

in brief...

Career opportunities

How important is providing careers-related information for students? **Sandra McNally** surveys the latest evidence on what advice is on offer and what works.

The quantity and quality of educational investment matter for labour market outcomes such as earnings and employment. But not everyone knows this – and navigating the education system can be extremely complex both for students and their parents. A growing body of research has begun to test whether interventions designed to improve information about the costs and benefits of education and application processes have an effect on students' attitudes, beliefs and behaviour.

My review of this work focuses on the results of ten evaluations implemented using randomised control trials. The findings are mixed, with most studies showing an effect of information interventions on attitudes and beliefs, but fewer showing an effect on behaviour.

In developed countries, simply providing information about the link between education and labour market outcomes has not yet been found to have much impact on actual behaviour, even though it does change people's attitudes

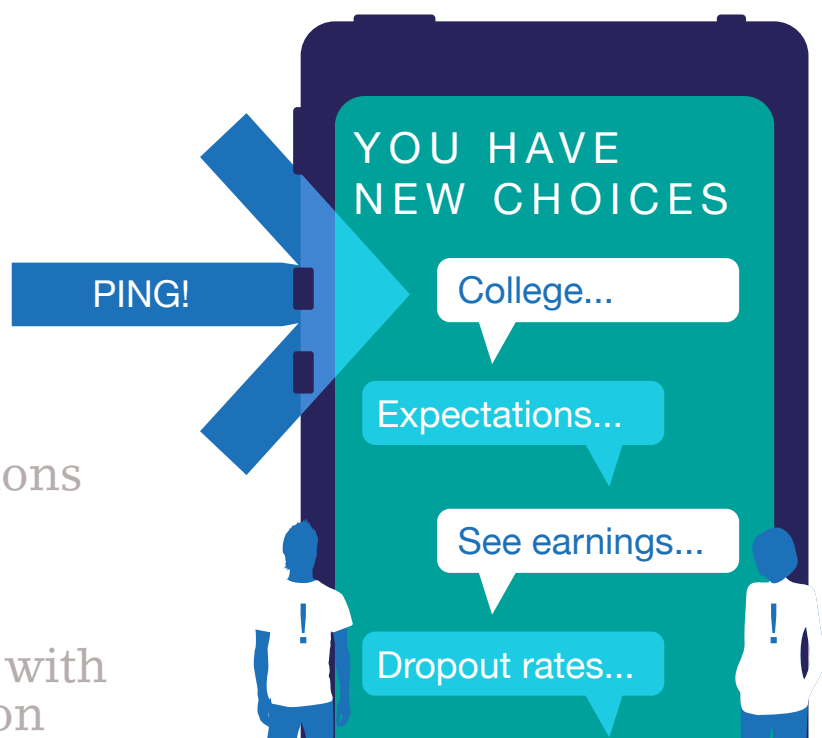
to educational investment decisions. On the other hand, there is evidence to show that when supplemented with mentoring or practical help, the provision of information can influence behaviour.

Two studies in developed countries focusing on information provision show a positive impact of information on behaviour – one in the United States (Hoxby and Turner, 2013) and the other in France (Goux et al, 2017).

The US study uses administrative data to target high school seniors (in their final year of secondary education) who are both very high-achieving and have low family income. Students are posted an information package that is 'semi-customised' to take account of their circumstances (family income and location) and includes a fee waiver for making college applications.

The study in France focuses on students who are very low-achieving. In contrast to the US study, it aims to make

Students' decisions about their education can be improved by providing them with more information





Information interventions are not costly, but making them effective is not a simple matter

people more realistic about future plans. It focuses on decisions made at the end of middle school (when students are aged 15 or 16) and targets the parents of young people who the school's head teacher has identified as the most low-achieving and at risk of dropping out.

Whereas the US study focuses on changing the expectations of students that are too low, the French study does the opposite. In the latter case, expectations of better jobs without the necessary educational qualifications are unrealistically high and lead to ill-considered actions and premature dropout from further education. It is thus important to note that information experiments can be just as well applied to downgrading overly optimistic expectations as upgrading overly pessimistic expectations.

What both studies have in common is that students make better educational choices as a result of the information interventions. The US study shows that students attend more selective colleges and do just as well in terms of grades and persistence as they would have done in a less selective college. The French study shows lower dropout rates one and two years after the intervention and that the change in behaviour is between attending a two-year vocational programme rather than repeating grades and/or dropping out.

The two studies are similar to each other in the sense that the treatment group is very well targeted towards those who are on the verge of making a decision about educational choice and appear to have no other

impediment to making that choice (that is, they have appropriate preparation for the choices being considered). The treatments deliver exactly what the target groups need and want at the right time.

In some of the other eight trials, information interventions change effort but do not translate into changes in outcomes. For example, an intervention involving sending text messages to students about the benefits of education changes students' motivation but does not affect their performance. A possible explanation is that students do not know how to translate their higher aspirations into effective study.

Another unsuccessful information intervention involves providing final year school students with information about the earnings returns to different courses. While there is an increase in applications for 'high-return routes', there is no increase in admissions because the system is very competitive for high-return educational routes. This suggests that information is important for changing motivation but it is not sufficient on its own if students do not have the necessary academic prerequisites.

Policy-makers should take note that although information interventions are not costly (relative to many other policies), making them effective is not a simple matter.

This article summarises 'How Important is Career Information and Advice?' by Sandra McNally, a contribution to *IZA World of Labor* (<https://wol.iza.org/articles/how-important-is-career-information-and-advice>).

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Further reading

Dominique Goux, Marc Gurgand and Eric Maurin (2017) 'Adjusting Your Dreams? High School Plans and Dropout Behaviour', *Economic Journal* 127(602): 1025-46.

Caroline Hoxby and Sarah Turner (2013) 'Expanding College Opportunities for High-Achieving, Low-Income Students', Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research Working Paper 12-014 (<http://siepr.stanford.edu/research/publications/expanding-college-opportunities-high-achieving-low-income-students>).