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

Qualifications & professionalism in career development

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# 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

# Note: Understanding the qualification levels

The qualifications available in the careers sector are diverse, with additional complexity arising from differences in terminology and qualifications outside England, particularly in Scotland. A notable example is the variation in the way qualification levels are described. So, Levels 4, 6, and 7 in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland correspond to Levels 7, 10, and 11 in Scotland. For clarity in this report, we have chosen to use the terms pre-graduate, graduate, and post-graduate to describe different qualification levels, as outlined in the table below.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | England/Wales/NI | Scotland | Example qualifications |
| Pre-graduate  | L4 | L7 | Modern Apprenticeship: CD (Scotland)Technical Apprenticeship: CD (Scotland)Diploma in Careers Information and Advice |
| Graduate | L6 | L10 | Higher Apprenticeship: CDPNVQ 4 Advice and Guidance + 3 specified L6 UnitsDiploma in Career Guidance and DevelopmentCareers Leader (Accredited)BA (Hons) Guidance and Counselling |
| Post-graduate | L7 | L11 | Diploma in Career GuidanceMasters in Career Guidance/Development (Inc QCD)Masters in Career Guidance/Development (No QCD)PG Dip in Career Guidance/Development (Inc QCD)PG Dip in Career Guidance/Development (No QCD)Post Graduate CertificateCareer Leader (Accredited) |

# 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.



# Introduction

Career development professionals play an essential role in guiding individuals through complex career pathways. They work to help individuals navigate an ever-changing education system and a dynamic labour market. Helping people choose, manage and develop their careers is more important than ever in the contemporary world as we face political instability, environmental change and the continuing advance of digital and AI technology.

In such a world it is not possible to expect that careers will be organised in logical straight lines. Careers are not simply chosen, but rather built over the course of a lifetime. Making the right choices in education and transitioning into the labour market are important, but successful career management requires skill and know-how to be deployed across the life course. And for most people, particularly those who do not come from advantaged backgrounds, building a career requires the support of others, including career development professionals.

Career development professionals capable of providing this kind of support do not magically appear in the world. A career development professional has to weave together a wide range of skills and competencies including knowledge of the labour market, an understanding of human psychology and the ability to act on these things through counselling, teaching and a range of other approaches. Yet in recent years, there has been a need for an overhaul of how career development professionals are recruited, trained and developed. It has now been more than a decade since the Careers Profession Taskforce (2010) investigated these issues on behalf of the UK government and made several important recommendations to professionalise the sector. While much progress has been made since this report, continued challenges in terms of funding and loose government specification of professional requirements have meant that a process of de-professionalisation has not been halted. The time is now ripe to look at these issues again in the light of the contemporary situation.

This report, commissioned by the Career Development Institute (CDI), seeks to plug the gap in the evidence base. It explores the current state of the qualifications that underpin the careers profession and asks how these can be improved as part of a wider project of professionalising the field.

## A brief history

The career development profession emerged at the start of the twentieth century with the establishment of vocational guidance bureaux in many countries including the UK (McCash et al., 2021). In 1904, Maria Ogilvie Gordon made a proposal for local education authorities and school boards across Britain to set up Educational Information and Employment Bureaux to support school leavers in finding suitable work. Soon after, in 1909, the government created a public employment service focused on adults and began to work on further provision for young people. As the network of careers and employment services grew the question of who should staff such services began to be asked and approaches to the training and qualification of these practitioners began to be developed (Peck, 2004).

For much of the post-war period career development professionals working in the public careers service were expected to hold the Diploma in Career Guidance (DipCG), a post-graduate qualification which was understood to be broadly analogous to the post-graduate qualifications taken by teachers (Gough, 2017). This system still exists in Scotland, and to a lesser extent in the other UK nations, with the qualification now known as the Qualification in Career Development (QCD). However, in England, the development of the Connexions Service in the 2000s and then the defunding of the public careers provision in the 2010s, resulted in the careers profession being seriously eroded and deskilled (Lewin & Colley, 2011; Watts, 2013). During the 2000s this saw the qualification requirements for career development professionals drop to pre-graduate levels and although this was addressed by the Careers Profession Task Force (2010) which reaffirmed the importance of graduate level qualifications, the contraction of the overall funding envelope for career guidance in the 2010s saw the profession and its training capacity shrink further.

Whilst support for career development and professionalisation has always been strong in Scotland, since 2014 the Department for Education in England’s interest in career guidance has steadily increased. The Careers Strategy (DfE, 2017) reiterated both the importance of career guidance and the value of qualified professionals. Yet, both the Strategy and subsequent government policy have stopped short of setting clear requirements for qualification levels and funding has remained limited.

This complex history has resulted in a somewhat muddled picture in terms of the qualifications in the field. On one hand, there are a range of university-based courses delivering qualifications at post-graduate level and work-based qualifications offering graduate level awards. At the other end of the spectrum, there are many career development practitioners who have no formal qualifications in the field. In between there are a wide array of historic and contemporary qualifications which mean that for both people seeking to enter the profession and for the general public who want to make use of the services that it offers, the careers profession can be confusing to engage with.

The historical development of the field has seen it go through a process of professionalisation and then de-professionalisation. This has led some commentators to argue that there is a need for an assertive process of reconstruction of the careers profession (Hughes, 2013; Neary, 2022). In addition, there has also been considerable development of the nature of the role that career development professionals do and some proliferation of allied and associated roles such as the careers leader, employer engagement practitioners and employability practitioners. Whether these different roles are included within the profession of ‘careers professional’ or viewed as allied or paraprofessional roles is one of the key issues that professionalisation and re-professionalisation processes needs to resolve. This report will not attempt to resolve all of these issues, but it will provide data and insights that might support future thinking in this area.

## The value of qualifications

Qualifications are an important guarantor of quality as they help to define and regulate the skills and knowledge that people need to perform a particular job (Hooley & Rice, 2019). Gough and Neary (2021) argue that the existence of firstly, a body of defined skills, knowledge and theory, and secondly, a mechanism for developing and regulating this corpus of knowledge, are key elements of what makes an occupation into a profession. However, they also go on to describe the need for this to be recognised and accepted by policymakers and the general public in order for an occupation to become a full profession. This recognition when supported by trust in the profession to regulate itself is often known as the *regulatory bargain*.

As career development professionals require knowledge and skills in order to work effectively with their students and clients it is important to ensure that they are appropriately trained and that they have access to continuing professional development, to ensure that their skills and knowledge are up-to-date and that there are some systems in place to quality assure both the initial qualifications and the practice and conduct of careers professionals once they are qualified. In the UK, the CDI is central to all these processes, overseeing the development and/or delivery of qualifications like the Qualification in Career Guidance/Development, delivering the graduate level work-based qualification on behalf of OCR and alongside other OCR centres, providing CPD to career development professionals and managing the framework of registration and ethics to quality assure careers professionals and drive their engagement with CPD. This means that the practice and activities of the CDI are central to the focus of this report.

Internationally there are a diverse range of ways in which career development professionals are trained, qualified and regulated (Gough & Neary, 2021; Hooley & Schulstok, 2020; Hooley, 2022). Many countries have university-based training for career development professionals typically delivered at bachelor’s or master’s level. However, other countries use work-based routes for the training of career development professionals. Indeed, one of the trends globally has been for a proliferation of different pathways through which people can qualify as a career development professional (Niles & Karajic, 2008; Patton, 2002).

The issues of de-professionalisation and the challenges of building trust in and awareness of new professions that are faced by the careers profession in the UK have also been observed in other countries. Observers have frequently concluded that the professionalisation of careers is a work in progress that requires both investment in training and development and the building of stronger understanding and engagement from policymakers, other professionals and the general public (O’Reilly et al., 2020).

Qualifications are therefore far from the whole story in relation to the professionalisation of careers. Nonetheless, the development of training programmes and qualifications are bound up in important ways with the project of professionalisation because they codify the nature and scope of the profession. Typically, this is informed by national assumptions about what practitioners should know and be able to do to be seen as qualified or licensed to practise. In some cases, such thinking can be enshrined into a series of standards and guidelines which then provide a basis for training programmes (Hiebert & Neault, 2014).

In *The NICE Handbook* (Schiersmann et al., 2012) and subsequent related publications (Schiersmann et al., 2016) a group of leading trainers from across Europe synthesised a number of these frameworks and proposed an over-arching European framework for the training of career development professionals. This framework recognises five ‘professional roles’ or key areas of competency that should be addressed in careers professional training. These state that career development professionals should be a: career information and assessment expert; career counsellor; career educator; social systems intervener and developer; and a programme and service manager. This framework has been influential in several countries in Europe (Andreassen et al., 2019) and has shaped the CDI’s thinking about what the modern careers professional should look like in the UK (CDI, 2021).

There is therefore good evidence to support the idea that training and qualifications are an important part of an effective career development profession. There is also evidence to suggest that other countries have invested in the development of the profession and that they have placed robust approaches to training at the heart of that. With this in mind, we can now begin to investigate the current situation in the UK.

# Research approach

This study, conducted in 2024, used a mixed-methods approach to explore issues related to qualifications and professionalism in the career development field. It incorporated a survey alongside interviews and roundtable discussions to capture a picture of the attitudes and experiences of career development professionals and key stakeholders in relation to qualifications and professionalism in career development.

The study aimed to explore the following issues.

