

**Our Careers Support Fails To Provide Social Justice, Economic Opportunity Or Value For Money –
It's Time For Change**

1 One of our defining traits is our ambition to better ourselves.

We do it from the day we are born.

We learn to communicate and interact. We harness skills and get jobs. We seek recognition in qualifications, prizes, and promotions.

We aspire to do tomorrow what we didn't quite achieve today.

2 However, millions of people are missing out on the chance to achieve their potential because careers support is in a dire state.

Our schools and colleges fall way short in the eight Gatsby benchmarks, which are based on respected international standards. One in five does not even meet any of the eight benchmarks at all. Schools on average meet just 2.13 of them. And just 21 schools and colleges are reported to achieve all eight.

69% of businesses do not think secondary schools adequately prepare children for work.

And advice is often biased against technical routes in a system that is overwhelmingly stacked in favour of academic routes - even after the introduction of the Baker clause which, at least in theory, forces schools to open up to technical options.

This has deep roots culturally in our education system - fuelled by the fact that teachers have academic university backgrounds.

3 When we think about society's gravest social problems, we might not immediately think about careers support. But we should.

Poor careers support is the enemy of personal fulfilment and of prosperity and full employment.

It narrows people's perspectives on opportunity and it erodes ambition.

It means deep reserves of human potential remain frustratingly untapped.

This is true across the board but it is especially harmful to those who are already disadvantaged.

Why? Well, disadvantaged pupils are far worse placed to convert solid school attainment into good jobs.

Even when they get similar GCSE results and live in the same neighbourhoods, for example, pupils on free school meals are 34% more likely to drop out of post-16 education, and 47 per cent less likely than their peers to attend top universities.

Wealthier students have more access to social capital: access to know-how, social networks, extracurricular opportunities, work experience, and all those extras that help people on to and up the career ladder. They have access to a far broader perception and understanding of the job options and how to take open the door to them.

Because disadvantaged children have less social capital, it is even more important they can access good careers support.

This widens the range of careers young people are aware of and expands the range of careers to which they feel they can aspire.

Good careers guidance engages pupils, boost grades, and improves their job prospects. For example, pupils who have good quality exposure to employers are up to 20 per cent less likely to fall into the category of NEETs. They are also likely to earn around 18 per cent more, than those who do not have this.

And it helps pupils prepare for changes in the labour market. This is even more vital in a world in which people are required to study longer; where labour market conditions are changing so rapidly; and in which up to a third of jobs could disappear by 2030. Ironically this is set against a background of an uncertain post-Brexit climate with employers agonising about skills shortages.

4 The Government's recent careers strategy is a small step forward in the right direction

The evidence suggests that leadership in schools is key to successful guidance and advice, and the Government strategy rightly emphasises the need to have dedicated careers leaders in schools and colleges.

It also rightly places more of a rigorous focus on schools achieving the Gatsby benchmarks, including more meaningful interactions with businesses, with a focus on STEM subjects.

And it ensures that Ofsted will now hold schools and colleges to account for their careers provision.

5 But the current strategy alone will not fix the problems that exist. What is needed is fireworks... what we got were damp squibs.

There are many worthy intentions to admire in the strategy. But it does not go far enough.

It was a missed opportunity.

Careers support is still far too fragmented

We have a confused mish-mash of offerings of support with different government agencies providing bits here and un-coordinated pieces there.

For the student it must be like trying to negotiate a way through spaghetti junction with all the signs pointing the wrong way. No wonder so many get lost.

How can they know and understand the difference between The National Careers Service and the Careers and Enterprise Company: Networks for Collaborative Outreach and local authorities: combined authorities, city mayors, or Local Enterprise Partnerships: Jobcentre Plus or individual university outreach or National Collaborative Outreach Programme?

On top of this are employers' own initiatives and third sector organisations. Some working with government agencies, some not.

And no overarching entity to bring it all together, far less a decent roadmap to guide baffled students to good quality help and advice.

