed that young people needed the best qualifications they could get – 'best' being those acquired via full-time study. Although aware that going for an apprenticeship is not 'dropping out', they still tended to lump these young people in with students who are likely to drop out or opt for low-skilled jobs without training. This is understandable in the light of the nature of apprentice 'frameworks' available which enable employers to take on young people without the 5+ A*-C grade GCSEs originally intended as the minimum entry level requirement. Small wonder that employers, teachers and students alike doubt the MA's parity with the rival A level option.

Too little, too late

In central London at least, the appeal of full-time education is compounded by the lack of information about specific alternatives. There is pressure for students to choose their post-16 option in November – well before the run-up to internal 'mocks' and the actual exam period. Keen to secure the funding attached to student numbers, colleges visit schools and vigorously promote their wares, whilst detailed information about the types of MA on offer is not available until the following April. By this time virtually all young people have made their decisions.

The role of the professional

Despite the bias towards conventional post 16 routes, schools are anxious that the careers service should provide one-to-one interviews for all Year 11 students. (Since September 1999 there has been a reduced service agreement between schools and careers services, limiting one-to-ones to students considered to be 'at risk' of dropping out.) However, careers teachers had often attempted to secure the kind of service which fitted with their personal view of careers education, making it difficult for the careers service to pursue a more up-to-date approach. In particular, teaching staff appear to be resistant to the idea of working with much younger pupils who may not yet have rigid preconceptions.

The view of the future

The Learning and Skills Council is now up and running, for the moment delivering contracts for education and training which reflect those of its predecessors. From 2002, this will change, as local LSC offices start delivering their strategic plans and assume responsibility for allocating sixth form funding. In this new, co-operative, complementary world of post-16 provision, the distinctions between academic and vocational options could gradually be eroded. The extent to which this is possible will depend on the availability of high quality learning opportunities, regardless of how these are labelled. It will depend on improving the understanding of students, parents and teachers of non-traditional 16+ routes. It will depend on employers recognising work-based learning as a means of recruiting and developing young people, and their own role in providing opportunities for career progression. It will also crucially depend on schools' willingness to encourage ambitious, yet *realistic* career aspirations.

ARTICLES

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