* What different routes and pathways exist through which people can become trained and qualified as career development practitioners or professionals[[1]](#footnote-2)?
* How are the different career-related qualifications perceived by stakeholders in the sector and beyond it? What labour market advantage do they afford to those who take them?
* What are people’s experiences of studying for career-related qualifications or employing people who have been awarded these qualifications? What barriers have been faced by practitioners and aspiring professionals in acquiring qualifications and skills?
* What opportunities exist for continuing professional development (CPD) within the career development sector? Is there a strong enough framework and sufficient opportunities for CPD in the sector?

## Stakeholder interviews

The project began with the identification of 22 stakeholders for interview. Stakeholders were chosen for diversity, with the aim of engaging with a wide range of different kinds of stakeholders. These included representatives from UK careers services, awarding bodies, delivery organisations, and career consultants. The diversity provided a broad basis for analysing current attitudes towards career development qualifications and identifying areas for desired future improvement.

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted via MS Teams, typically lasting an hour and addressed the following topics.

* The ideal qualifications needed to be a career development professional.
* Attitudes towards the qualifications currently on offer.
* Issues affecting the sector in relation to qualifications and professionalism.
* How the sector could best be further professionalised.
* The role of the CDI in relation to career development qualifications and professionalism.

Interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Teams automatic transcription feature and data was subsequently analysed thematically using NVivo. This approach allowed for coding and identifying patterns across responses, capturing both recurring themes and unique insights.

## The survey

Once the first few interviews had been completed, we began to construct a survey designed to explore the perspectives of a wider range of participants in relation to the research questions set out above. The survey was developed using SmartSurvey and used tailored routing to ensure that relevant questions were delivered to the diverse range of respondents. There were sections targeted at employers, training providers, practitioners, and students.

The draft survey was discussed with the CDI and then piloted with six participants including practitioners and training providers sourced from the iCeGS network. The purpose of the pilot was to test and refine the survey design before conducting the full-scale survey. We asked the pilot participants for feedback on survey questions (i.e. language and terminology) and technical issues. This feedback was then collated, and changes were made to the survey where necessary. Doing this helped to ensure that the survey was well-designed and able to provide meaningful results.

The full-scale survey was disseminated through multiple channels, including social media, the Career Development Institute (CDI) newsletter and mailing list, direct outreach to stakeholders, and existing networks within the International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS) and the research team. It was open from the 2nd September to 1st October 2024.

The survey received 644 usable responses after cleaning which were analysed using Excel and SPSS to identify key trends, correlations, and significant insights. There was a good spread of ages with survey respondents ranging in age from their 20s to over 60, with the majority (66%) aged between 41-60. Of these 26% were fairly new to the profession and had worked in it for less than five years, whilst the majority (55%) had been in the field for more than 10 years.

In terms of location, the overwhelming majority were located in England as set out in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 Responses by country (644 respondents).

In terms of their general (non-careers specific) level of qualification, respondents were generally fairly highly qualified. Most (63%) respondents held a postgraduate qualification with a further 26% qualified to at least graduate degree level. Most survey respondents (87%) had a qualification in career development, with this being particularly strong amongst sole practitioners (96%), those who worked in careers or employability companies (92%) and those in higher education institutions (91%). Their qualifications included a variety of qualifications in coaching, counselling, employability skills, careers leadership or other qualifications which address career, employability, and transition. Figure 2.2 sets out the proportion of participants who indicated that they had different types and levels of careers qualification. There were very few responses from individuals who held pre-graduate qualifications, the majority of respondents to this survey were highly qualified, holding a careers qualification at graduate or postgraduate level. Post-graduate qualifications were generally clustered in Higher Education and National Career Development services (SDS and Careers Wales).

Figure 2.2 Respondents by career development qualification (591 respondents).

Respondents reported that they worked for different types of organisations. We have categorised these organisations into the eight organisation types set out in Figure 2.3.

Figure 2.3 Respondents by organisation type (633 respondents)

Those working in schools were the highest number of respondents at 22%, followed by higher education institutions (16%), national career development services (16%), further education or independent training providers (14%) and careers or employability companies (14%). This shows a good spread of respondents who were engaged with all of the main contexts in which career development is practised in the UK.

Most respondents to the survey were practitioners (78%) with the most common job title among respondents being *careers adviser* (37%). Substantial numbers of respondents described themselves as employers (19%), training providers (15%) or students (7%). It was possible for participants to have more than one role, for example, many of the employers of careers practitioners also identified as careers practitioners.

Around half of respondents were primarily working with young people under 19 (49%). Smaller proportions were working in further education (8%) or higher education (15%). While 11% were working with adults (over the age of 19) and 17% reported that their clients spanned all age groups. Most respondents (85%) worked with individuals with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND/ASN/ALN) as part of their practice.

Most respondents were members of the CDI (70%), with higher levels of membership in Northern Ireland (78%), Wales (74%), and England (70%), compared to Scotland (56%). In Scotland, more respondents (54%) were likely to be members of Unison, compared to Wales (32%), England (17%), and Northern Ireland (9%). This also varied across organisation types. Sole practitioners (86%), respondents in schools (84%), and those in the third sector, NHS, and local authorities (84%) were most likely to be members of CDI. However, only 44% of respondents in higher education institutions were members of CDI. In higher education institutions, most respondents (79%) were members of AGCAS.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (79%) were members of at least one career-relevant professional association (e.g. AGCAS or CDI). Around a third (30%) were members of a trade union. A quarter (25%) of respondents were members of both career-relevant professional associations and trade unions, while 16% were members of neither. This varied across countries, with higher levels of membership of career-relevant professional associations in Northern Ireland (96%) and Wales (90%), compared to England (78%) and Scotland (68%). In Scotland, 60% of respondents were a member of a trade union, compared to 39% in Wales, 27% in England, and 17% in Northern Ireland. Affiliations also varied across organisation types, with higher levels of memberships of career relevant professional association in higher education institutions (94%), and lower in careers or employability companies (64%) and national career development services (66%). Trade union membership was notably higher in the school and national career development services sectors (38% and 37%, respectively), but very low among sole practitioners (4%).

## Roundtables

Following the survey’s completion, four roundtable discussions were undertaken, each focusing on different stakeholder groups.

* Training providers.
* Employers.
* Practitioners.
* Students.

Roundtable participants were recruited principally through the survey, with volunteers indicating their interest by providing contact details. These discussions, which involved a total of 25 participants, were structured around preliminary findings from the survey and interviews and aimed to deepen the understanding of sector-specific challenges and opportunities and surface potential solutions or recommendations.

The round tables typically lasted around an hour and were transcribed using Microsoft Teams automatic transcription feature. Data was then analysed in NVivo.

# Findings

We will discuss the findings from all three phases of the project together under a series of themes related to the research questions.

## Perceptions of the career development profession

In this section we explore the attractiveness of the career development sector. While many participants highlighted the value of their work and were positive about the overall purpose of the sector, there were a range of concerns about the attractiveness of the sector to those outside of it. There were also particular issues relating to pay and recruitment in the sector.

### Image and visibility of career development

Many participants were very assertive about the value of the profession. They emphasised its capacity to change people’s lives and make a real difference to society.

It is really just wanting to make a difference to people's lives, you know, that was the main inspiration for me wanting to get into careers. **Practitioner (Roundtable)**

I would recommend it as a profession because it is so rewarding and you do make a difference.
**Practitioner (Roundtable)**

Practitioners felt that career development offered them good and meaningful work, but they also identified a range of challenges and downsides to the occupation. Many of these issues were connected to the way that the profession was seen more widely.

Participants often articulated the belief that the career development sector is not perceived as an ‘*attractive*’ place to work. Participants explained that they perceived the sector as having *‘an image problem’* with those not working in the sector seeing the profession through *‘some kind of old-fashioned stereotype’*.

Participants stressed the importance of improving public understanding of the sector.

Ensuring that schools really value career guidance, ensuring that the general public understand what career guidance is…I think that sometimes careers advisers can get a bit frustrated when people don’t really understand their role or don’t value the work they do.
**Employer, National Career Development Service (Interview)**

One participant argued that public perceptions of the sector are still engrained from when people experienced careers advice themselves at school.

People don’t necessarily have really good positive memories of kind of year 11. I’m talking people of a certain generation …when it was literally you had that half an hour session and you sat down with a computer…I know broadly that’s gone, but perceptions remain and a kind of negative perception just sticks around.
**Employer (Interview)**

Respondents also reported that there is very limited public understanding of the qualifications held by career development professionals. The overwhelming majority of respondents (87%) strongly disagreed/ disagreed that there was a good public understanding of qualifications in this sector, a sentiment shared across all nations. This view was even stronger among the respondents in higher education institutions, with 94% strongly disagreeing/ disagreeing with this statement. But there was also a view that this needed to be addressed as part of the campaign to improve the status and recognition of career development professionals. If the public were better informed it would both lead them to accord career development professionals more respect and help them to avoid unqualified and unskilled practitioners.

Careers professionals are still misunderstood. Many believe anyone can do this work and have had bad experiences as a result of not engaging with fully qualified careers practitioners. The future needs of the sector rely on better publicity and a turn-around (involving e.g. lobbying of parliament and challenging stereotypes) in the way we are viewed by the general public. Bringing back careers professionals into schools and colleges, PRUs and other educational establishments as well as in Job Centres and employment hubs for adults is the only way forward, I believe.
**Practitioner (Survey)**

Many participants in the research stated that they believed it to be, at least to some extent, the role of the CDI to rectify these issues and to help attract new people to the profession. Some people were relatively positive about the CDI’s current role in doing this.

