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Building better futures: Decent work, inclusion and careers support services in the UK

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Abstract

The concepts of decent work, inclusion and supporting individuals to find sustainable pathways to learning and work opportunities present new opportunities and real challenges. Job roles and labour markets are changing rapidly. Job security has been abruptly and cruelly diminished for many, without warning. Specifically, we focus on how the UK careers support landscape in each of the four home nations is changing in response to the pandemic. We argue the quasi-market, experimental approach to careers provision in England has significantly weakened young people's access to professionally-trained advisers. We propose that a 'spaces and places paradigm' has the potential to reframe the Covid-19 crisis in transformative ways. Our results show highly fragmented policies in England will not create the level of support needed by individuals, particularly those most vulnerable in the aftermath of Covid-19, to build better futures for themselves.

Key words: careers services, decent work, digital, inclusion, impact

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Introduction

Decent work is a concept popularised by the United Nations' International Labour Organisation (ILO). The ILO defines decent work as meaning 'all women and men should work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity' (ILO, 1999, 2001). Over the last two decades, this highly commendable aspiration has remained steadfast. It focuses as much on labour markets as workplaces. The concept of decent work is connected to poverty reduction and reducing

inequality in developing countries in the context of globalisation and sustainable economic development. By 2030, the UN as part of its Sustainable Development Goal 8, aims to achieve decent work for men and women.¹ It is noteworthy that the ILO uses the terms ‘decent work’ and ‘job quality’ interchangeably in recent years. (ILO 2015).

From the early 2000s, researchers attempted to operationalise the ILO’s concept of decent work using a variety of indicators and methods. Results showed a lack of coherent measurement (inter alia: Standing, 2002; Ghai, 2003; Anker et al., 2003; and Bescond et al., 2003). More recently, with its origins in development economics, decent work has been picked up by civic organisations as a means to reduce in-work poverty. For example, in the UK Oxfam Scotland applied the concept of decent work to its study of low-wage workers in Scotland. Out of 26 decent work factors it identified, the five indicators rated the highest by these workers were: sufficient pay to cover basic needs; job security; paid holidays and sick leave; a safe working environment; and a supportive line manager (Stuart et al., 2016). Dodd et al (2019) experimented with a Decent Work Scale with 2 samples of working adults in the UK and found evidence of its validity. The results may have implications for greater usage, although this has yet to be fully realised. Despite many researchers trying to operationalise this concept of decent work, it is probably best understood as a programmatic, aspirational political and social agenda (Munoz de Bustillo et al. 2009, 2011).

Whilst many of the ILO dimensions are inextricably linked to the work of UK career development professionals, much of the current careers support activity related to decent work is characterised mainly through rapid responses to job redundancies. We suggest new approaches to careers support are required that focus on decent work opportunities, transferability of knowledge and skills, career adaptability and resilience (Brown et al, 2012; Hughes, 2019). This article proceeds to argue that national careers services will need to focus more on dimensions of decent work to support greater inclusion of those most vulnerable in the aftermath of Covid-19.

Focus

In the UK, the economic crisis resulting from Covid-19 is having greater impact on some groups more than others. Young people, the lowest paid, and females are disproportionately affected by the

crisis. Issues of inequality and inequity in young people and adults having access to government-funded specialist national careers services (as opposed to welfare to work systems located within Public Employment Services) are discussed. Similarities and distinctive differences in home nations are presented. Earlier published works (Hughes, 2013) described arrangements in England as a “careers experiment”. Seven years on, we reflect on progress and setbacks compared to developments in the Celtic nations. We consider the question of a widening inequality in access to professionally-trained careers advisers and the lack of highly visible spaces and places for careers support for many young people in England. In contrast, examples from the Celtic nations illustrate how national careers services have responded to the impact of the pandemic. Reflections on the added-value benefits of harnessing professionally-trained careers advisers, to target work with vulnerable young people and adults, are discussed. This includes a brief example of a major flagship ‘Working Wales’ programme where government trusts careers advisers to deliver on its employability agenda.

