

Response to Call for Evidence by the Education Select Committee Inquiry on Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG)

Introduction

About me

I have been involved in CEIAG for over 30 years in a variety of capacities, including my current roles as: Chief Executive of the award-winning non-profit outreach organisation [Push](#); Co-Chair of the Fair Access Coalition (the group of heads of third sector organisations dedicated to access to higher education); Chief Executive of the [Engineering Professors' Council](#); a Commissioner for the Lifelong Education Commission; and a regular writer, commentator and [consultant](#) on matters relating to education, employability and social mobility. Notwithstanding those roles, this response is offered in a purely personal capacity and nothing I say should necessarily be taken as the view of any organisation I may represent from time to time.

Aim of this response

I intend to offer a set of principles for CEIAG policy informed by research (my own and others', drawing on behavioural economics) into employability, social mobility and how young people arrive at career choices, and by experience at the interface between education institutions, careers practitioners, third sector organisations and policy makers. It is not a highly technical submission and I have tried to write clearly rather than with dense citations and jargon as I hope this may be helpful and refreshing.

The need for CEIAG

By international standards, the UK has low productivity, low social mobility and widely varying patterns of regional prosperity and deprivation. Yet we have relatively high levels of high-quality education. It is hard to square these without wondering whether large parts of human capital are poorly invested.

To put it another way, too many people aren't able to get jobs they find fulfilling and so they lack motivation. Too many people are under-utilised, their skills and interests going to waste. Too many people find themselves unable to get the education or training that they need to pursue a dream, or find that the education they did achieve did not match what they needed.

The answer is better matching of labour market and labour supply. As I will show, we cannot force a match, but we can optimise it by better CEIAG – helping individuals understand pathways, the general direction they are heading (if not the exact career) and what they need to gather along the way.

In 2011, the government axed Connexions, Aim Higher and Next Steps – collectively just under £500Mn in funding. That decimated professional careers practice as many left the profession, never to return and taking years of expertise. It is also perhaps fair to acknowledge, it cleared out some outdated practice. Since then, although there has been a slow regrouping, we have limped on with a patchwork of provision.

Schools have statutory duties to provide CEIAG, but these are not fully inspected and don't feature in league tables. Too often, careers is led by an unqualified teacher whose attention lapsed in a staff meeting. They are expected to advise on things they know little about and adhere to the Baker Clause while the school is also under pressure to achieve academic excellence.

We have the National Careers Service which is held at a distance from actual practice and we have the CEC which is charged with fighting systemic barriers to create opportunities for work-related learning.

Provision is patchy and there is widespread evidence that careers provision is weakest in those schools where pupils are most socioeconomically disadvantaged and lack social capital – in other words, exactly where the need is greatest and where even a small amount of additional provision would have the greatest impact.

It is hard to imagine many areas of public expenditure where modest targeted spending could yield such returns across the whole economy as to invest better in ensuring young people are better equipped to make information choices about their futures and realise their ambitions. Sadly this has long been the case and the returns are not within the lifetime of a parliament – which is why we need a long-term careers strategy.

What is CEIAG?

It is worth drawing a distinction between the components of CEIAG (careers education, information, advice and guidance) and why it is necessary to consider them separately as well as together.

Careers education is education about careers, ie. learning about the different ways people make a living, what those different careers involve and some of the pathways that people take into and through careers. Ideally, careers education also involves learning about employability (those attributes that mean an employee can add value to an employer), how to acquire it and how to demonstrate it to a potential employer.

Careers information is factual. It may be data (for example, labour market information) or it may be other factual information, but generally, it is the information that is largely uncontentious (if soundly derived) and, on its own, provided without context. One analogy I often use is to say that if I say “beer in this pub is £2 a pint”, I am providing you with information. In isolation, information is not very helpful to the person at the receiving end.

Careers advice puts information into context, making it potentially useful to any person who happens to receive it. To use the same analogy, it would be advice to say that “the average price of beer is £2.40/pint, so this pub is relatively cheap”. Good advice is true in a general sense, even though it is insensitive to any individual's perspective.

Careers guidance, however, is personalised and starts with the individual and their hopes, opportunities and needs. For example, it is guidance to ask, “Are you thirsty? Do you like beer? How much can you afford? What are your alternatives?”

