A report by the International Centre for Guidance Studies for the Career Development Institute

Qualifications & professionalism in career development

Hannah Blake

Tristram Hooley

Ka Tung Lai

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**About iCeGS**

iCeGS is a research centre with expertise in career and career development. The Centre conducts research, provides consultancy to the career sector, offers a range of training and delivers several accredited learning programmes up to and including doctoral level.

The Centre employs researchers with a range of academic and professional backgrounds and works closely with a network of research associates and partners who contribute specialist knowledge and capacity. iCeGS has a strong ethos which connects our research to policy and practice. To find out more about what we do or for further information on iCeGS see [www.derby.ac.uk/icegs](http://www.derby.ac.uk/icegs)

**Contact information**

International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS)
Institute of Education
University of Derby
Kedleston Road
Derby
DE22 1GB

[www.derby.ac.uk/iCeGS](http://www.derby.ac.uk/iCeGS)

Twitter: @iCeGS

Facebook: @iCeGS\_UoD

LinkedIn: International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS)

# Foreword

Career development has a crucial role in helping young people and adults thrive, yet faces its own challenges. The CDI’s Big Listen survey records that a high number of people are likely to leave the careers profession in the coming years, driven by retirement and poor pay. Plus, while career development professionals are proud of the amazing work they do, they don’t feel well recognised by government, employers and the public.

Change is needed to bolster the career development workforce and enhance our professional standing. We need clear and attractive routes for new people to join the profession, opportunities for progression, specialisation and fair reward, and robust and well-understood methods of professional recognition.

The CDI commissioned this research by iCeGS to help address these issues. It is a powerful examination of the current state of professional qualifications and recognition for the sector, based on comprehensive feedback from a wide range of stakeholders. It gives clear, compelling and honest insight into the issues we are experiencing – including criticisms of the CDI itself. Yet it is also a positive report – highlighting the many strengths of the current system and the opportunities that change presents.

The research was presented to the CDI Board in January 2025. It wasn’t published then as we were concerned about creating uncertainty in parts of the sector which may not be addressed quickly. Instead, we initiated the first projects to address the key issues identified, staring with a review of the Qualification in Career Development (QCD) which is awarded by the CDI to students at five universities. Following consultation with key stakeholders – including the universities - we are now implementing changes to tackle the concerns raised in the report.

We have also started a review of the UK Register of Career Development Professionals and are planning additional projects related to other areas flagged by the report, such as the clarification of qualification levels.

I am delighted that we are now publishing the full report, and we are grateful to Dr Hannah Blake, Professor Tristram Hooley and Ka Tung Lai for working with us to complete such a landmark study. The insights and recommendations will be of tremendous value to governments, training institutions, researchers and practitioners.

As the sector’s professional body, the CDI has a central role to play in addressing the issues raised. However, most of the changes will require a collaborative effort with other organisations and individuals. This is reflected in the CDI’s 2030 strategy, which will launch by the end of 2025. I look forward to working with colleagues across the sector to further enhance our profession, welcoming new entrants, encouraging continuous development and enabling clients to achieve their career aspirations.

**David Morgan,** Chief Executive, Career Development Institute

# Executive summary

Career development is a professional activity which requires up to date knowledge of the education system and the labour market, a range of counselling, coaching, pedagogic skills and theoretical knowledge to work effectively with individuals and groups. Qualifications are an important guarantor of the quality of the professionals who are charged with supporting people to make career decisions and build their careers. It is also important that career development professionals have access to CPD and a requirement to ensure that their knowledge and skills remain current. This report will explore these issues of professionalism with a particular focus on the training and qualifications system that exists for the career development profession.

The existing training and qualifications system for careers professionals has developed over several decades and has been particularly challenged by the last 25 years of policy change and innovation. We believe that now is a good time to take stock of the system and to consider whether it needs reform. This research sets out the findings of a project which took place in 2024 which included 22 stakeholder interviews, a survey of 644 careers professionals, employers, training providers and wider stakeholders and roundtable discussions with 25 further participants to explore how the field should develop. The report ends with a series of recommendations setting out the way forward for the field.

## Key findings

Participants generally felt that the career development profession was a valuable and rewarding occupation. However, they were frustrated that the sector is not well understood by the general public, nor is it viewed as an attractive place to work. This negative perception was considered to be a contributing factor for a shortage of skills in the sector with 68% of employers stating that they often or always struggle to recruit appropriate qualified candidates. This leads 36% of employers who responded to the survey to use unqualified or underqualified staff to deliver career development services.

Key issues that disincentivise new entrants to engage with the sector include the fact that:

* career development work is poorly paid, with around 70% of respondents to the survey reporting that they earn around the UK median income or less and 35% reporting that they earn less than £30,000 a year; and
* other than a student loan for a Master’s qualification there is no funding for individuals to take qualifications that would allow them to enter the field. This means that the main source of funding for training and qualifications comes from those employers who are either willing to train their existing (unqualified) staff, or recruit unqualified staff and train them on the job. For some employers, the use of the apprenticeship levy, will then provide a funding source to pay for this.