I think they’ve (CDI) got a great role to play in terms of raising awareness, championing the sector…they’ve done a really good job doing that, and I think probably they could do even more.
**Employer, National Career Development Service (Interview)**

But others, felt that the CDI needed to do a lot more saying, *‘they* (CDI) *should be shouting our cause’* (Training Provider), or *‘I don’t know what they do in terms of marketing for the profession…I think it’s all a little bit insular rather than getting out there’* (Training Provider).

These image problems for the sector were understood to have a knock-on effect in relation to the attraction of new people into the sector. The lack of visibility and understanding combines to mean that those outside of the sector do not have a clear idea of what a job in the careers sector is.

There needs to be work around promoting the value of what we do because there's a huge misunderstanding of what it is that we do.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

### Pay

Another area of concern is related to the financial rewards that are available in the sector. Most survey respondents (79%) were currently in paid employment and primarily involved in working on careers. Figure 3.1 sets out the salaries that respondents to the survey reported.

Figure 3.1 Annual salary (gross) among respondents who are currently in paid employment and primarily work on careers (507 respondents)

Some respondents raised concerns about inequalities in pay between the different sectors within career development, suggesting that this may cause problems for the low paying organisations as qualified and talented people could be drawn away to other higher paying organisations.

I’m not going to go and work in a school that’s paying £19,000 with no kind of offer of career progression when I can go to a university and they will pay almost double that.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

As the UK median income for fulltime employees who have been in a job for at least a year is £37,430 (ONS, 2024) the data presented above suggests that around 70% of respondents to our survey are earning the *median income or less* with around a third (35%) earning less than £30,000 a year. If this is representative of the wider career development sector it means that the sector is generally providing people with relatively poor pay.

Around half (47%) of survey respondents did not believe that they were fairly paid in their job. And when asked about how they compared to other professionals the majority (73%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that their salaries were fair and comparable. Participants shared the following perspectives.

The cost of living makes it difficult to live comfortably on a careers adviser salary.
**Employer (Survey)**

I think it is underrated for the level of work and skill that we use and something that’s frustrated me a bit for most of my career.
**Practitioner (Roundtable)**

The issue of pay was also acknowledged by employers and training providers who highlighted problems with both attraction and retention of suitably qualified staff.

Pay and conditions in the sector are not appealing and many good qualified career professionals left the sector/redeployed in the 2010s and were not replaced. Their salaries would have far exceeded the pay of career professionals making it impossible to return.
**Employer (Survey).**

Recruitment and retention has been a perennial problem really…and I’m being really frank, a lot of that is because the pay isn’t always great.
**Training Provider (Interview).**

Funding would attract people into training, but of course the funding of training is only part of that piece, because people need to see decently paid jobs at the other end of it.
**Training Provider (Interview).**

### Financing qualifications

Unsurprisingly given the levels of pay reported by survey respondents, the issues of both short-term funds to finance the cost of qualifications and longer-term prospects for pay were considered significant barriers to people becoming qualified as a career development professionals, with half (52%) of the respondents noted that cost was the most important factor when deciding whether to do a qualification. This is unsurprising given that outside of Scotland where Skills Development Scotland fund the post-graduate qualification and QCD, there is a lack of funding available for those wishing to train as career development professionals, which means that for new entrants, the cost of entering the profession would fall entirely on them. The only available funding for individuals seeking to upskill or join the profession is through a postgraduate student loan. However, this must be repaid, and considering the salary of practitioners and the absence of significant pay increases associated with the qualification, many may be discouraged from pursuing this funding option.

Almost half of survey respondents (48%) thought that better access to funding for training and qualifications would encourage people to take up professional qualifications in the careers sector.

I think there are difficulties because I think we no longer have the funding situation where people can return to university.
**Practitioner (Interview)**

If I was wanting to achieve significant change for the sector over the next five years I’d be trying to convince government to have similar ways of accessing funding that sectors such as teaching and social work have…that would be a magic bullet to transform the sector.
**Training Provider (Roundtable)**

Some of the issues around the cost of training and qualifications for individuals were alleviated by the willingness of a large minority (41%) of employers to pay for training up to degree level. However, this also serves to skew the training and qualification system in such a way as to mean that it is focused on work-based qualifications for those who are already working within the field and also raises questions about the opportunity for those practitioners who work for employers who are unable or unwilling to pay for training.

Even where employers were able and willing to fund qualifications they often reported that this placed a strain on their organisation or raised significant other challenges for them.

The cost to train the individual is something that we are borderline unable to do. We fully rely on funding from schools, so we couldn't income generate for the staff member in their training. Training this individual was a considerable factor in the company recording a financial overall loss last year. This speculative approach will never accumulate the return on our investment, meaning we are unlikely to be in a position to fund a training opportunity for new careers professionals in the future, which is incredibly sad and problematic for us.
**Employer (Survey)**

When the challenges for individuals funding themselves to do qualifications are combined with the challenges for employers, the overall funding arrangements for the system look extremely fragile. This led many participants to agree that there was a need for substantial reform in the way training for career development professionals was funded.

I think we come back to the same old thing is that it needs to be changing how it's funded because if that's the bottom line, that's the bottom line.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

The government funding for careers leaders training is a worthwhile example of what can happen when there is financial backing with qualifications. As of early 2024, the Careers & Enterprise Company had funded over 3,000 Careers Leaders to undertake specialised training aimed at improving knowledge around leadership, management, coordination, and networking (The Careers & Enterprise Company, 2024)). Finlay & Tanner’s (2021) research suggests that as a result of this funded qualification careers leaders are able to demonstrate increased competencies enabling them to undertake their role to a higher standard than those who had not undertaken the qualification, demonstrating the long-term value of such investments, not only on the individuals directly involved but also those indirectly involved such as stakeholder organisations.

### Recruitment

The issues of poor image, a lack of funding for training and low pay combined to reduce the attractiveness of the sector. The overwhelming majority (79%) of survey respondents reported that they did not believe that there were enough appropriately qualified career development professionals. There was a consensus amongst participants across all parts of the research that recruiting into the career development sector was often difficult, and that whilst there is a plethora of jobs in the sector, there are few candidates, particularly appropriately qualified candidates for these jobs.

Most employers (68%) stated that they often or always struggle to recruit appropriately qualified career development practitioners, with 28% finding it hard to recruit candidates with one-to-one (counselling, coaching, and personal guidance) techniques, 22% finding it hard to recruit candidates knowledgeable with career theory, and 21% finding it hard to recruit candidates with the capability to develop, deliver and manage careers education.

In England, many participants discussed the idea that there was a national shortage of graduate level trained professionals. This has led some employers to invest in training staff either through internal training programmes or through putting staff through graduate level qualifications including the Higher Apprenticeship. However, they also explained that this approach presents its own challenges such as balancing job responsibilities with the demands of the qualification programmes.

Around a third of employers (36%) reported that the difficulty in recruitment had led them to use unqualified or underqualified individuals to provide career development services. However, they were also aware of the problems that such an approach presented, highlighting that the use of unqualified career development professionals could have significant implications due to inadequate knowledge, skills, and techniques in providing career development. Employers expressed their concern around the implications of using unqualified/underqualified individuals, with one employer who responded to the survey stating that ‘*there are implications for quality and client experience without the qualification in my view*’.

Several employers noted how there was an ethical issue around using un/underqualified individuals and suggested that such an approach risks ‘*devaluing the profession’* (Employer, Survey). One employer explained their dilemma when using an unqualified individual.

We employed an unqualified person with a wealth of life experience because we were without a Careers Advisor for 6 months, we did try to recruit a qualified one several times over the six months and also increased the salary offered but no-one applied. I had to train her on the job.
**Employer (Survey)**

## Training and qualifications

Across the stakeholder interviews, roundtables and the survey, participants were positive about the experience of training across a range of different routes. But many also expressed concerns about the unclear and fragmented pathways into the careers profession. Whilst there was a general consensus that the minimum level of qualification should be at graduate level it was clear that there was a lack of comprehension as to the differences between the different levels of qualification, what each qualification covered and what job role it enabled you to undertake. In this section, we discuss the issues that emerged in relation to qualifications in the field.

### Routes to qualification

There are a wide range of different pathways to qualification, but many participants expressed a concern that the pathway into the profession was unclear and fragmented. The differences between the different types and levels of qualification were often unclear and difficult for participants to describe.

The most common qualification offered by training providers were graduate-level careers qualifications (e.g. the Level 6 work-based qualification), which was provided by 50% of providers. This was followed by pre-graduate level careers qualifications, which were offered by 32%. Careers leader qualifications were available from 26% of training providers. Postgraduate-level careers qualifications were less common, with only 24% of providers offering them.

In general training providers reported recruiting relatively low numbers of new trainees onto their qualifications each year. On average a training provider’s annual cohort was 34 trainee career development professionals, but the median was 20 trainees which demonstrates that many providers are training much lower numbers. On average, only 9% of trainees were recruited internationally.

Participants in the interviews and the roundtables raised concerns that a lack of clarity about the different training routes was having a detrimental impact on organisations and the clients of career development services. Students were particularly vocal about the issues they faced when trying to understand routes to both initial and further qualification. There was a consensus about the need for better clarity in terms of what each qualification consists of and what it enables you to do.