It all reminds me of a passage from Charles Dickens's Little Dorrit: "If another Gunpowder Plot had been discovered half an hour before the lighting of the match, nobody would have been justified in saving the parliament until there had been half a score of boards, half a bushel of minutes, several sacks of official memoranda, and a family-vault full of ungrammatical correspondence, on the part of the Circumlocution Office."

Some of these agencies face serious problems.

Like the Careers and Enterprise Company. My colleagues and I in the Education Select Committee are deeply concerned by what we have learned in two recent hearings.

I don't doubt for a second that the company is passionate about its work, and that there are good people working there. But I'm worried they are not providing us with value for money.

This body can be ludicrously wasteful. Last year it spent £200,000 of taxpayers in a time austerity on two conferences – money which should have gone to the front-line. One cost around £150,000 and the other was about £50,000 and held at KidZania! Salaries are too high - its CEO earns almost as much as the Prime Minister. And it has spent £900,000 on research, with another projected £200,000 a year to come.

There is a lack of convincing data on its impact. And a lack of data on hard outcomes: like education and training decisions, or employment outcomes.

The quality of employer encounters is key. But in one recent hearing, it confirmed that a school assembly is a meaningful encounter.

It does not always take its own advice. Take mentoring. Its latest accounts suggest it has spent £4 million on mentoring. In one of its own research reports, it says: "Few effects can be seen from mentoring relationships that last for less than six months... There is a widespread consensus that a year-long relationship constitutes a quality mentoring interaction." And yet several of the programmes it funds fall far short of this.

There is a scandalous lack of oversight. The National Careers Service is heavily scrutinised. I'm talking the works: Ofsted inspection, mystery shoppers, quality standards, and payment by results linked to customer satisfaction and job/learning outcomes. But the CEC? Nothing even remotely comparable.

Despite this, it has been lavished with new roles, without really demonstrating that it has mastered its initial brief. It is now broker; grant controller; research organisation; designer of careers toolkit; running a fund for disadvantaged pupils; supporting careers hubs. And I'm still not clear why grant-making decisions cannot be made by the DfE.

Our overall careers offer suffers from many other problems.

For example, we are ignoring the need for professionalism

The evidence shows that access to personalised, impartial and professional advice is at the heart of delivering effective careers support.

They are key to providing objective advice, unrestrained from cultural bias. They bring important up-to-date knowledge of the labour market and the routes people need to take to make the most of likely opportunities. They are trained to understand students' strengths and motivations, and match this with good advice.

But recent policy has banished large portions of the career development profession.

Teachers and employers cannot do the job alone. Careers leaders can play a part, but students must have access to independent advice. This is particularly important when it comes to technical routes, which have not always been championed by all schools.

There is also not enough emphasis on starting early

It is vital that we start careers support early. Anastasia de Waal understands this with her "I CAN BE" programme for young girls that focuses on primary schools in deprived areas.

According to the OECD, career expectations at around 13 are a good predictor of actual choices. And the evidence shows that even before they start school, children are already forming their own clear perceptions of different occupations.

UCAS calculates that being confident about entering higher education at the age of 10 makes it twice as likely that a child will end up at a competitive university.

Despite the importance of an early start, the Government's careers strategy devotes just four of its 105 paragraphs to it. It allocates £2 million "to test new programmes, or expand ones that work".

We do really need to be SO much more ambitious.

And the strategy makes little mention of students who are the hardest to reach

Like those who have been excluded from mainstream education.

Children who are home schooled. Looked after children.

6 We must urgently improve our careers offer in England and build a National Skills Service.

What do I mean by this?

- A one-stop-shop under the direction of a single rigorous backbone organisation.
- It must devote extra focus to those who have fallen on hard times.
- It must serve all ages.
- Provide top-class independent, impartial support from qualified professional advisers, and -
- A clear line of accountability.
- And, most of all, a better use of money with demonstrably and measurably improved outcomes.

Let me take each of those in turn

A one-stop-shop under the direction of one backbone organisation.

