

What kind of skills system do we want?

The skills ecosystem that needs to be in place, is one where there is a strong link between the number of young people and adults qualifying in a vocational area and the number of jobs available in that geographical location. The size of the area that needs to be considered will vary depending on the density of population in that area and other geographical characteristics. There would need to be solid support mechanisms to assist colleges and training providers to better understand their local labour market and identify the level of need for individual courses locally and to determine how the need is met across different colleges/training providers, perhaps by evidence-based planning linked to the funding agreements currently in place.

This skills ecosystem needs to address the needs of SEND and disadvantaged learners and support the local labour market/employers. It is all too easy in areas of higher unemployment for SEND and disadvantaged students to miss out on opportunities that they could take, but for which others are recruited. The impact for these students is often diminution of skills and future employability, possibly at a faster rate than for others.

If such a system were working effectively, one could envisage the use of multiple forms of employer engagement and work experience placements as a pre-employment route, successful completion of which would normally and ideally secure permanent employment at the end of a study programme. This would necessitate further education and training providers and employers working more consistently and closely together across the country than appears to be the case currently. (A good example of the skills ecosystem and local employment and skills partnerships working together can be seen in Wales.) This is particularly challenging when courses last more than a year or several courses must be completed sequentially, so that a long skills pipeline is required and employer attitudes to recruitment would need adaptation to fit with this more distant horizon.

The skills required in the local workforce will necessarily change over time, not least as a result of the changing ways of working, Industry 4.0 and opportunities resulting from, digital technology advances. There also needs to be reciprocal arrangement whereby employers can look to local colleges and training providers to meet their needs for skills enhancement for current workers. The ecosystem needs to flow both ways.

Importantly, this skills eco system needs to be one in which all learners have access to high quality careers guidance, provided by qualified career development professionals, to enable them to navigate the local landscape and understand, and effectively compare, alternative offerings and the merits of the varied providers who supply those offerings.

The new system should explicitly provide, within each of its offerings, career management support and facilitate the development of career management skills, including resilience, that will smooth the transition from education courses into the world of work. It should embody the values of equality of access and lifelong learning, whatever region of the country the learner resides in. Tutors should receive training to support the delivery of careers management skills within the curriculum itself and understand how and when to refer learners to a careers adviser.

Perceptions of performance tables against which further education colleges are measured need to change. Equal attention is required to progression and destination data compared to examination results. Destinations into vocational opportunities, including apprenticeships, should be recorded ahead of higher education destinations, and should make clear when the work-based destination is at a level

that reflects a progression from the education level achieved within the study programme. This seems to be the true measure of skills success.

The Career Development Institute is the UK-wide professional body for the career development sector. We would be keen to support the introduction of a new skills system and could assist with local projects and pilots as well as with the co-creation of national vocationally based study programmes which develop employability and career management skills. These activities could be undertaken on a partnership basis.

CDI Members will take an active role locally to provide a clear route from study programmes to the world of work, assisting learners to develop links with local employers through work experience and other opportunities to gain exposure to the workplace. Our members would also assist students to develop employability skills and career management skills outside their formal studies, enabling them to make decisions based on the local labour market as it changes.

There is a further, unique role for careers professionals in the skills ecosystem. Careers advisers collect a lot of intelligence from their guidance interviews about what skills individuals are hoping to, or need to, develop. Along with intelligence on the needs of the labour market and of employer, this intelligence on the interests of potential students should also be fed into decisions about courses to offer.

To what extent is the current system effective?

The organisation and funding of the current system encourages colleges to compete for students rather than focussing on what is in the best interests of an individual learner. Financial or other incentives should support individuals to move more freely between the institutions and the courses they provide, which would better enable each individual to pursue the combination of sequential options that are right for them.

The implementation of the Gatsby benchmarks if properly and effectively monitored, will deliver more encounters with employers, their workplaces and with further and higher education, making continuation by default from one level to the next level on the same career path and with the same institution less likely.

Work experience has two functions – to introduce learners to the world of work and then to explore potential careers. Employers and colleges need to work more closely together to ensure quality provision of relevant work experience and ensure that meaningful learning occurs during the placement. All too often the student takes a work placement unrelated to their area of study and with an employer who is not within the industry sector in which they wish to work. This reduces the learning and weakens the opportunity to make future career decisions as a result of that exposure to the world of work. Pre-placement briefing and debriefing for learners and employers is hugely important so both parties maximise the value of the experience.

SEND learner experiences in areas of high unemployment can mean they move from a five-year learning programme where personal development has been achieved, to attending a day centre where those skills are gradually lost. Work is required to give these individuals more opportunities without being in direct competition with other job seekers.

What do we need to do?

Often learners are open to a range of possibilities to progress into learning and from there to employment. More should and could be done at a local level to treat study programme cohorts as a supply chain into local employment, encouraging students, through encounters with qualified careers advisers to opt for courses that could successfully gain them meaningful employment when completed.

More could also be done to incentivise colleges to match course cohort sizes more precisely to local employment requirements, which would require them to work collaboratively together to manage the number of available places. This incentivisation could be achieved through conditions attached to funding agreements.

Whilst the priority aim is to expand the number of apprenticeships, there is also scope to encourage employers to support students through the provision of meaningful work experience and other encounters, which, if successful, would result in employment when their college-based learning has concluded. This is effectively what T levels are seeking to achieve at level 3, but such support is equally needed at all levels below Level 3. It should also be remembered that apprenticeships are based on full-time employment roles and not all job seekers, eg carers, can take on such roles. It is important that the skills ecosystem meets their skill development needs effectively.

We feel that the first step involves the effective determination of the geographical areas covered by specific stakeholder liaison activities, appropriately defined to suit rural and smaller/larger urban areas as required. Local stakeholders within each area can then determine who locally should collaborate together to estimate the level of demand that the colleges should be aiming to meet. Colleges can then work together to determine how they will between them offer the appropriate number of places on each study programme and how they will monitor, and if appropriate cap, the number of students enrolling on those courses. There are a number of roles that professionally qualified career advisers could play within these networks to support the local course provision and to assist individual learners to navigate their options accordingly.

Although learning providers, including colleges, employ qualified careers advisers as part of their student services teams, the demand for their guidance skills far exceeds the supply of careers professionals in employment. There needs to be greater investment in the training of careers advisers to meet this skills shortage. Learning providers will shortly be able to take advantage of a new HA training route, with a drawdown of £9000 over 2 years. It is important that take advantage of increasing their headcount of careers professionals through this route.

Notes

1. The Career Development Institute (CDI) is the UK-wide professional body for the career development sector. Our members (circa 4,500) are career advisers; career leaders (schools and colleges); career coaches and career managers working in the public, private, community and voluntary sectors.

Importantly we are responsible for the UK Register of Career Development Professionals. We are the awarding body for the Qualification in Career Development (QCD) and CDI Certificate in Careers Leadership; custodian of the National Occupational Standards (NOS: CD); responsible for the Careers Framework, and UK Career Development Awards.

We provide all the member services that you would expect of a professional body and subject association. Through the CDI Academy, we offer an extensive range of Level 4-6 qualifications for career advisers and career leaders and a CPD programme with special rates for members and free webinars; quarterly magazine; dynamic website with Members' Area and CPD recording system; *Careers in Careers* jobs board and fortnightly news emails.

Critically we work with a wide range of stakeholders and government departments to improve career development services for young people and adults, speaking with one voice on behalf of the whole profession.

2. For further information please contact Linda Chamberlain, CDI Policy Associate at linda.chamberlain@thecdi.net