If I’m really honest, I’m still quite confused about the various levels of qualification. I think I’ve understood what it is I’m doing myself, which is a good step forward, but I’m not sure I really fully understand the difference between the Level 7 and the QCD versus the Level 6.
**Student (Roundtable)**

Training providers also discussed the confusion that existed about the different routes to qualification in the sector. They believed that this confusion served to depress recruitment into the sector.

I currently think the landscape is too confused and too varied for the good of the sector with too many qualifications and too much variety of what qualifies for practice.
**Training provider (Survey)**

I think it is really confusing for new applicants, it is really confusing for people trying to develop themselves.
**Training provider (Roundtable)**

It’s very unusual that I would have a conversation with somebody on application who was clear at all about what the other options were or what the structures were within which they were going to be making such a choice.
**Training provider (Roundtable)**

One training provider compared the qualification routes to other sectors, stating that

I think working with colleagues who train teachers, knowing people who train counsellors, train social workers, I think there is a greater level of clarity in those sectors around what minimum competency looks like, because there’s often stronger policing of what minimum professional competency looks like.
**Training provider (Roundtable)**

One employer reported that the increasing likelihood of training on the job means that most new entrants to the profession do not start with an understanding of the different qualification pathways. Rather they get employed and then look for opportunities from there.

As far as the route and understanding of coming into it, most people come in that we recruit these days are not coming necessarily with an understanding of what that route would be, they’ve come by chance.
**Employer (Roundtable)**

Clarity around qualifications was deemed particularly important in terms of ensuring that individuals in the sector have the right qualifications for the job they were doing or applying to do.

There’s confusion over the term Level 6 because obviously we have Level 6 requirement for statutory advice and guidance, and then we’ve got the same name for Level 6 for careers leaders… the lack of understanding of which Level 6 [schools] want and what they actually need is really really poor…I’m talking to head teachers that have actually employed the wrong people to do the wrong jobs.
**Practitioner (Roundtable)**

Only 36% of survey respondents agreed that it is clear how to qualify as a career development professional. The level of clarity was lower in Wales (23%) and Northern Ireland (17%) than it was in England (34%) and Scotland (60%). These differences are perhaps accounted for by the fact that there are very limited training offers available in Wales and Northern Ireland, whilst in Scotland there are clear pathways, funding opportunities and a strong push for clarity around qualifications from the country’s main employer of careers professionals (Skills Development Scotland).

Overall, when considering qualifications as a whole, 70% of survey respondents believed that the sector would benefit from streamlining the qualification route. This view was even stronger amongst employers, with 81% agreeing with this statement.

### Support for trainees

We explored the experience of participants in relation to their initial training. The overwhelming majority (88%) of survey respondents stated they had a good experience studying for a career development qualification, with 85% agreeing that it was good preparation for practice, and 86% saying the course improved their career prospects. Respondents with postgraduate qualifications (91%) tend to have a higher level of agreement than those with graduate qualifications (82%).

Training providers reported that an average of 90% of students they recruited went on to successfully complete the programme for which they registered. For the students who did not complete the programme, 34% of training providers reported that this was due to time constraints, while another 34% cited leaving the sector as the reason. Additionally, training providers also noted several common reasons for students not completing their programmes: health issues (24%), financial reasons (22%), and academic difficulties (22%). Figure 3.2 sets out these reasons for non-completion in more detail.

Figure 3.2 Reasons for students not completing training programmes (responses from 50 training providers)

Most initial training involved some kind of work-based learning, whether this was delivered through supported reflection for those who were currently in a relevant role or through a placement, for those who were not in role whilst training. This work-based learning was viewed as a key part of training programmes and something that needed to be carefully structured to make it effective.

We want to ensure that the employer is putting in significant support to ensure that they’re getting that supervision, they’re getting that mentoring, they’re getting that support whilst they are out in the workplace.
**Training provider (Roundtable)**

### Minimum qualification

Almost all (94%) respondents believed that minimum qualifications were necessary for career development professionals who provided personal guidance. Across the research, there was an overwhelming majority of respondents among all UK nations (91% - 97%) and organisation types (88% - 100%) who agreed on the need for this minimum qualification requirement.

There was a strong consensus that the minimum level for professional qualifications should be set at, *at least*, graduate-level. Respondents to the survey from England, Wales and Northern Ireland typically viewed graduate-level qualifications as being the minimum requirement for career development professionals whilst respondents from Scotland typically viewed postgraduate-level qualifications as the minimum standard. This preference may be influenced by the high percentage of Scottish respondents holding postgraduate-level career qualifications (98%) and by the fact that Skills Development Scotland (the main employer of careers professionals in Scotland) stipulates the need for postgraduate-level training and pays for this for new employees.

Figure 3.3 shows that the majority of respondents (58%) believed that graduate-level qualifications (58%) should be the minimum level of qualification required to practise as a career development professional, with around a quarter (24%) believing that minimum qualification levels should be set higher than this, at least at postgraduate level.

Figure 3.3 Minimum qualification requirement for career development professionals by countries (643 respondents)

There are some important differences by sector in how minimum qualifications are seen. As Figure 3.4 shows graduate level qualifications dominate in schools and further education, while in higher education and national career development services such as Skills Development Scotland, there is a much stronger expectation for postgraduate qualifications.

Figure 3.4 Minimum qualification requirement for career development professionals by organisation types (643 respondents)

Although the balance of opinion was that a graduate level qualification should be seen as the minimum requirement some respondents were keen to stress that this does not mean that it is the only or maximum requirement.

The narrative has definitely changed in terms of rather than it being a minimum Level 6 requirement, people seem to have dropped that word minimum and just say Level 6 which I think is having an impact on recruitment to the Level 7 programme.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

### Pre-graduate qualifications

Following the work of the Careers Profession Task Force (2010) and then subsequent shifts to both statutory guidance and the contracts for the National Careers Service, the requirement for graduate level qualifications as a minimum has been asserted and the popularity of pre-graduate qualifications has begun to wane.

Whilst a handful of stakeholders saw the pre-graduate level of qualification as an *‘information advice role’* with individuals able to *‘handle lower level queries’,* most stakeholders generally articulated a need to rework the pre-graduate qualification if it is to remain a key career related qualification. They described the qualification as needing *‘a complete revamp’* and being *‘very woolly’* and even going as far as saying

I can’t understand really why the Level 4 still exists to be honest with you.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

One training provider explained that while in the past there was a lot of interest in the pre-graduate level qualification, this has become less popular, with most work-based training now focused on the graduate level qualification.

We just put everyone through to Level 6 because cost difference wasn’t huge between the two. And if they’re Level 6 you can use them in different ways.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

In general, the historic purpose that the pre-graduate qualification had fulfilled has been supplanted by the graduate level qualification.

I think really it should be more of a leading up to Level 6…people say to me I want to do the Level 4 and I’ll say what do you do, and they’ll say I’m in a school, and I’m like actually don’t bother, don’t waste your money.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

This suggests that if the pre-graduate qualification is going to be retained, it needs to be rethought and a new or clearer purpose for it developed.

### Work-based training/Graduate Level

As reported above, graduate level qualifications have now become seen as defining professional standards outside of Scotland. Not all graduate level qualifications are work-based, Northumbria University delivers a university-based BA in Guidance and Counselling, but the overwhelming bulk of the graduate level qualifications are still alongside work. The focus on work-based qualifications is driven by the funding arrangements that exist, which positions employers as the principal funders of career development qualifications.

The fact that employers are the main funders of training means that it is increasingly unlikely that people will have undertaken career-specific training before they start working in careers. Most survey respondents (60%) reported that they had begun to work in the careers sector before gaining a qualification in career development. This varied across countries, with 64% of individuals in England gaining their qualification while in practice, compared to 38% in Scotland, 50% in Wales and 53% in Northern Ireland. How people enter the profession also varied across organisation types, with 70% in the school sector gaining their qualification whilst in practice and 54% in higher education institutions.

The work-based approach to the graduate level qualification presents several challenges for both trainees and employers around the need to balance the job responsibilities of the trainee and others involved in the training with the demands of qualification programmes.

The biggest downside of training people ourselves is the impact on our frontline managers and support etc. That’s where we struggle supporting people through that training, it’s quite a difficult ask.
**Employer (Roundtable)**

The graduate level qualification is widely regarded as meeting its primary purpose of preparing individuals for professional roles. However, there was significant debate among stakeholders regarding the balance between theoretical knowledge and practical application within the qualification. Whilst the importance of the theoretical side of the training was not questioned, there was concern over the lack of practical learning in the qualification. One training provider believed that:

The qualification doesn’t have many skills in it...if you were just doing what it says on the tin for the qualification, there’s actually two out of nine units that are skills based.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

This was supported by other participants who stated

If you can’t communicate with people, if you haven’t got really high-level skills and had the chance to practise that in different contexts, then all the theory in the world is never going to get you those skills.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

I think part of the problem perhaps is that the minimum amount of practical experience you need to do is not that high…the minimum actually is quite a bit lower than we do.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

The fact that some participants felt that the existing graduate level qualification is too strongly focused on theory is not necessarily borne out by an examination of the structure of the qualification which actually only has two units which are knowledge based, with all of the other units including a practical element (OCR,2024). However, it is important not to dismiss these critiques and to consider further whether the balance between theory and practice is right in the existing qualifications.