I find this a useful distinction because it helps us understand how best to deliver the component parts of CEIAG. Careers support should not stop at CEIAG though. Beyond those components we should not overlook the potential role of mentoring, behavioural/mindset support and practical help (such as funding for trips and open days or clothes appropriate for work experience, etc).

Driving Improvement

Improving Careers Education

Careers education may involve experiential learning, ie. learning about careers through practical or personal experience of employment, but it may also involve other forms of learning: theoretical and reflective. Learning is most effective when several different approaches are deployed together. For example, careers education will be most effective when we not only have experience of doing things ourselves and directly experiencing other people doing things, but when we have conceptual frameworks within which to understand those experiences, and support to reflect on what we can conclude from the coming together of experiences and concepts.

Schools and curricula should be encouraged to embed work-related experiential learning into all subject areas, considering the challenges of real-life workplaces and attempting to solve problems using their subject skills and knowledge. This will make academic learning more evidently relevant to pupils as well as improving both their careers and academic education.

Ideally this would involve interactive activities with employers either in the classroom, virtually or, when possible, in the workplace – although this places a heavy burden on both the school and employer in terms of administrative load, safeguarding, etc. The aim is to ensure we make teaching both more effective and less – not more – difficult.

There are broker organisations that support these interactions, but they are not necessarily easily discoverable and navigable by teachers (who often have little personal experience of employment outside education). It is also important to align interactions with the curriculum to make the benefits of work-related learning clear to teachers.

Improving careers information

There has never been more careers information available to young people, to parents and to teachers. The challenges are knowing where to find it (search engines tend to amplify information on the basis of popularity, rather than quality, which favours heuristic information), knowing what is good information and what is not, contextualising the information, and cognitive load.

The government and public agencies have an important role in creating information and disseminating it in such a way that users can recognise it as authoritative, independent, reliable and up-to-date. That is not to say that they necessarily have to provide the end delivery. Information is better filtered through advice and guidance which may best be provided by practitioners, schools and third sector organisations.

Public policy on careers information should focus on making sure relevant information is freely available, its quality and independence is signalled (kitemarked even) and it is well signposted. To this end the government should fund a look-up tool that can be embedded into any website or app – in effect a curated and moderated library of careers information. The National Careers Service may be well-placed to manage this.

Consideration must also be given to the impact of digital poverty on information access.

Improving careers advice

Schools and colleges are well-placed to provide careers advice, but they are not well equipped. That is to say they have access to pupils and boundless willingness to help them, but they rarely have the expertise and the resources (human, digital and physical) to contextualise information without drawing on outdated and narrow personal experience.

The government should explore how to deliver training to teachers or specialist staff to provide advice, as distinct from guidance. Advice is often best provided by independent third-sector organisations.

Improving careers guidance

Of the four components of CEIAG, guidance is the most useful to the individual, but the hardest to deliver and largely redundant without the other three. Guidance requires knowledge, skills and contact (albeit sometimes virtually) with the person being guided. A careers guidance practitioner bears enormous responsibility because it is their role to draw aspirations out of their client and frame them in the context of opportunities. In some ways, professional careers practitioners are analogous to doctors in that they use their expertise to diagnose someone's needs and to support their next steps which, in the case of a doctor, may save a life and, in the case of a careers professional, may make a life.

Many people have dismissive tales of poor careers guidance. These are hackneyed and, even if they were ever fair, they are not now. In recent decades, careers guidance has become an evidence-based, theory-driven profession equipped with sophisticated tools.

Given the responsibility, careers guidance should never be entrusted to anyone who is not adequately trained to do it responsibly, knowledgeably and professionally. The Government should require anyone working in a publicly funded role as a careers practitioner to be on the CDI Professional Register.

Towards a new careers strategy

The government's last careers strategy provided a plan until 2020. Two years on, we need a new plan that considers today's needs in the light of any progress made, post-pandemic recovery challenges, current skill needs (and the influence of the Fourth Industrial Age), the need for levelling up, and new delivery technologies.

Aspiration

It is often said that we need to raise young people's aspirations, particularly with reference to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is insulting to imagine that aspirations are what they lack. They lack opportunities and expectation. The difference between the opportunities they expect and the aspirations they have is a measure of the extent to which they have agency in their own lives. A key goal of CEIAG should be to raise agency not aspiration.

