

## **Promoting Equal Provision - The Gatsby Benchmarks.**

A problem long-acknowledged, yet only recently addressed purposefully and comprehensively in England, was how to define good careers provision, and best encourage schools and colleges to achieve it. There were no objective standards by which to judge whether any given institution's programme was excellent, average, or poor.

Enter Sir John Holman (an eminent academic and senior education adviser) who, in 2014, and for the Gatsby Foundation (a long-established charitable trust) undertook to solve this. Accordingly, he and several distinguished careers professionals visited six countries - Canada, Finland, Germany, Holland, Hong Kong, and Ireland - consulting extensively on careers provision in each. From these, they emerged with eight 'Benchmarks' they considered the essence of good career guidance.

The Benchmarks are:

- 1 - A stable careers programme.
- 2 - Learning from career and labour market information.
- 3 - Addressing the needs of each pupil.
- 4 - Linking curriculum learning to careers.
- 5 - Encounters with employers and employees.
- 6 - Experiences of workplaces.
- 7 - Encounters with further and higher education.
- 8 - Personal guidance.

Each Benchmark consists of several criteria. This helps schools/colleges not only to see how far they are from achieving a Benchmark, but exactly what (if anything) must be accomplished to fulfil any specific criterion within it.

A widespread survey of schools in England at the outset revealed that none had already achieved all eight Benchmarks (the highest being five), but many had achieved several in part, a likely spur even to those still with some way to go.

Also encouraging was the estimate of an eminent accountancy firm that, even starting from scratch (which few need to) the Benchmarks could be met with an expenditure of only 1% of an institution's annual budget.

In 2015, following the 'Gatsby Good Guidance Report', a pilot study involving 16 institutions in all (13 schools and 3 colleges) in the north-east, and the Local Enterprise Partnership, was set up. This was to see how Benchmarks could be achieved when embarking from different starting-points. The pilot also highlighted the framework's value when auditing existing careers provision, besides planning specific and measurable improvements.

One year into the pilot, all 16 institutions were said to have made 'fantastic progress'. The average achievement was reaching an additional 2 Benchmarks, and partly reaching all 8. In addition, no less than a quarter of institutions had fully acquired 5 benchmarks (comparable with only the best on the original national survey).

Further positive impacts were increased representation of designated careers governors on school boards, re-allocation of current resources towards career awareness, and new in-house delivery structures.

Following this, by September, 2018, all schools and colleges in England had to draw up and submit a careers plan. Helpfully, a number of organisations (the 'Careers and Enterprise Company' and 'Grofar' among them) designed tools to assist them in planning and recording progress towards achieving the Benchmarks.

The Department for Education had set schools and colleges a target of achieving the Benchmarks by the end of 2020. However, the 'Covid' pandemic has made this goal very difficult for many, and impossible for some. In particular, 'lockdown' and closures prevented the encounters with employers and employees, and the experiences of workplaces essential to completing Benchmarks 5 and 6.

Even before this, though, Benchmark 4 (requiring teachers to link curriculum learning to careers) was proving challenging. However interested, many subject teachers lacked the time to learn about related occupations, while the curriculum itself often lacked relevance to modern workplaces. Introducing career elements during Years 7 and 8 (rather than the more pressurised 9 and 10) may offer a partial answer.

Independent commentators on the Gatsby Benchmarks emphasise the importance of institutions networking to achieve them. Careers Leaders must, they say, form links not only internally (with such as senior managers, departmental heads, and heads of year), but also, vitally, with agencies like their local authority, employers, and career guidance companies.