The development of the *career development professional higher apprenticeship* has added an important new work-based pathway to the sector. However, at present, this pathway is in its infancy. Only 33% of employers who responded to the survey had supported an employee through an apprenticeship and only 23% of training providers reported offering apprenticeships.

There is some evidence to suggest that engagement with the Higher Apprenticeship is increasing with around 70 apprentices completing in 2022-2023 in comparison to only around 10 in 2021-2022 (Gov.uk, 2024) and new providers beginning to deliver it. Some employers were enthusiastic about the opportunity to use the apprenticeship, and associated levy funding, to upskill existing staff and deal with skills shortages.

We have struggled to recruit qualified staff so we have made a decision to upskill existing staff who want to work in the careers sector. The apprenticeship system has allowed us to use our levy pot to fund necessary training.

**Employer (Survey)**

We need something to address the lack of qualified professionals so it [the apprenticeship system] is useful. The levy has seemed to helped schools utilise this option.
**Employer (Survey)**

The apprenticeship system also benefited employers because it offers a robust approach to the development of practitioners in context. Apprenticeships, alongside other work-based qualifications, allow individuals to integrate their learning into their real-world practice, meaning the pathway is very responsive to employers’ needs.

The apprenticeship system allows businesses to shape apprentices' skills to meet industry needs, developing sector specific talent.
**Employer (Survey)**

Learnt on the job and benefited from applying learning to practice.
**Employer (Survey)**

However, employers also faced challenges with the apprenticeship system, including in engaging with an unfamiliar and often bureaucratic system. However, the key challenge highlighted was the investment required in both time and support for apprentices. Employers emphasised that mentoring apprentices and finding appropriately qualified people to be mentors, as well as the need to provide time for training, takes significant effort and resources.

Challenges are finding time/qualified staff in school to be able to support apprentices in the workplace as they undertake the apprenticeship.
**Employer (Survey)**

Apprentices may need more guidance and mentorship, requiring extra resources from the employer.
**Employer (Survey)**

It took us about two years to get our head around the paperwork and the portfolios because it was such a shift in the way that we worked. So, in many respects it’s easier to just send someone off to do some training and have someone pre-qualified.

**Employer (Roundtable)**

The apprenticeship is an important innovation in the space as it creates a new and much needed funding mechanism. However, it remains to be seen whether it will become embedded into the sector as despite the ringfencing of funding through the levy it still makes heavy demands on employers, training providers and trainees. Many of these issues are not unique to the career development sector but are linked to wider debate on apprenticeships (Cavaglia et al., 2022; Field, 2023; UVAC & CMI, 2022). This also raises some concerns as the existence of apprenticeships and the apprenticeship levy are highly reliant on policy decisions.

### The Qualification in Career Development (QCD) and post-graduate pathways

The Qualification in Career Guidance which then became the Qualification in Career Development (QCD) replaced the Diploma in Career Guidance in the early 2000s. It is integrated within post-graduate diplomas delivered by universities. It was originally conceived as an equivalent to the kind of post-graduate qualification that is commonly taken by teachers and was traditionally taken prior to employment in the field. Participants in the study revealed firstly that the QCD is increasingly struggling to attract students, secondly, that it is now common for students to take the course alongside employment within the career development field meaning that it has often become a work-based programme by default, and thirdly that there are a number of other post-graduate level qualifications which do not include the QCD, but which can also lead people to full professional status and registration with the CDI.

Training providers explained that students are either not recognising the value of the QCD or see it as added pressure when already undertaking a time-consuming qualification.

Many students over the years who have done the PGDip have no interest in the QCD because they have no interest in working for SDS (Skills Development Scotland).

**Training Provider (Interview)**

I mean the practice requirements for the QCD are so onerous that for many students it’s just too much. And for students working in the sector already it is just too much because they’re part time students.

**Training Provider (Interview)**

Attitudes towards post-graduate level qualifications varied, mainly depending on the sector that an individual works in. Some articulated an opinion that the QCD was considered as *‘the gold standard’* whilst others reported that they did not understand why people would want to undertake the qualification when graduate level qualifications also confer professional status*.* Overall opinions of the QCD and post-graduate level qualifications were positive, with people feeling that they offered a strong grounding for professionals.

Post-graduate level qualifications were considered by stakeholders to have more breadth than the other qualifications, teaching students to have a more strategic insight into their work. One training provider explained that the post-graduate qualification is:

broader in that there is that practical element, but also it's very much around that strategic role and you know all that side of things you know understanding data and not just understanding LMI but understanding data to make strategic decisions.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

This was supported further by another stakeholder who stated that

You are looking much more at kind of strategy and longer-term strategy and I think that’s really important to kind of get careers really kind of embedded across the curriculum, across an institution. **Employer (Interview)**

It was generally considered that post-graduate qualifications offered a strong form of professional training, but this was balanced by a recognition that it was not necessary for many career development professionals. Having said this, when asked ‘*which qualifications are you thinking of taking and why?*’ there were 45 free text responses from individuals stating that they were keen to either top up their PG Dip to a full Masters or undertake a post-graduate qualification. This suggests that there is still an appetite from career development professionals to undertake post-graduate training.

### Content and focus of qualifications

The careers profession has a broad range of underpinning knowledge and skills. Qualifications are designed to address this broad range of knowledge and skills and to ensure that professionals are appropriately trained for practice. In this section we explore the content and focus of careers qualifications.

The importance of career theory, one-to-one counselling and coaching and the use of career information were the areas that were most strongly emphasised by both career development professionals and by training providers. Other important areas included the understanding of a range of models for practice, awareness of the labour market, understanding of referral and signposting processes and ethics. Post-graduate and graduate career development professionals shared a similar pattern, with career theory and one-to-one counselling and coaching being the skills most developed through their qualifications, while non-graduate career development professionals showed the highest development in awareness of the labour market and the use of career information. Figure 3.5 sets out the proportion of career development professionals who felt that particular skills or knowledge had been developed through the qualification that they had taken and compares it with the proportion of training providers who say that their programme develops that area of skill or knowledge.

Figure 3.5 Skills and knowledge developed by career development professionals through their training and addressed in training programmes

There are a number of areas which could be more strongly emphasised in training programmes most notably employer engagement, where there is a strong evidence base to support its efficacy as part of careers work (Musset & Kurekova, 2018), work with special needs groups, more systemic approaches around advocacy, leadership and organisational development and entrepreneurship. Figure 3.5 shows that while career development professionals report that digital and technologically mediated skills and knowledge have not been developed through their training historically, training providers report that the areas of digital technology, online guidance and AI are now covered much more regularly.

We also asked respondents about the skills and knowledge career professionals will need to develop, as well as the issues they will need to address in the next 5-10 years. Most respondents mentioned digital technology and AI, particularly in terms of delivering guidance (e.g. online guidance) and how the technologies and AI will influence changes in the job market.

Interestingly, career development professionals and training providers place so much emphasis on career theory and one-to-one (counselling, coaching and personal guidance) techniques, yet employers seem to find these areas difficult to recruit for which was mentioned in the previous section. This suggests that in addition to there being a shortage of qualified career development professionals, there might also be a gap between what training programmes emphasise and what employers need in their actual workplace settings.

Figure 3.6 sets out the areas of skills or knowledge which participants reported should be developed at different levels.

Figure 3.6 Recommended levels for career development techniques, skills and knowledge (622-630 respondents)

This provides insights that allows us to explore the perceived differences between the qualification levels.

Analysis of the skills set out in Figure 3.6 is helpful as they provide insights into how the different levels are understood. Broadly we might summarise this as follows.

* At the *pre-graduate level* practitioners are grounded in the ethics of the profession and focused on referral to both other professionals and digital tools and sources of information, provision of information and the ability to support clients in the use of tools and resources. We might describe this as training at a paraprofessional level (Hooley et al., 2016).
* At the *graduate level* practitioners need to be skilled in a range of different delivery approaches and working with a range of different groups. This practical knowhow then needs to be underpinned by a deeper level of theoretical knowledge. This can be understood as a professional level of practice (Gough & Neary, 2021).
* At the *postgraduate level* practitioners are focused on more systemic ways of working that move them beyond a focus on the individual. This includes research, leadership, consultancy, organisational work and policy expertise. We might view this as an advanced professional role, suitable for the leadership of the field. It is also important to note that many of these advanced professional skills are also addressed at the graduate level and that while a postgraduate qualification might be a useful preparation for leadership in the field, it should probably not be thought of as a requirement.

## Progression and development

In this section we look at what happens after people have completed their initial training and highlight a range of issues related to career progression and the opportunities to gain access to CPD and other development opportunities.

### Moving from initial training to full professional confidence

In general, the initial qualifications available are seen as offering both a good experience and a good preparation for practice. However, in the interviews and roundtables some participants raised issues around the transition between initial qualification and achieving full professional proficiency and confidence. Some emphasised the importance of newly qualified career development professionals receiving adequate support and mentoring after completing their qualifications and suggested that this was often not the case in practice.

As soon as I graduated and went to work in the sector, there was no support…it would have been good if we’d been linked up with people who had graduated and gone into similar roles.
**Practitioner (Roundtable)**

Some argued that there was a need to formalise the post-qualification year and support it with a clearer framework and access to formal mentoring.

Doing a post grad one year full time and then doing a year’s sort of probation experience…that benefit of having embedded support on the job…help people work through some of those issues earlier in their career…I think that kind of mentoring style could be really valuable.
**Practitioner (Roundtable)**

Training providers also recognised the potential benefit of having mentoring or a probationary period in place after qualification.