Our careers offer in this country is a sprawling mess. We need a single entity to take charge.

To provide leadership and bring it all together.

To focus resources where they are most needed and promote social justice.

To bring together revenue streams, avoid duplication and improve efficiency.

To offer strategic oversight.

And ultimately to be accountable for delivering.

A National Skills Service would allow us to do all of this.

We can draw on international examples to help inform our thinking.

Like the Scottish careers support system, which has been applauded by the OECD for its coherent structure.

Scotland funds a national public entity – Skills Development Scotland – to run the country’s careers information, advice and guidance offer; support work-based learning; and broker constructive engagements with employers.

It has a multi-agency approach. It works with schools and colleges, through a network of high street centres, with job centres, with local authorities, through outreach centres, and with employers.

But, crucially, Skills Development Scotland is the strategic leader, which means it is easier to enact Government policy and be consistent.

The National Skills Service would bring all the information individuals need to make informed career choices under one roof. One website for everything.

Funding options. The latest information on the labour market and skills needs. FE league tables. All the educational and training options that might be available to someone at any point in their lives (and know-how about how to take each path).

Like the brilliant Career Colleges, which specialise in vocational areas that are linked to local needs, and bring together employers and FE colleges to give students relevant skills that meet skills gaps.

National Careers Week, which flies the flag for careers and skills education and provides important resources for schools.

And, Middleton Murray who have recently published a new book and created free “i-want-to-b-a” podcasts to help students, parents and schools learn about different careers.

Serving those who have fallen on hard times

Because a National Skills Service would drive the overall careers support offer, it could also take a helicopter view and focus resources on those who need them most.

This matters enormously. Our careers offer should contain all the elements of necessary to underpin social justice. It needs leadership which is motivated and trained to spot the gaps and decide where to steer support.

Like supporting apprentices from the poorest areas. Currently, there is a £60 million support fund for apprenticeships in disadvantaged areas. This currently goes to private providers and we can be a lot smarter about how we use that money.

Some disadvantaged pupils are just not ready for work and face many complex challenges. They're not even at the foot of the ladder of opportunity. We need to help them get there so they can start apprenticeships and work their way up.

Serving all ages

A single backbone organisation makes it easier to offer an all-age approach, which can be used to support children in primary school all the way through to second-chance learners.

The evidence suggests that all-age approaches can be more cost-effective by avoiding duplication.

And the evidence also shows we must start early. "All ages" means starting in primary school.

I repeat, career expectations at around 13 are a good predictor of actual choices. Evidence shows that even before they start school, children are already forming perceptions of jobs; that early intervention can shape these perceptions and tackle negative stereotypes; and that children in primary schools are receptive to learning about skills and occupations.

We must start in primary schools.

Of course, this needs to be carefully considered. I'm not talking about sending 8-year-olds to Deloitte for an internship. It is more about helping to expand children's ideas about what is possible from an early age.

Don't take my word for it. In Finland, they have really gripped this. They have a world-renowned all-ages careers education system. And they recognise the need to start young. In primary and secondary education, school career services offer 76 hours of careers counselling.

Some of the best primary schools in this country are already doing the same. Gateshead College hosts classes of primary school children to try their hand at coding and broaden their perspectives.

I mentioned them briefly earlier, but “I CAN BE” is another example of this. They are currently helping two hundred 7- and 8-year-old girls to experience the world of work by taking them to visit women in workplaces in their local area.

Offering top-class impartial support from qualified professional advisers.

The evidence shows that independent and impartial support delivered by experts is crucial.

Our new National Skills Service should recruit the very best professional careers specialists. It should treat careers support as a distinct field of expertise – not one that can be shipped out to teachers (whom we already ask to do so much) or generalists on the cheap.

Again, we can learn some lessons from other support systems.

The offer in Scotland has been commended by the OECD for its professionalism. Its career support experts are professionally qualified and top-up regularly to develop.