We consider current UK trends pertaining to decent work and inclusion situated within a changing world of work in a pandemic. The UK Government has been moving towards creating ‘good work’. This enshrines the principle of “Despite the important contribution of the living wage and the benefit system, fairness demands that we ensure people, particularly those on lower incomes, have routes to progress in work, have the opportunity to boost their earning power, and are treated with respect and decency at work.” (Taylor et al., 2017, p.6). Government accepts that a dual strategy of job creation and job quality can be pursued simultaneously in policy and practice. It set out this shift in thinking in its Good Work Plan (HM Government, 2018), following recommendations made by the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices (op.cit). There is a broad shift across government within the UK to now advocate improvements in job quality, whether expressed as decent work, fair work or good work. None so far has sought to enshrine improving job quality in law. As a consequence, responsibility for offering decent work rests with the voluntarism of employers and responsibility for finding decent work rests still with individuals.

Kramer and Kramer (2020) emphasise the increased segmentation of the labour market which allocate workers to ‘good jobs’ and ‘bad jobs’ and the contribution of occupational segmentation to inequality. Individuals being able to navigate their way through the labour market with easy access to

careers support services is therefore an imperative. Given a broad shift across government within the UK to now advocate improvements in job quality, whether expressed as decent work, fair work or good work, there seems to be some significant dimensions toward this. One is ‘foregrounding’ spaces and places for inclusive all-age careers support. We propose that a ‘spaces and places-paradigm’ has the potential to reframe the Covid-19 crisis in transformative ways.

‘Foregrounding’ spaces and places

The concept of ‘spaces and places’, first developed by Harrison and Dourish (1996), highlights it is not enough to provide people with ‘*spaces*’ for interaction; people need to interact in well-designed, conducive ‘*places*’. In their work, spaces are differentiated from places in the sense of “Space is the opportunity; place is the understood reality” (p. 67). The notion behind this differentiation is that there is a contrast between what designers can influence or determine (the space), including physical, structural, procedural or technical properties, and what intended users make out of it: a place that is socially accepted and “theirs” (p.70). Drawing on insights from architecture and urban design, they argued that constructive human engagement happens when people meet in appropriate and distinctive places. Effective places can be either ‘bricks-and-mortar’ environments or digital for remote service delivery. Any space and its properties (social, physical, procedural and technical) are a product of social processes, which in turn have to be understood when the aim is to facilitate change or transformation. By adopting this lens, it allows us to shed light on, understand, and consider the dependencies between individual needs, preferences, diversity and multiculturalism, combined with the wicked question of where can people go for quality-assured careers support?

The need for the right kind of ‘spaces and places’ was illustrated in England last year. The Office for National Statistics figures (ONS, June 2020), showed the fastest increase in claimant unemployment since the winter of 1947, and the increase month on month was five times greater than witnessed in the 2008–09 recession. There were growing concerns about rising youth unemployment, particularly in certain disadvantaged areas. There were few spaces for young people aged between 16

and 19 to access specialist, one-to-one or group-based careers or employability support beyond the local public employment service (DWP), which was overwhelmed with unemployment claimants.

The ‘spaces and places-paradigm’ is vital to help understand the pace of change and reframe the Covid-19 crisis in transformative ways. For example, earlier lessons from Connexions services in England (Hoggarth & Smith, 2004) highlighted the importance of young people having a local place to go outside of school. This may include: a multi-agency response to an individuals’ needs, a one-stop-shop approach with cyber-café facilities, welcoming community ‘pods’, or mobile provision where a bus or van can provide an outlet in a rural area or an urban setting to reach those most in need. More recently, digital self-service facilities are a necessity as part of the client/customer experience. As discussed below, regardless of the delivery mode, spaces need context, facilitation and careful embedding into cultural environments, so that people can make them into helpful places where they can shape meaningful content for themselves. For people to make sense of transitions in learning and work, some reflection is necessary on the context and influences that facilitate and/or impede their progress.