Whether that be you know, somebody who’s been doing the job or a similar job for a while and has come through the ranks…I still think they need to be afforded some additional support if it’s required.
**Training provider (Roundtable)**

The capacity to receive support and mentoring in the workplace was seen as particularly challenging for newly qualified career development professionals working in certain types of employers. For example, those in schools were often the only careers professional working for their organisation, making mentoring and support much more challenging.

### CPD

The Career Development Institute requires registered career development professionals to complete at least 25 hours of CPD a year (CDI, 2024). On average survey respondents agreed with this requirement and suggested that careers professionals should undertake an average of 28 CPD hours. They also reported that they typically exceeded this requirement, reporting an average of 34 hours annually. Figure 3.78 Annual CPD hours for careers professionals (517 respondents) sets out how the desired and actual levels of CDP break down by sector.

Figure 3.7 Annual CPD hours for careers professionals (517 respondents)

Respondents reported primarily engaging in CPD activities to widen (94%) and maintain (88%) their knowledge, to develop specialisms (63%), and to support their own career progression (49%). The overwhelming majority (95%) of respondents identified their CPD needs through self-reflection, with other common reasons reported as through the identification of skills gaps (69%), as a result of development reviews (55%), and in response to client feedback (40%).

The overwhelming majority (78%) of respondents access their CPD needs through self-guided learning, such as reading and using online resources, followed by accessing resources from the CDI (63%), their employer (56%) or their professional community (online) (53%). Figure 3.9 sets out the main sources of CPD reported by respondents to the survey.

Figure 3.8 Sources of CPD (603 respondents)

Self-guided learning was the most common source across all organisation types, with particularly high usage among sole practitioners (88%) and those working in the third sector, NHS & LA (81%). The CDI was another significant source for accessing CPD needs, especially those in schools (78%), sole practitioners (78%), and further education institutions or independent training providers (73%). However, its use was notably lower in higher education institutions (37%). Access to CPD through employers showed significant variation by organisation type, with 70% of respondents in higher education institutions reporting this source. Respondents in careers or employability companies reported 67%, while sole practitioners showed very low utilisation (10%).

Self-guided learning was the most commonly accessed source of CPD for both CDI-registered (79%) and non-registered (76%) career development professionals. However, CDI-registered career development professionals (83%) were more likely to access CPD resources through the CDI compared to their non-registered counterparts (42%). On the other hand, non-registered career development professionals (65%) were more likely to access CPD resources through their employers than CDI-registered professionals (51%).

Across countries, self-guided learning remained the most common source for accessing CPD. The CDI was utilised significantly, especially in Northern Ireland (65%) and England (64%). Respondents in Scotland and Wales reported lower usage at 54%. Access to CPD through employers was also common in Scotland (74%), Northern Ireland (74%), and Wales (73%), but showed a lower percentage in England (53%).

Regarding the barriers to undertaking CPD, only 5% of respondents reported having no barriers. The most significant barrier was a lack of time, cited by 65% of respondents. Financial limitations were another major barrier, which not only included the cost of CPD (42%) but also concerned the lack of return on investment (19%). Figure 3.9 sets out the most common barriers reported by participants.

Figure 3.9 Barriers to undertaking CPD (554 respondents)

As the cost of CPD was one of the main barriers, it is important to understand who is paying for CPD. Respondents reported that 39% of their CPD was free, 35% was paid by their employer, 6% by the government, and 1% by other sources. Only 19% paid for it themselves. However, less than half of employers paid for CPD (44% for non-accredited CPD and 42% for accredited CPD). See Figure 3.11 for further information on what forms of CPD employers were willing to pay for.

Figure 3.10 CPD paid for by employers (120 respondents)

As part of CPD, participants identified a strong need for refresher sessions and expanded opportunities for specialisation, particularly at graduate and post-graduate levels where practitioners could enhance competencies in digital skills, leadership, and supporting individuals with special needs. Throughout the research participants expressed a desire for refresher courses that would allow long-standing practitioners to revisit foundational theories and integrate emerging methodologies. One training provider emphasised that many practitioners, after a few years in the field,

might want a refresher. They might want to refresh on theory. They might want to refresh on something else…you know, it was mentioned before about the key competencies, the new ways of energising theories, new theories alongside old theories. How do people get to do that if there’s no CPD available to them?
**Training provider (Roundtable)**

While some refresher resources are available through the Career Development Institute, practitioners believe that broader access to such courses would be beneficial. Additionally, stakeholders across the sector agreed on the value of specialisation, especially in areas such as Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and Additional Support Needs (ASN). One practitioner pointed out the gap in training for professionals interested in SEND/ALN/ASN, noting that career advisers lack the pedagogical training provided to teachers on engaging students with learning difficulties.

I think one of the current problems is when people find themselves in a quite specialist role or want to go into something more specialist like SEND for example, there is nothing really there to back them up.
**Practitioner (Roundtable)**

I definitely think, you know, there should be more focus on how you engage with students that are SEN, or you know, might have learning difficulties and things like that. All the things you are taught as a teacher, but not as a careers professional. I think they are really really important.
**Practitioner (Roundtable)**

Another participant proposed the development of targeted CPD modules, rather than full qualifications, for advisors working with specialised populations.

Maybe something around ALN possibly like you know, I would say possibly sort of might be useful to have kind of additional modules and not whole diplomas, but you know additional modules that people who specialise could do. So something maybe for ALN advisors something perhaps for advisors who work in prisons and the probation service.
**Employer (Interview)**

This feedback highlights a sector-wide demand for modular CPD options that enable practitioners to enhance both generalist and specialised skill sets in response to diverse client needs.

### Additional qualifications

When we asked career development professionals if they were seeking other qualifications to develop their work, around a third (30%) said that this was something that they were interested in. Careers leaders without a postgraduate or graduate career development qualification (47%) and those with non-graduate qualifications (47%) showed the highest motivation to pursue additional qualifications, likely to strengthen their professional standing. Respondents with postgraduate career development qualifications (24%) tended to feel less need for further study, signalling confidence in their existing credentials. Among career development professionals who were not considering other qualifications, most reported that they already had the necessary qualifications (66%). Other reasons for not wanting to pursue other qualifications included the belief that further qualifications would not increase their salary (45%) and time constraints (40%).

Figure 3.11 Reasons for career development professionals not taking other qualifications (214 respondents)

### Progression

Respondents consistently reported limited opportunities for career advancement within the sector, describing it as ‘*very flat*’ due to a lack of progression pathways. This perceived stagnation discourages practitioners from pursuing further qualifications and often leads to their departure from the sector, particularly within school-based roles. One survey respondent noted that additional training or CPD has minimal impact, as practitioners ‘*will never be truly valued or given progression opportunities like teachers are*’. Another practitioner in a school expressed frustration, describing the sector as a ‘*dead end job*’, one they loved but felt was ultimately limiting with no pathway to school senior management. These sentiments were echoed by others who reported feeling ‘*pigeonholed*’ rather than professionally developed. Employers also acknowledged these issues, highlighting the structural barriers within the field. For example, one employer noted

[Practitioners] can’t progress any higher at that stage unless they go for promotion to careers manager and there are limited places for careers managers. So, if none of our careers managers move or retire there is no motivation for a career adviser to go to that so basically they’re stuck as a careers adviser.
**Employer, National Career Development Service (Interview)**

Another employer stated that,

There’s no progression. What’s the point?... the only way you’re going to progress in the profession is to actually stop delivering.
**Employer, (Interview)**

This lack of progression stifles motivation, leaving practitioners ‘stuck’ unless they leave direct service roles. Overall, both practitioners and employers emphasised the need for future sector reforms to prioritise clearer advancement opportunities to retain skilled professionals and foster career growth.

## Quality assurance

The existence of a robust training and qualification system provides quality assurance for the profession as it ensures that those who are delivering career development services are competent to do so. As has already been discussed there was a strong agreement across all participants in this research that qualifications are important and that there should be minimum standards for those who want to practise as career development professionals.

In this section we turn to look at how the qualification system itself is articulated and quality assured. This includes a critical role for the CDI as the professional body. Some aspects of the existing system are set out in the CDI’s (2021) document *Career development professionals in the 21st century* but it seemed clear that there was room for further development of this document as the system develops and evolves.

### The regulation of qualifications

The CDI plays an important role in the articulation and regulation of qualifications, the development of high level learning outcomes and the definition of what constitutes a professional level. This strategic role is a critical one played by the CDI as the principal professional body in the sector but is also combined with several other roles in relation to the training and qualification system including as a deliverer of training in its own right.

Some participants felt that the CDI had too many roles in relation to the qualification system and argued that they should try and focus their role further, ideally becoming more strategic.

I think the problem at the moment for me is that they’re trying to be too much for the actual size of the organisation that they are…I think that they have not really discovered their core purpose.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

Some participants expressed concerns that the CDI had a dual role as both provider (of degree level qualifications) and regulator of (postgraduate) qualifications. While the CDI’s different roles relate to different qualification levels, some felt that this still led to a conflict of interests.

The CDI potentially shouldn’t be offering qualifications, they’re not impartial.

**Training Provider (Interview)**

Participants reasoned that the CDI has an important role to play as the voice of the sector and as a regulator and quality assurer, and participants questioned the feasibility of this when the organisation is also involved in the delivery of qualifications and assessment.