The experience of training and qualifications was overwhelmingly positive. Most respondents (88%) reported a good experience of their initial qualification, 85% agreed that it was good preparation for practice and 86% agreed that it had improved their career prospects. Qualification completion rates are high (90%) which provides further evidence that the existing qualifications are working well.

There was overwhelming support (94%) for the idea that it is necessary for career development professionals to hold a qualification to practise, with a consensus that all career development professionals should be trained at least to degree level, with a minority arguing that a post-graduate level qualification should function as the minimum qualification.

There were also substantial concerns about the overall training and qualification system, with many participants viewing elements of the system as being unfit for purpose and in need of reform. Key issues highlighted included:

* the complexity of the existing system, which is based on multiple qualifications at different levels, delivered through different approaches and with a range of different names and foci. This was viewed by many participants as confusing and off-putting for new entrants to the field;
* the lack of clear differentiation between pre-graduate, graduate and post-graduate qualifications and the need to more clearly articulate what each of these qualifications are for;
* the lack of sufficient numbers of trainees, meaning that training providers are often dealing with small cohorts and the skills shortages in the sector are not being addressed quickly enough;
* the high likelihood that new entrants to the field enter with no careers-specific qualifications and then train later rather than entering via an initial qualification;
* the need to radically reform the pre-graduate qualification in England which was viewed as being a qualification without a purpose;
* the need to further embed the English Higher Apprenticeship into the consciousness of both potential trainees and employers and to address the bureaucratic challenges that it presents; and
* the need to reform the funding system for career development qualifications for those living outside Scotland, particularly in relation to the possibility of taking post-graduate qualifications.

There was also a strong recognition that initial training was not sufficient for the professionalisation of the sector. Many participants argued for an equal focus on post-qualification development. Key issues that were raised included:

* the importance of focusing on the initial period after qualification. It is important that trainees are supported and mentored to move to full professional confidence in the period after they qualify;
* respondents also strongly endorsed the idea that professional practice requires ongoing CPD. On average people believed that a professional should engage in 28 hours of CPD a year and reported that they engaged in an average of 34 hours. However, they also reported a range of challenges to engaging in CPD which were mostly focused around access to time and money. This meant that CPD was often strongly reliant on self-study and free resources.
* around a third of career development professionals who responded to the questionnaire reported that they were interested in seeking additional qualifications.

Despite a strong endorsement of the value of CPD many participants raised concerns that there were too few opportunities for progression in the career development sector. The sector was viewed as being ‘*very flat*’ with a move into management the only way to progress.

Finally, we found a range of issues related to the quality assurance of qualifications and training in the sector. Principally these related to the following two issues.

* The CDI was viewed as having a critical strategic role in the articulation and management of the training and qualification system. Participants identified a range of areas where there were tensions in the multiple roles that the CDI was currently playing in this area.
* The existence of the register was understood as one of the most important tools available to support the professionalisation of the sector. However, only about half of the respondents (54%) were currently registered, with registration levels particularly patchy in Scotland and in the higher education sector. Less than half of employers strongly emphasised the register in their recruitment and training providers raised several concerns about the criteria for registration.

## Recommendations

Based on these finding we make 12 recommendations for the sector to consider and act on.

1. Renew the sector’s commitment to professionalism.
2. Campaign to improve the image of the sector.
3. Improve pay and conditions for career development professionals.
4. Develop new mechanisms for funding qualifications.
5. Clarify and simplify the range of qualifications available for career development professionals.
6. Strengthen both work-based and classroom-based routes into the profession.
7. Clarify the differences between the different levels of qualification.
8. Codify the post qualification period to support the development of professional confidence and proficiency.
9. Strengthen the range of opportunities and support for CPD.
10. Expand the progression opportunities within the career development profession.
11. Reassert the CDI as the strategic body with responsibility for training, qualifications and professionalism.
12. Continue to develop, promote and clarify the register.

Many of these recommendations require substantial changes from a wide range of stakeholders including training providers, careers professionals and employers. However, it is particularly important to highlight firstly the role of government, which needs to recognise that there is a crisis of professionalism within the field and the need to address this through improved funding and regulation, and secondly, the role that the CDI has in providing leadership for the system as a whole.

# Visualising progress: recommended routes to strengthening the sector

This infographic illustrates five key focus areas essential for enhancing and strengthening the careers sector. The five sections highlight critical priorities and recommendations: **Quality Assurance** emphasises the need for strategic oversight and clarity; **Professionalism** underscores the importance of renewing commitments to professional standards and practices; **Financial Issues** focus on addressing pay and funding challenges for career development professionals; **Qualification Pathways** aim to clarify and strengthen routes to professional qualifications; and **Post-Training Development** supports ongoing professional growth and confidence. Together, these elements create a comprehensive framework for advancing professional excellence and career sustainability.

The full report is available at:

International centre for Guidance Studies, <https://www.derby.ac.uk/research/themes/public-services/icegs/>

****Career Development Institute, [www.thecdi.net](http://www.thecdi.net)

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