The changing world of work and inclusion

The changing world of work and inclusion is another critical dimension in the aftermath of Covid-19. Blustein (2018) argues work is a central way in which race, class, gender, sexuality, and health or disability are played out in our society. Job roles and labour markets are changing rapidly. Job security has been abruptly and cruelly diminished for many, without warning. Whilst many workers in developed economies are in full-time permanent jobs, job security has become an issue for those working in the gig economy and the rise of non-standard employment (Warhurst and Knox, 2020). Concern over this issue is overlain by the challenges of globalisation, new digital technology and an ageing population and their impacts on jobs (OECD, 2017).

The impact of job losses and lives upended by the Covid-19 pandemic have yet to be fully realised in local households and communities. In November 2020, the UK’s Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported “decreases in the number of part-time workers (down 158,000 on the quarter

to 8.11 million) and self-employed people (down 174,000 to 4.53 million, with a record 99,000 decrease for women). Three-quarters of Britons fear losing their jobs (Edelman's Annual Trust Barometer, 2020). In early January 2021, a further national lockdown was announced by the Prime Minister, with a tsunami of unemployment expected to reach at least 2.6 million by Spring 2021.

According to the Covid Recovery Commission (CRC, 2020) people living in the poorest neighbourhoods are not only at higher risk of dying from Covid-19 but are also suffering more from unemployment and worsening mental health. Wilson et al (2020) argue the lowest paid have been badly affected, not least because forecasts before the downturn were suggesting a sharp decline in demand for 'low skilled' work over the next decade. Women have been more adversely affected than men. People with disabilities, who have lower employment rates than the people with no disabilities, often face greater barriers to moving into work or changing jobs. Older people are also likely to be particularly at risk – because they are unlikely to go back to work once they are unemployed.

Displacement from employment in high-risk sectors such as hospitality, theatres, travel and tourism, leisure and retail, where jobs and opportunities have been ravaged, have had a particularly heavy impact on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. This differential effect deepens existing inequalities and prevents inclusive growth. Scholars writing and researching in the field of adult education (inter alia: James & Thériault, 2020; Boeren et al., 2020; and Waller et al., 2020) confirm Covid-19 has rendered social inequalities – not limited to disability, employment status, immigration status, income, race and social-class. Displacement from jobs and food poverty are other real concerns. Therefore, new forms of career dialogue and support for people of all ages has become increasingly important.

A reformulation of the challenge to focus more on inequality has gained policy traction internationally (Rafferty 2019). Addressing inequality is 'good economics' (Nolan 2018) as well as furthering social justice (inter alia: Atkinson 2015, Arthur, 2018, Hooley et al., 2018). The language of inclusion and inequality is shifting. For example, social inclusion – a term now preferred by UK policymakers for its more positive connotations than social exclusion – involves tackling the barriers that stop people participating fully in society (Warhurst & Dickinson, 2020). The origins of the

concept of inclusion reflects a social exclusion agenda. This origin, in development economics from the 1950s, advocated ‘pro-poor growth’. It focused on interventions to help people below the poverty line. It morphed into ‘inclusive growth’ by the end of the 2000s, from which point the focus had shifted to support for all: the poor, near poor, middle income earners and even the rich (Klasen, 2010).

Within a UK context, inclusive growth is about enabling more people and geographical areas to contribute to and benefit from economic success. There is a strong belief in work as a key enabler and supply-side interventions in education and training as key levers. An element often overlooked by policymakers in England is the work of professionally-trained careers advisers bridging together the worlds of education, training and employment. Robertson (2019) argues “career guidance supports people to access decent work, and education or training opportunities that provide access to a source of income, social contact, purposeful activity, and some healthy challenges” (p.2). People’s health and their financial circumstances are inextricably linked to work. UK trends to date suggest that people experiencing a prolonged economic decline are more likely to have poorer mental health and wellbeing (Eastaugh, 2021).

A further dimension is digital connectivity and competence. In the UK, digital poverty and the North/ South divide are major concerns. For example, the Lloyds’ Consumer Digital Index (2020) found that 9 million people in the UK are ‘digitally excluded’, with no or limited access to the internet. This exclusion has also been compounded by the pandemic. A major challenge and opportunity for professionally-trained careers advisers is to advocate on behalf of individuals who are digitally excluded. Simultaneously, practitioners must increase their own digital competence and connectivity to structural changes in education and labour markets. In these unprecedented times, careers advisers need to rapidly respond to the diverse needs of specific groups, particularly those most at risk of being left behind (Akkok, 2021).

