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Partnerships and career development learning: Creating equitable shared futures

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Abstract

Quality career guidance, or career development learning (CDL), has the potential to lessen the gap in educational and employment outcomes of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, but current approaches to CDL have been criticised as being inadequate. This paper explores the role that multi-stakeholder partnerships can play in providing access to career skills, knowledge and experiences for students from all backgrounds that enables them to achieve their educational goals and position themselves as tomorrow's "future-ready" graduates. Drawing on interviews and qualitative surveys with students, parents and key stakeholders in Australian career development, we explore the benefits and challenges of linear partnership models and make recommendations for more holistic approaches.

1 Introduction

The world of work is changing rapidly. These changes are variously perceived to result from globalisation, artificial intelligence and technology (Education Council, 2019; FYA, 2018; OECD, 2016; Torii, 2018). These transformations mean that the future-ready graduate must have the career development and employability skills to navigate a novel work reality as well as the work experience, knowledge and attitudes that employers seek. Traditionally, shifts in skills demands have disproportionately affected workers with lower levels of education, and the rewards of the work reality that are approaching are unlikely to be bestowed evenly among the workforce (Torii, 2018).

Quality career guidance, or career development learning (CDL), has the potential to lessen the gap in educational and employment outcomes of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Australian Government, 2013; Bajada & Trayler, 2014). CDL is defined as "learning about the content and process of career development or life/career management" (McMahon, Patton, & Tatham, 2003, p. 6), an activity that may be fostered through appropriate and intentional career services and programmes. However, current approaches to CDL in some countries, including Australia, NZ, the UK and the US, have been criticised as being inadequate (Brown, 2015; Economic Education Jobs and Skills Committee, 2018; Moote & Archer, 2018; Yates & Bruce, 2017). Identified problems which can impact access and quality of career education include resourcing; teacher qualifications, knowledge, and attitudes; equity; and regulation (Andrews & Hooley, 2017; Economic Education Jobs and Skills Committee, 2018; Yates & Bruce, 2017).

Innovative models of partnership between schools, tertiary providers and industry are well positioned to offer equitable, integrated and relevant CDL for diverse groups of students. Partnership activities aim to broaden students' understanding of the world of work and enrich

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school learning through creating concrete experiences that help to develop career aspirations and an understanding of pathway options (Torii, 2018, p. vi). This is particularly important for young people from low socioeconomic (LSES) backgrounds who may not have ready access to the social networks often needed for future employment opportunities (Torii, 2018).

The aim of this paper is to outline the ways in which partnerships can best support the CDL of students from LSES backgrounds. The following section provides a brief overview of the study from which the findings were developed.

2 The study

This research was conducted in Australia in 2019-2020 as part of the project “Higher Education career advice for students from LSES backgrounds”. The aim of the research was to understand how school-embedded models of CDL provision could be expanded beyond traditional modes such as help from career advisers and counsellors. This would inform a set of best practice principles and a guide to partnerships (Austin, O’Shea, Groves, & Lamanna, 2020) which could be used across the sector to improve CDL for students from diverse backgrounds.

Amongst other activities, the project collected data in the form of qualitative surveys and in-depth interviews, involving 125 university students and parents of young people from LSES backgrounds as well as key stakeholders in Australian career development.

3 Findings

This section explores the benefits and challenges of a model of partnership work that emerged as prominent in schools which cater to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and then offers recommendations for a more effective approach.

3.1 School driven CDL partnerships with individual partners

The primary approach to CDL partnerships revealed in this study was what we are describing as a “hub and spoke” model – that is, a model which had the school at the centre of the partnership and universities, non-for-profit organisations, vocational education providers, government agencies and industry as individual stakeholders connecting linearly with the school.

An advantage of this approach was increased exposure to authentic CDL opportunities beyond the school environment which provided students with experience, familiarity and the development of a sense of belonging in, for example, university life. Such experiences largely helped students to conceive that “...*university... is for them, and it’s not just for certain students who traditionally have accessed higher education*” (Joseph, University Outreach Coordinator). School career advisers concurred, one of whom explained how this exposure assisted in getting students “...*out there....[so they think] ‘Oh yeah, I could do this’*” (Nicola, School Career Adviser).