They should be a professional body who advocates for the profession and maybe keeps a register which recognises qualifications…but absolutely has nothing to do with qualifications at the point of delivery.

**Training Provider (Interview)**

In an ideal role they would be the keeper of the standards and they’d be quality assurers.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

These findings suggest that, for some, the CDI’s dual role may undermine its credibility and effectiveness as a regulator and advocate for career development professionals. Although it is also important to note that this issue was only raised by a small number of training providers who have particular interests in changing the way that the sector operates.

In relation to the QCD the CDI plays a distinct role in the accreditation of the qualification. This includes the articulation of learning outcomes for the qualification and the quality assurance of delivery, including moderation of assessment practices.

Some participants raised concerns that the requirements for the delivery of the QCD were too demanding and contrasted this with other post-graduate qualifications which also allowed graduates to join the CDI professional register. There was a concern that this led to a two-tier system in which non-QCD programmes had the advantage.

I feel that the CDI needs to work out whether the register or the QCD is its main description of what the professional standards are. Because at the moment there's too much confusion between those two things, and they both seem to do the same sort of thing of saying. If you want to get into the sector, what qualification do you need? Well, do you need to be on the register or do you need to have a QCD? I would rather that they'd lost one or the other of them.

**Training Provider (Roundtable)**

Other providers also felt that the CDI’s requirements for the QCD were too heavy and argued that it was over-stepping its role and failing to recognise the role of higher education institutions as awarding bodies.

They're not accrediting our programme. They're forcing us to run their qualification. That's actually what's happening. But we get no money for that. They get all the money and we do all the work. It's insane.

**Training Provider (Interview)**

Participants involved in training in higher education institutions argued that academic institutions possess the expertise to assess against learning outcomes and do not need the level of quality assurance that the CDI is currently offering.

Academic institutions know how to assess against learning outcomes and should be trusted to do so.

**Training Provider (Interview)**

The CDI says here are the learning outcomes and here are 16 other things that we need your students to do and not only are we going to force you to design your programme badly around those requirements, but you have to do it exactly like this.
**Training Provider (Interview)**

Further to this, participants consistently highlighted that the CDI should not be directly involved in the moderation of the QCD.

I’m not sure that the CDI should be directly involved in assessment **Training Provider (Interview)**

My personal view is that the CDI should not be involved in qualification oversight **Training Provider (Interview)**

### Registration

One of the most important tools that the CDI has to regulate the relationship between training and qualifications is the UK Register of Career Development Professionals. The CDI promises the general public that:

By using a Registered Career Development Professional who will be able to show/display a current CDI dated logo, you are guaranteed that the services provided are delivered by a professional who is qualified to at least graduate level in career guidance/development, abides by the CDI Code of Ethics and updates their skills and knowledge each year by undertaking at least 25 hours of continuous professional development.
**CDI (2024).**

The decision about what qualifications admit people to the register is therefore critical, and as already discussed in the previous section serve to define what constitutes a professional qualification, even if people do not actually register.

Over half of the career development professionals (54%) who responded to the survey were registered on the CDI register. Registration rates varied significantly by country and organisation type. For instance, in Wales, 79% of career development professionals were registered, followed by Northern Ireland at 60%, and England at 54%. In Scotland, only 36% of professionals were registered on the CDI register. Registration was notably higher among school-based (75%) and sole practitioners (83%) than in higher education institutions, where just 32% were registered. The majority (55%) of respondents believed that registration was important for professional standards, with significantly more support among registered (79%) than non-registered (25%) professionals. This also varied across organisation types. Respondents in schools (69%) and among sole practitioners (73%) showed the highest levels of support for the importance of career professionals being registered on the CDI register. However, respondents in higher education institutions showed the least support, with only 34% in agreement.

Those who noted the importance of the registered stated their reasons for doing so being.

To promote professional status

To demonstrate that I am fully qualified

To stay up to date with news and policy

Follow a code of ethics

Support also varied geographically and organisationally, with higher support in Northern Ireland (70%) and Wales (67%) for the importance of career professionals being registered on the CDI register. However, respondents in Scotland (45%) and England (55%) showed relatively low levels of support.

Employers also varied in their requirements with only 21% mandating CDI registration and 25% expressing a preference for it. Those who required registration cited

Commitment and professionalism

Maintain high standards

Demonstrate adherence to ethical standards

However, criticisms of the CDI register emerged, especially regarding its cost relative to perceived value, its practical relevance, and the consistency of quality standards listed for professionals. Some professionals, particularly practitioners, viewed the register as a marketing tool, questioning its necessity for established professionals and its reliability as a guarantor of quality.

I think it is the job of the CDI or one of the functions of the CDI to oversee the quality of the offer that a careers guidance professional can give and that brings in obvious questions like the register, who’s on the register and what that means, and the purpose of the register.
**Training provider (Interview)**

Concerns about what should be emphasised in the qualifications that allow people to join the register were also raised. Some focused on the level of qualification, whilst others focused more on the content of the training and particularly on the practical aspects.

For me, the one thing that I think there’s real tension around and needs to be sorted is how somebody can be on the register of career development professionals with that range of qualifications…if we’re saying the register for career development practitioners is evidence that you are a competent careers practitioner…but then you’ve got a PG Cert that can potentially have no practical elements to it all the way through to a masters… the practice element should be taken into account.
**Training provider (Interview)**

This feedback underscores the sector’s need for a more rigorous, value driven registration system to enhance its professional status and credibility among both practitioners and employers.

# Discussion

The findings of this study underscore several ongoing challenges and opportunities for professionalisation within the UK career development sector. Many of them emerge from a variety of the themes discussed in the last chapter. In this chapter we will discuss some of the cross-cutting issues that have emerged and propose some ways forward for the careers sector distinguishing between CDI responsibilities and where changes need to come from higher authorities.

## There is a lot that is working well

The study reveals a lot of positive things about the existing training and qualification system for career development professionals. Career development professionals generally value their work and believe that it has offered them access to good and meaningful work. There are a wide range of qualifications, serving the needs of different individuals and organisations, and people’s experience of these qualifications is generally very positive and most find that there is a lot that can be used from their training in their practice after qualification. Participants in the study, including career development professionals, employers and wider stakeholders all agree that there is a value in professionalism and that qualifications provide an important mechanism for ensuring quality and professionalism.

*This leads us to recommend the following.*

1. **Renew the sector’s commitment to professionalisation.** It is important to argue for the importance of qualifications for career development professionals and to continue to professionalise the careers sector. The CDI have a key role in leading this agenda, but it also needs other stakeholders to be involved.

## The sector is poorly understood and unattractive

The career development sector’s low visibility and outdated public image present barriers to attracting new talent. Many participants expressed their frustration that career development lacks status and recognition in comparison to professions like teaching or social work. These image issues mean that career guidance is poorly understood by the general public and that other professions such as teaching, do not recognise the professional skills and capabilities of career guidance professionals. Amongst these wider issues, a poor image is also likely to be deterring many potential recruits from joining the profession.

*This leads us to recommend the following.*

1. **Campaign to improve the image of the sector.** The CDI, and other key stakeholders, should work to improve public perception and attract new people to work in the field. In late 2024 the CDI launched its first long-term campaign to raise the profile of the profession, this is a positive start in emphasising the professionalism of the field and the value of the services that it provides. Given this it is hoped that the CDI and other stakeholders continue to build on this campaign over the next few years.

## Financial issues

Low levels of reward and recognition within career development were highlighted as key issues impacting both recruitment and retention. Our research suggests that most career development professionals are earning less than the median UK wage and around a third are earning considerably less than this. Consequently, many career development professionals feel undervalued in relation to their counterparts in teaching or other public sector roles. There is also considerable inequality within the careers sector with professionals working in some settings, such as universities, able to access higher salaries than those in schools and charity and third sector contexts. The fact that career development is unable to reliably offer people access to a good salary, stability and progression unsurprisingly diminishes the attractiveness of the field and deters people from entering it.

These long-term pay issues combine with the fact that there is very limited financial support for training and qualifications and serve to deter many potential entrants. For many people making a substantial investment in a qualification, particularly at the postgraduate level, does not look like it will result in a good financial return. This calculation has disastrous effects on the supply of skills in the sector.

The complete lack of government funding and the financial disincentives that exist for individuals to invest in their own training and development means that most investment in training and qualifications in the careers field comes from employers. This has resulted in a situation where the majority of training is work-based, and the future skills base of the field is reliant on employer investment. However, as the financial situation for most employers of career development professionals remains tight, this mechanism for funding training in the sector remains fragile.

We believe that a mixed economy of individual, employer and government funding would offer the strongest model for the development of the careers sector. At present, the individual pay market for qualifications has become very small and the government is providing no funding. This means that employers are carrying the training and development needs of the sector. This results in both a narrow approach to training and qualification and a system dependent on employers having sufficient funding and motivation to continue to pay for the training of career development professionals. This seems a risky way to organise the sector.