UK national careers services: the state of decent work and inclusion policies

A recent joint international survey report (Cedefop, 2020) provides a snapshot of how career guidance policies, systems and services are adapting and coping, during the pandemic. Findings are based on responses from 93 countries worldwide. A total of 40% of respondents reported that career

guidance had received policy attention from government during the early pandemic, but a comparable percentage stated a lack of this attention (p.16). It is, therefore, timely to reflect on the state of play in the four home nations of the UK and to examine the current discourse in the context of decent work and inclusion. Each UK government-funded national careers service is situated within a broader policy context of education, employment, skills, enterprise and economic growth.

During the pandemic, UK professionally-trained careers advisers have adapted and transformed their work. They have discovered more inclusive and innovative ways of delivering careers support to good effect. Examples include: distance and e-based careers policies and practices delivered either by telephone, online 1:1 interviews or group webinar sessions, virtual career fairs, virtual work experience, virtual internships, the 'My World of Work Job Hub' (SDS, 2020), career podcasts and new forms of career 'gaming' e.g., Careercraft (an adaptation of Minecraft). Phoning, texting, and emailing have become the 'new norm' and many schools have allowed advisers to use their school platforms to share information with young people and parents. New forms of online multi-channel delivery (this spans several different channels, like social media, mobile, websites and physical locations), remote curriculum learning, increased labour market intelligence (LMI), and targeted outreach with those most vulnerable, are current priorities.

Many teachers and careers practitioners have risen to the challenges of remote service delivery during lockdown. However, in the coming year it is likely to be more burdensome for teachers to focus on developing careers expertise as they catch up on lost time with their students and cope with the psychological stress of responding to Covid-19. Working closely with professionally-trained careers advisers is part of an added-value solution for both teachers and government. Co-creation and strengthening careers and employability support will be essential in the year(s) ahead. For lifelong guidance systems, Barnes et al., (2020) call for fresh policy impetus with greater emphasis on professionalism and quality.

The careers experiment in England

In England, there are four fundamental policy design flaws in relation to ensuring young people (and adults) gain access to decent or good work. Since 2013, a quasi-market, experimental

approach to careers support for young people and adults remains the dominant discourse (Hughes, 2013). This takes the form of different agencies providing different forms of careers support with reductions in access to professionally-trained careers advisers, particularly for young people within and outside of education.

The first design flaw stems from a government policy for the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC), funded by the Department for Education – with a national network of co-ordinators and industry advisers driving Gatsby ‘Good Career Guidance’ benchmarks (Gatsby, 2013) – to only focus on what happens to young people whilst they are in school or college. The notion of decent work for young people is overlooked and superseded by a drive for schools and colleges to self-assess against 8 Gatsby benchmarks. The quality of careers support for young people in England’s schools remains subject to frequent criticism (HoC, 2020, p.4).

Prior to 2012, the annual allocated budget from government for careers services for young people alone was around £203million. The CEC annual budget of around £30m illustrates the long-lasting effects of austerity measures. Key strengths of the CEC include: a strategic national careers and enterprise network; funding for ‘test and learn’ programmes; and area-based Careers Hubs, with subsidised bursaries to train some teachers as ‘Careers Leaders’ in schools and colleges. Differing careers companies in localities play an important intermediary role by bidding for funds and coordinating these activities in schools. However, major weaknesses include: the proportion of CEC funding is not fully realised on the frontline, Careers Leader roles and allocated hours vary considerably, there is a lack of priority is given by the CEC to career guidance from professionally-trained careers advisers, inequity exists in the allocation of funds – often the most affluent schools put themselves forward for funding; short-term pilots come to an abrupt end when the funding expires e.g., career-related learning in primary schools; and a lack of highly visible places and spaces for young people to receive impartial career guidance in their locality.