Start young

Expectations are established young. People grow up with default pathways from birth – and even before (it is sometimes said that it takes three generations to remove the effects of disadvantage). Making choices that diverge from default pathways is harder than following them. It involves the unknown, risk and even cultural rejection. So, in order to help someone to expect that they can realise their aspirations, it is important to start the process of careers education as early as possible.

The new careers strategy should develop an incremental programme of careers education that runs throughout primary school and continues into secondary school, at which point the role of IAG should be widened and deepened.

The process of choice

Life choices tend not to be *moments* but rather a protracted *process* of becoming ready to recognise the choice that has been emerging for some time. Cognitive load (too much unfiltered, uncontextualized information) confounds this process and encourages people to fall back on default pathways or heuristic post hoc rationalisation of poorly informed, instinctual choices.

By starting to guide the process early, by doing so gently – drip-feeding just what's needed as soon as it may be needed – and by provoking curiosity (asking questions as much as seeking to provide answers), we can support people to go through the process of choice with a mind that is open to information and advice. Guidance supports this process.

Continuous and contiguous support

It is not enough to start young, if each year you start again. It should by now be clear that CEIAG should be continuous and contiguous. By this I mean that it ought to be regular throughout a pupil's education and it should always be building on and responding to what has gone before.

To this end every child should have a CEIAG portfolio – analogous to a medical record – in which interventions, experiences and achievements are recorded. Coupled with other records (such as their Individualised Learner Record and qualifications), a public version of the portfolio can form a proto-CV or take the place of UCAS personal statements (which are due for review).

They should also have a careers practitioner – analogous to a GP – who has access to this portfolio and can conduct regular intervention based on a developing picture of their aspirations, attainment and experience. Every child should know their careers practitioner and ideally establish a relationship with them over a number of years. Each child should be guaranteed to have regular one-to-one support from a careers practitioner throughout secondary school, at least once a year until Year 9 and more frequently thereafter.

On a macro level, the data in such portfolios would provide a powerful evidence base for what interventions work to achieve desirable outcomes and may even support the prediction of labour market trends.

Matching labour market supply and demand

We can teach children about labour market information, but for the same reason people buy lottery tickets more in hope than in expectation, young people will want to be what they want to be. Cognitive biases will prevent them from hearing the messages they don't want. But even if they do hear them, they still know that, however few opportunities there may be to achieve their aspirations, the way to make them even harder to achieve is not to pursue them. Many will be disillusioned by the level of challenge early on, especially those for the challenges and disadvantages are greatest.

We need to optimise the success for the greatest possible number. To do this our strategy needs to encourage your people to pursue dream in a practical way: that is to say, they should be supported to build the employability that they will need.

Employability comprises: (i) skills (transferrable and job-specific); (ii) knowledge; (iii) character attributes (attitudes and values, behaviours, personality and mindset); and (iv) social capital. What varies however between careers is exactly which skills, what knowledge, etc, and in what proportions. No two careers are alike in terms of the employability profile they require or the rewards they offer (in the broadest sense).

CEIAG should aim to help young people explore their own employability profile and the rewards they want, and then be able to match those with careers. If they find a good match in terms of rewards, they should be able to identify whether their employability profile matches and therefore be better able to redress any deficits in an intentional way.

By developing employability in this way, we can help young people to explore best-fit careers (beyond fanciful notions of what they imagine a career to offer) and develop a plan to achieve an even better fit.

Although each career is different, they have a significant overlap: a core of employability attributes that make a person well-rounded, able to pursue many different opportunities and adaptable to an ever-changing labour market.

Careers education should be built into the entire curriculum to be explicit about these components of employability and the ways in which education helps to develop them. For example, while a student may not make much use of the knowledge of oxbow lakes that they acquire in KS2 Geography, they will use the analytical skills that they develop in learning to understand the process behind the formation of an oxbow lake. Those analytical skills are invaluable as an employability skill if transferrable, but when we teach about oxbow lakes, we fail to make it clear that we are developing the pupils' analytical skills. Without this metacognition (awareness of what they're really learning), pupils will not develop the skill as effectively and may wonder what the point is of the work they're doing, which undermines their motivation to learn.

Careers education should provide this metacognitive framework for skills development. It should also encourage self-reflection on how effectively the skills have been developed, and on how they might be developed further and through what actions (eg. work experiences).

The goal will be to support young people to navigate their way better to careers they see as fulfilling and, in the process, ensure there is a wider supply of well-rounded, highly employable young people able to fit into a range of careers.

Johnny Rich, March 2022

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