We acknowledge that, although this is an area where the CDI can actively campaign and advocate for change, the ultimate responsibility for addressing and resolving this issue rests with the government. *This leads us to recommend the following.*

1. **Improve pay and conditions for careers professionals.** Career development needs to offer people access to decent work and opportunities for progression. Presently it is unable to offer this to a high proportion of workers within the field. The CDI, alongside the wider sector, should advocate for increased government investment in the sector, with an emphasis on ensuring sustainable funding that supports the development of a highly trained and professional workforce. Without a steady and long-term funding commitment, the goal of maintaining a professionalised and skilled field becomes unattainable.
2. **Develop new mechanisms for funding qualifications**. There is currently insufficient funding available to meet the skills needs for the careers sector. There is a desperate need to inject new government funding into the system to support new people to acquire qualifications. This could be in the form of bursaries for individuals, dedicated funding for employers as part of government contracts or the provision of funding directly to training providers to offer free or low-cost qualifications. Ideally a mix of all these approaches could be used to strengthen the system.

## Strengthening and clarifying qualification pathways

The sector currently offers a wide range of qualifications. These include both pre-graduate, graduate and post-graduate routes and academic and work-based pathways. This diversity is potentially a strength, but it is poorly understood, with inadequate differentiation between the levels and too few trainees spread too thinly across the whole system. In addition, Northumbria University offers the only undergraduate degree programme in the UK dedicated to career development, presenting a potential opportunity for further growth and expansion in this area. At present, training providers, employers and perhaps most importantly trainees and potential trainees are often confused about what different qualifications offer and which one they should pursue. This confusion is ultimately damaging to the system and to the professionalism of the field.

The weak funding system discussed in the previous section has resulted in a drift towards a situation where the overwhelming majority of qualifications are funded by employers. This in turn has seen a shift from a model which was based on *pre-employment initial training* to one which is based on *post-employment training and qualification*. The sector needs to decide whether it is okay to move completely into this kind of work-based training model. Again, we would argue that there are advantages to having a mixed model which offers a range of pathways into the sector, particularly when taking into consideration access to funding. Regardless of this, there is a need to clarify how the fulfilment of professional roles and training and qualifications interact whilst someone is undertaking a work-based qualification. Ideally, the training of new professionals should begin on day one of their employment and professional responsibilities and requirements should be acquired gradually as they achieve competence through their training and experience. Clearer management of the acquisition of professionalism in the workplace would support the quality of the profession and lead to enhanced government confidence.

The existence of pre-graduate, graduate and postgraduate routes is also positive and valuable for the sector. However, at present these different qualifications are poorly articulated and understood. Earlier, we outlined the three qualification levels for career development professions, categorised as pre-graduate, graduate, and post-graduate. Figure 4.1 presents the top five skills identified for each level. Within these qualification levels, we can further define practitioners' roles as follows: **paraprofessional** (pre-graduate level, able to signpost clients), **professional** (graduate level, providing careers guidance), and **advanced professional** (post-graduate level, providing careers guidance and taking on management responsibilities).

Figure 4.1. Key skills and knowledge at different levels

The framing of the distinctive elements of the different levels of qualification provides a basis for rethinking the core purposes of each of these qualifications and articulating a progression pathway through the sector towards advanced professional roles.

*This leads us to recommend the following.*

1. **Clarify and simplify the range of qualifications available for career development professionals.** The CDI should re-develop its QCD and progression pathway in negotiation with employers and training providers. This should aim to articulate a range of different routes into the sector and demonstrate the progression between different qualifications.
2. **Strengthen both work-based and classroom-based routes into the profession.** Recent years have seen a substantial and unplanned shift towards work-based qualifications in career development. The growth of work-based routes is to be celebrated, but it does offer some challenges. Notably the challenges in ensuring that the assignation of professional roles is done progressively and alongside the qualification rather than allowing people to assume a fully professional role with no training on the promise that they will later undertake a qualification. Conversely classroom-based pathways are able to manage the entry into practice more gradually, but currently lack a viable funding route. It is also important to ensure that classroom based routes are strongly connected to practice and that they provide people with the skills that they need.
3. **Clarify the differences between the different levels of qualification**. Career development professionals are trained at pre-graduate, graduate and post-graduate level, with all of these qualifications offering some promise of professional status. In recent years government recognition of graduate level qualifications as a minimum standard for full professional status has been helpful. Going forward the CDI and other stakeholders should work with government to strengthen the requirement for graduate level qualifications. But, it should also work with training providers and employers to clarify the role of the pre-graduate level qualifications and to more clearly differentiate what the purpose of post-graduate qualifications are in terms of creating advanced professionals who are capable of innovating, leading the sector and taking on more specialised roles.

## Moving beyond initial training

Participants highlighted some weaknesses in the support available to career development professionals once they have completed their initial qualification. There is little support available in the initial period after qualification as professionals move towards full professional mastery. Other professions offer various kinds of support including mandatory CPD, mentoring and lighter workloads to aid professionals in their transition from trainee to full professional. Many such forms of support do exist within the careers profession, but it is neither codified nor universal.

Beyond this initial period, there was a strong endorsement that professionalism needed to be linked to CPD. Participants highlighted both the positive impact of CPD on career development practice and existing barriers, such as limited access and lack of financial support. Career development practitioners are committed to professional growth, with many exceeding recommended CPD hours. However, high reliance on self-directed learning indicates a need for more structured, employer-supported CPD options. Specialisation in areas like SEND/ASN/ALN and digital literacy were commonly cited as desirable but are often inaccessible, emphasising the need for expanded CPD offerings that meet sector-specific skill gaps.

Participants also highlighted the limited opportunities that the careers sector offered for career progression. Many highlighted that management was the only obvious pathway upwards within the sector and bemoaned the lack of opportunity to specialise and engage in other forms of leadership such as becoming a mentor.

1. **Codify the post qualification period to support the development of professional confidence and proficiency.** The CDI should work with career development professionals and employers and should set out what kind of support career development professionals should expect at the point at which they qualify. This post-qualification support should be designed as a springboard into full professional proficiency, access to a community of practice and the embedding of reflexive practice into normal working practice. This support could take shape as something similar to the early career framework for teachers which builds on Initial Teacher Education and provides a platform for future development. Consideration also needs to be given to how support and CPD can be ensured for those individuals who are self-employed.
2. **Strengthen the range of opportunities and support for CPD.** Ideally this would mean that dedicated funding was made available to career development professionals to pay for and access CPD, including undertaking new qualifications to move people towards specialisations and advanced professional status.
3. **Expand the progression opportunities within the career development profession.** There needs to be a concerted effort to offer a stronger career development pathway for professionals within the field. This might include clearer recognition for advanced professionals, specialists in areas such as special needs or digital guidance, the strengthening of academic, research and leadership roles and a range of other possibilities.

## Quality assurance of the system

There is a clear need for the training, qualification, CPD and progression systems within the career development field to be managed and quality assured. The current weakness of the field relates to its complexity and fragmentation and this reduces confidence in the system. The CDI plays a critical role in defining and managing professionalism and this is a role that we would strongly endorse.

However, there are areas of concern in the CDI’s role. Some participants felt that the CDI is attempting to fulfil too many roles and that it has a tendency to dive too far into the details of provision. There would be a strong case for refocusing the organisation’s role more strategically.

The CDI’s registration process was acknowledged for its potential to enhance professional accountability and provide clarity to the general public, however, a number of critiques raised issues around the criteria for what allowed professionals to be included on the register. There are also important national and sectoral gaps which need to be addressed if registration is to fulfil its potential. We have not looked at the issue of chartered status in this report, but any developments of the register will need to be considered within the frame of chartership, if that is a direction that the career development sector decided to pursue (Moore, 2023).

1. **Reassert the CDI as the strategic body with responsibility for training, qualifications and professionalism**. The CDI is at the centre of all of the issues discussed in this report, whether as a policy stakeholder, quality assurer, deliverer of training or a representative of the profession. In general stakeholders would favour the organisation emphasising the strategic role that it can play in shaping the profession.
2. **Continue to develop, promote and clarify the register**. The register is an important tool in the ongoing professionalisation of the field. It serves several roles including acting as a mechanism to define the minimum qualification within the field and therefore acting as the threshold to the profession. There is a need to increase engagement with the register and address various concerns about its inclusion criteria. A potential approach to advertise the register as a 'tool for all' and highlight its connection to professionalisation could be to introduce a provisional registration phase for individuals pursuing graduate or post-graduate qualifications. This provisional status could transition to full registration once the qualifications have been completed and awarded.

Conclusion

The career development profession is experiencing a crisis of professionalism. After years of disinvestment in the field and very limited regulation there are substantial problems that need to be addressed. Career development is a profession with a history of more than a century, yet it has suffered at the whims of successive governments leaving its training and qualifications system in need of further development.

The sector has a wide range of training and qualification routes. In some ways the diversity is a strength, as it meets a wide range of different needs. Yet, outside of Scotland and higher education, it is only the work-based graduate level qualification that is really thriving and even this is dependent on the decisions of employers who are increasingly financially hard-pressed. Beyond the higher apprenticeship and some funding for careers leaders there is currently no financial investment from government.

This is a big problem and requires serious consideration, thought, and action. It isn’t simple, and the changes needed are not insignificant. However, addressing these challenges is worthwhile because it is an important and essential job. Ensuring the professionalisation of career development benefits not only the sector but also the individuals, communities, and economies it serves.

It is time for things to change. The CDI needs to lead this change, but it also requires decisive policy shifts from government. Now is a critical moment to make this shift, and the professionalisation of the career development field is both an urgent and meaningful endeavour. We should seize their opportunity to build a stronger, more sustainable foundation for the profession.

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1. For the purpose of this report we regard a practitioner as someone who is actively engaged in career development practice and a professional as someone who has formal recognised qualifications in career development at the level recommended by the CDI (level 6 or above). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)