Secondly, the Department for Education’s National Careers Service, managed through a separate funding agency, offers a new telephone helpline service and national website for young people from age 13 upwards. It focuses careers guidance face-to-face delivery mainly on adults in

defined priority groups, including rapid job redundancy responses for adults, and is rewarded through payment-by-results (ESFA, 2020). In July 2020, the government's Plan for Jobs (HM Treasury, 2020) announced a further £32m investment in the National Careers Service (over 18 months). This policy statement affirmed its intention to support an all-age careers service and to revitalise the professional status of career guidance. But this has been recently undermined by difficulties resolving tensions within government policies e.g., separate and competing careers and employability initiatives funded by the Department for Education and Department for Work and Pensions.

A further vulnerability has arisen. The third design flaw came in November 2020, with a new £2billion 'Kickstart Scheme' giving 16–24-year-olds a foothold in decent work opportunities by creating high-quality, government-subsidised jobs for at least 6 months. Over 500 'gateways' – organisations that act on behalf of employers offering 29 or fewer vacancies – have registered with DWP to help the smallest businesses to hire young people. This new bridge to learning and work for youth sits outside the role and responsibilities of professionally-trained careers advisers. This widens the gap in careers advisers' advocating on behalf of young people to promote social inclusion and decent work opportunities with employers. It also demonstrates central government's lack of recognition on the added-value benefits of harnessing professionally-trained careers advisers working skilfully with employers and young people. There is also the critical fragmentation of policy relating to young people at age 18 as few can access 'Plan for Jobs' opportunities if they are not in the Universal Credit system.

Subsequently, a fourth design flaw occurred when the Department for Education set out its intention to achieve greater alignment between the CEC and the National Careers Service, to create a clear, all-age careers system (DfE, January 2021). One month later, central government announced more than 150,000 jobseekers across Great Britain will benefit from new employment support, helping them build their interview skills, find local vacancies and quickly get back into work through the Department for Work and Pensions. It launched a 'New Job Finding Support Service' ranging from job searches and interview practice to advice on how to switch careers. This will run in parallel to existing support available in jobcentres and by work coaches with no mention of the

National Careers Service. A new team of Job Search Advisers, with minimum professional qualification requirements, are now available online or over the phone, to support those recently unemployed who already have the skills and experience needed to move into a new career, but might not be sure where to start. It is accordingly important to note, the National Careers Service area-based advisers rely on referrals from DWP to support the achievement of their payment-by-results from the funding agency. These design flaws have created further uncertainty in the role of careers advisers supporting decent work, inclusion and sustainable policies.

Central Government has also set out its intention to address inequality and ‘level up’ underperforming and left-behind parts of the UK. Recently, the Local Government Association (2020) representing local/combined government councils and boroughs called upon central government to end the patchwork of careers activity in England and hand funding and control of careers and employment schemes to local authorities in England (local authorities being responsible for providing a careers service prior to the Education Act 2011). Devolved budgets and new Work and Health programme responsibilities hold new promise for locally designed careers support places and spaces to be created that meet local needs. This too creates further fragmentation and inequitable provision.

All parts of this English careers experiment remain highly contested territory. The chaos caused by Covid-19 in schools and colleges (Schools Week, 2021) is likely to result in professional careers support for young people slipping down the priority agenda. The extent to which this situation can be recovered post-Covid remains unknown. There are calls from the careers industry body and partners for a central government backed Careers Guidance Guarantee (Careers England, 2020). This Guarantee is designed to ensure that everyone, including young people and adults, those in education, work and who are currently unemployed or not in education, employment or training (NEET), will be able to access the professional career guidance that they need. So far, this has failed to gain any traction with central government. The muddled and multi-faceted policy and delivery arrangements currently make it extremely difficult for young people and adults to know where to find work and where to go for trustworthy careers support. It is difficult not to conclude, the professionally-trained careers advisers’ expertise is under-valued by policymakers in England.

Celtic nations

In contrast to England, national careers services funded by government administrations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, are overseen by Departments for the Economy or involve joint Departmental responsibilities.ⁱⁱ The ‘decent, ‘good’ or ‘fair work’ agenda is common parlance rooted in their economic and social agendas. Careers services are all-age, multi-channelled and deliver careers support in a wide range of education, training, employment and community settings from an early age. Better coordinating efforts and less fragmentation, as well as an all-age approach, accounts for better success in the Celtic nations. Being smaller in population and resources, the Celtic nations were required at the onset to collaborate and cooperate, where in England fragmentation flourished. Digital infrastructure, shared professional learning and highly visible access to professional careers advisers are strengths that account for better outcomes in the Celtic nations.

