

Briefing Paper

December 2021

The contribution of career development to public policy objectives: Recognising the potential with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

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Introduction

This paper seeks to do three things. Firstly, to outline the current international consensus on the contribution of career development to delivering on public policy goals. Secondly, to point to the unrecognised potential for career development to contribute to a wider range of socially valuable policy outcomes. Finally, to make recommendations for policymakers, service leaders, practitioners, and researchers.

The paper will draw on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals¹, and represents a summarised version of the argument presented by the author in the *Oxford Handbook of Career Development*².

Summary

Governments and international bodies recognise that career development services are worth investing in, and they act for the benefit of society. The UN Sustainable Development Goals provide a systematic and contemporary way of thinking about public policy objectives. Looking through the lens of the UN framework we can identify six areas where career development services can contribute to the delivery of public policy:

1. Labour markets: promoting decent work and economic development
2. Education: promoting access to learning and progression
3. Social equity: promoting fairness in access to opportunity
4. Health and well-being: promoting mental and physical well-being through work and learning
5. Environment: green guidance to facilitate an economic transformation
6. Peace and justice: supporting pathways that offer an alternative to crime

Career development enables individuals to have fair access to sustainable careers.

Current perspectives on public policy for career development

Historically most career development services have been directly or indirectly funded from the public purse, and as a result government policy has been influential in shaping the nature of these services. This field was not subject to serious study until the end of the 20th Century when Tony Watts became the leading figure in the UK and internationally in applying policy studies to career development³, establishing the unavoidably political nature of the topic⁴.

In the early years of the 21st century, progress was made in career development thanks to the creation of the International Centre for Career Development in Public Policy (ICCDPP)⁵ and the introduction of international comparative policy studies by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)⁶ focused on developed nations, The World Bank⁷ focused on emerging economies, and the European Commission focused on its member states⁸ and acceding or candidate states⁹.

As might be expected, there is variation - nations with strong economies and strong democratic institutions tend to have better developed career services. Nonetheless consistencies were found. One of the key messages emerging from these studies relates to the rationale behind public policy for career development – what governments are trying to achieve when they intervene in the provision of career development services for their citizens^{10,11}. Governments recognise career development is of benefit not just to individuals but to wider society, and is seen by governments as contributing towards three main categories of public policy goals:

Learning or educational goals: To facilitate effective functioning of the education and training system, to promote skills development and lifelong learning, and to smooth transitions from education into the labour market.

Labour market goals: To facilitate effective functioning of the labour market, matching individuals to work that suits them, and reconciling the supply of labour to the demand.

Social equity goals: To promote social inclusion and equality of opportunity.

Whilst nations may vary in the relative importance placed on these goals, this has been widely accepted as an explanation of government intentions. Subsequent international comparative policy studies continue to broadly adopt this viewpoint, for example studies of the Middle East¹², and European Union neighbouring countries¹³. As a result, there is an international consensus that career development has a value to societies and that its purpose can be understood in terms of its contribution to educational, labour market, and social equity goals.

This consensus is most clearly illustrated by a recent joint statement by CEDEFOP, the European Commission, the European Training Foundation (ETF), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the OECD, and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)¹⁴. This argues that governments should invest in career guidance to further economic, educational, and social equity objectives. Notwithstanding the wholehearted support from international bodies, in many countries career development services remain peripheral to education and employment policymaking¹⁵.

Looking beyond the current consensus

This perspective is well grounded in evidence so provides a sound basis to build on. One limitation of comparative policy studies is that they focus on describing what governments do and say that they do: they reflect existing ways of thinking. Career education and guidance may have wider social impacts and benefits that our existing frameworks do not capture. There may be contributions that career development can make to society that no governments have seriously considered. To identify any unrecognised potential, it is necessary to adopt a systematic approach. By considering a systematic framework for the goals of public policy, it is possible to see where career development can make a difference. Such a framework is provided by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

This image is used by the UN to provide an overview of the goals:



The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

This is a framework which provides a guide as to what responsible governments should be striving to achieve. It provides a way of categorising objectives for public policy that is both comprehensive and applicable worldwide. The Sustainable Development Goals apply to the period 2015-2030, and they replace the earlier UN Millennium Development Goals. The 17 goals are underpinned by 169 specific targets and endorsed by 193 UN member states.