Its advisers have access to up-to-date labour market intelligence, including data on labour market trends and employer skills demand – split geographically and by sector. They are also updated on different qualifications and training routes, including earn and learn options.

All this information helps them to tailor the services they provide. And its offering is also parent focused. All of which the evidence shows is really important – particularly to tackle unfounded assumptions about technical routes.

We used to have a healthy number of experts in our own workforce. Tragically, many are now leaving the profession, or going elsewhere, because we have reduced our demand for their skills.

What a complete waste.

We must welcome them back and allow them to play their part in a new, world-class offer.

A clear line of accountability.

We have seen how clear and visionary oversight and rigorous accountability to go missing when we create too many delivery vehicles.

A single entity would restore this. It would also make it possible to ensure oversight, transparency and accountability.

And we should demand the same level of rigour that we currently apply to the National Careers Service.

We should also test and learn. Evaluating all the way.

And a better use of money

Operating individually, in an un-co-ordinated manner and too often in a vacuum, our current smorgasboard of government-funded careers schemes cannot solve the present acute careers problem.

But put together and properly structured, they would have a real chance of doing so.

We would reduce waste and duplication. We would achieve economies of scale. We could improve organisational efficiency. And we would be able to plan expenditure more strategically.

Perhaps, most importantly, we would present a world class careers offering which was actually comprehensible to those who need it most – today's lost youth.

But a world-class offering will need a world-class budget.

In 2001, we spent around £450 million on careers support for young people in England; today the figure is closer to around £100 million. That is a scandalously false saving which must be reversed.

Making wiser choices about how we spend money also means thinking about how we're spending money in other parts of the education system.

To give careers support the shot in the arm it needs, we should divert spending from other areas.

Like the planned expansion of grammar schools.

£50 million has been earmarked for this between 2018-19, with a further £150 million to come. Is this really the best use of funds to promote social justice? It is highly doubtful that every penny of this money will benefit disadvantaged pupils.

It must be far better to spend it on careers support for disadvantaged pupils that would help compensate for their lack of social capital. The very social capital, after all, that helps more comfortable students get to places like grammar schools in the first place...

And we can surely also use some of the £800-odd million a year that universities will spend on outreach, to provide another boost to our new service.

Our National Skills Service can also be a one-stop-shop for other key sources of skills advice and guidance for technical education

In other advanced economies, technical routes are a well-respected, and well-oiled, part of the educational machinery that exists. In Switzerland, for example, around two thirds of students in the final part of their secondary education choose a vocational pathway.

All children, regardless of background, should have access to easily accessible technical routes that will lead to good job opportunities. But this is even more important for disadvantaged individuals who rely more on technical routes.

We need to make sure that our apprenticeship offer is world-class. To do this, we should bring the National Apprenticeships Service into the National Skills Service, where it can play a more integrated role with the skills and careers offers that exist.

And, as part of a single online resource, we desperately need a UCAS style portal for technical education - not a wishy-washy imitation of the existing one, but a proper, comprehensive online portal.

We need this to communicate and signpost the options that are available to people.

And we need it because it would empower students to see for themselves the opportunity in technical education, unconstrained by the biases that tend to seep into advice they might receive elsewhere.

7 Concluding comments

So, what I am calling for today is:

A one-stop-shop under the direction of one backbone entity.

One that focuses heavily on those who have fallen on hard times. Serves all ages. Offers support from qualified professional advisers. With a clear line of accountability. And brings into the fold the National Apprenticeship Service and a UCAS style portal for technical education.

These are the core pillars of a National Skills Service.

Top-class careers support is a lifeline for those who may stumble blindly into a life of unfulfilled promise.

It also taps into a whole new reservoir of latent talent and endeavour to help in the vital task of continuing to build the UK economy.

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Altogether, it is a win-win proposal serving the interests of fairness, social justice and the economic prosperity of our country.

We must treat it as such.

So that more people know how to climb the ladder of opportunity.

And that social justice is the real engine of the careers support we offer.