Furthermore, a number of participants in the study, including classroom teachers and career advisers, identified how partnerships allowed each school to achieve more than they could in isolation and maximised available resourcing. The organisation of work experience was repeatedly offered as one key challenge in terms of workload, as Tia, a School Careers Adviser, highlighted:

...teachers don’t have time to go out and engage with businesses but we know the businesses don’t have time to engage with multiple schools or multiple teachers at the same time. So, it’s an area that really needs dedicated resources. (Tia, School Careers Adviser)

Whilst it is acknowledged that CDL is under-resourced in schools, partnerships with other organisations can result in dedicated resources to enhance the CDL opportunities on offer to students.

However, whilst affording opportunities for students to experience authentic CDL, the “hub and spoke” partnership model can lead to narrow insights about particular pathways or professions. This approach occurs when schools only partner with a limited number of tertiary education providers or industry contacts, rather than taking advantage of the full spectrum of opportunities available. Cheryl, a School Careers Adviser, described the difficulty that she had in engaging with all of the stakeholders in the local community:

...council down here don't do very much at all as a careers network... it is very difficult to actually engage a lot with industry down here because the industries that are here are not suitable for students at high school level. (Cheryl, School Career Adviser)

Therefore, whilst individual partnerships exposed students to opportunities outside of the school environment, student exposure to a wide range of pathways and professions was limited and dependent upon the individual career adviser's ability to engage with those stakeholders and/or the willingness of the stakeholders to engage with certain schools.

Indeed, “hub and spoke” partnership models rely on the professional network of the individual career adviser to develop relationships with various stakeholders. Bianca, a Career Adviser, described how she had contacts “...that are specific to various racial groups – Aboriginal contacts and if we had females, I know that there's a lot of female contacts out there for trade” (Bianca, School Career Adviser). Career Advisers described how their contacts actively “tap their school on the shoulder” for CDL opportunities. “[I] often get phone calls from local employers saying ‘you got anybody who wants’...” (Michael, School Career Adviser). Therefore, access to CDL opportunities largely relied upon the social capital and networks of the career adviser, rather than a purposeful and coordinated approach to ensuring students had access to a wide range of CDL opportunities. Clearly, networks need to be more than linear individual to individual relationships, but “web-like” networks that expand the opportunities available to students (Putnam, 1993).

3.2 Recommendations

Drawn from analysis of the findings, a selection of recommendations are offered to increase the effectiveness of CDL provision through partnerships.

1. CDL should be provided as part of collaborative, multi-stakeholder partnership managed by a separate organisational entity who acts as a broker or pivot point.
2. CDL opportunities should be co-designed between stakeholders so that CDL opportunities can be tailored to the needs of student groups.
3. What “makes” a good partnership should be more clearly articulated to stakeholders including schools, industry bodies, universities, community bodies and other providers to guide the development and implementation of CDL partnerships.

4 Conclusions

Partnerships can increase opportunities for students and their parents to access information and experiences, tailored to aspirations and needs at critical moments in their educational journeys. Multi-stakeholder “whole of community” partnerships provide increased opportunities for students to explore “career clusters” rather than specific pathways or professions and do

not rely on the social capital and networks of individual career advisers. By undertaking “whole of community” multi-stakeholder approaches to CDL partnerships, CDL can be tailored to the needs of the local region and reflect the differing needs and goals of diverse learners. Through establishing separate organisational entities, such as regional education centres, to act as a pivot point or broker for multi-stakeholder partnerships, they are able to coordinate partnerships across universities, industry and vocational education providers to present schools with a multi-stakeholder partnership model. This approach to partnerships provides a strong foundation for students to achieve their educational goals and position themselves as tomorrow’s “future-ready” graduates.

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