It is the responsibility of nation states to implement the goals. The United Kingdom is committed to achieving the goals¹⁶, as are the devolved administration in Scotland¹⁷, Wales¹⁸, and Northern Ireland¹⁹.

They incorporate the concept of 'no-one left behind', indicating that economic and social development cannot just benefit elite groups in society. All citizens must be included, even the most marginalised groups.

Mapping the UN framework onto careers development work

Not all of the UN Goals are directly relevant to career development, and some are more relevant than others. That said most are unambiguously connected to careers work. They can be mapped onto our current understanding of the policy goals for careers work, but they also suggest three additional areas that have thus far been neglected by governments.

Labour Market goals



Career development work has always had an economic function. Career development practitioners help people to choose occupations and find work. There is a growing evidence base for the economic outcomes of career education and guidance²⁰. The UN goals also highlight the importance of decent work, that is work that offers adequate pay, good terms and conditions, a healthy and safe workplace, and dignity. Career development practitioners support people to make well informed occupational choices and access decent work.

Education goals



Career development work supports people to access learning, to navigate the education system, and to make effective transitions into work. This UN goal recognises that education has a wider social and cultural value above and beyond its role in developing human capital for work. Good quality learning opportunities should be accessible for all. Effective progression through the education system is particularly important in a high skill economy.

Social equity goals



Social justice is central to the work of many career development practitioners²¹. This means promoting fairness in careers for all, and support to access opportunities, particularly for those at risk of disadvantage because of their demographic, their identity, or their socio-economic status.



The UN goals recognise there are special issues relating to gender, and indeed this is a very important consideration in career development, but people may belong to multiple social categories, so it is useful to consider social equity broadly.

Health and well-being goals



Work and health are deeply connected. Unemployment is associated with detriments to mental health, whereas good quality work can be health promoting. Work, and worklessness, plays an important role in determining inequality in health outcomes²². The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically illustrated the many links between work and health. Career development promotes mental and physical health by supporting people to develop meaningful, valued life roles in safe environments. There is evidence to suggest that career education and guidance can have a positive impact on mental well-being²³.

Environmental goals



It is increasingly difficult to ignore the impact of climate change and environmental degradation. Governments are having to consider how they can

reorientate economies towards more environmentally sustainable activities. To be effective this transformation must consider individuals and their careers. Green guidance²⁴ has an important role to play in this transformation, by helping people to adapt their lifestyles to environmental threats and new economic opportunities

Peace and justice goals



It is widely believed that individuals who secure stable employment are less likely to engage in criminal activity²⁵. Career development helps young people to access work in the mainstream economy before they get drawn into crime, and as such it has a preventive function. It can also offer pathways for the rehabilitation of offenders, and

support desistance from crime. At a societal level, the fair sharing of career opportunities between different groups in the population will tend to be conducive to social harmony.

Some implications of the framework

For Policymakers: Career development policy has traditionally been the domain of either education or employment departments, and sometimes has suffered from falling between these two domains, or by being seen as no more than an adjunct to vocational skills policy. This framework suggests the potential for a wider social contribution of career services should be considered.

For Service Leaders and Practitioners: Careers service leaders and practitioners need to recognise that they are already having impacts across all of the six goals, and should seek to have this work recognised by evaluating these impacts so they can be evidenced. In particular health, environmental, and criminal justice impacts should be given serious consideration and enhanced.

For Researchers: Evidence-based practice is highly desirable but challenging to achieve in career development²⁶. An evidence base is also necessary for effective policymaking. By gathering evidence of impacts across each of the six domains, the career development profession will have access to a more systematically organised evidence base and will be better placed to inform policymaking.

About the author



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