In Scotland, a move towards whole system thinking manifests itself in complementary ‘fair’ work and careers strategy policies. A strong focus on the need to close socio-economic gaps for women, the disabled, care leavers and ethnic minority groups, supports collective action in Scotland. The national careers strategy (Scottish Government, 2020) highlights the important role career education, information, advice and guidance (CIAG) can play in helping to address future skills demands and deliver inclusive growth. There is a commitment by Scottish Government for publicly-funded CIAG providers to adopt a shared set of principles and a ‘universal’ entitlement to CIAG. There is an accepted view that CIAG services can support individual paths to self-sufficiency, better well-being and opening up access to opportunities, and creating new ones (Gray, 2020).

Co-design of services for vulnerable groups across Scottish agencies is a key feature. Ramsden (2019) argues this involves “the ability to work with uncertainty and ambiguity across organisational boundaries. These skills include the ability to inspire others into whole-system thinking and recognitions of shared problems” (p.29). The Scottish government’s investment in supporting multiple pathways for CIAG leadership and professional learning ranges from sponsored careers apprenticeships to doctoral studies. A strong focus on the need to close socio-economic gaps for those

in protected characteristic groups such as women, the disabled, care leavers and ethnic minority groups, supports collective action in Scotland.

A weakness identified by Congreve (2019) is rising poverty in Scotland. She argues Scottish Government “must continue to take seriously its commitments on inclusive growth, in every policy intervention, to ensure that the labour market and the economy enable people on a low income to see adequate financial return from their employment” (p.18). Employers in key sectors are part of the identified solution working closely with the government-funded national careers service ‘Skills Development Scotland’ (SDS).

In Northern Ireland, the national strategy for careers education and guidance was overhauled in 2016. This has guided the future direction of careers education and guidance (Department for Employment and Learning; Department of Education, 2016). Through a high-level Careers Advisory Forum (CAF), the government develops strategic and local partnerships to better understand the employability skills, qualifications and attributes needed by employers. The overarching goal is to facilitate better links between schools, colleges, local businesses and local councils. The Department for the Economy’s (DfE) national Careers Service is responsible for providing careers information, advice and guidance on an all-age basis. The Department of Education (DE), which sets the common curriculum for all grant-aided schools, provides guidance on the delivery of careers education in schools.

During the early stages of the pandemic, this joint Ministerial arrangement approved three specific measures to support those affected by the pandemic. Firstly, the national Careers Service offers one-to-one advice and guidance to all year 12 pupils (final year of compulsory education in NI) with a target of delivering to at least 95% of the cohort (22,479 pupils). All 16-17 years were contacted individually to ensure they are aware of the support available and encouraged to access help in these uncertain times. Secondly, advice and guidance for those workers furloughed, made redundant or unemployed received additional job search support. Thirdly, improved supported access to free online training, through a partnership approach with the Open University, focuses on driving up digital, employability and essential skills. Those who need additional support are signposted to the

Career Service. All three initiatives have been supported moves to increase the safety net for individuals seeking decent work.

A recent OECD review (2020) recommended the Northern Ireland Assembly to “complement recent strategic reforms to career guidance provision across all providers, by developing clear, common, transparent and accountable quality standards” (op.cit:13). Some further key areas identified for development include new spaces and places for careers support, particularly for young people, for example, a new careers portal involving employers and informal mentorship programmes. Northern Ireland is still below the UK unemployment level overall, but long-term unemployment is much higher - approximately 35% of all unemployed have been out of work for more than a year compared to just about 16% in the UK (BBC, 2020). A new careers and skills strategy will need to address the significant challenges of long-term unemployment and access to decent work and inclusive growth.

Cyrfa Cymru/Careers Wales is the major provider of the national careers service offering all-age careers provision in Wales. This bilingual ‘all-age’ careers service focuses on those in greatest need of support with career choices and decision making. Those looking to improve their careers prospects or those seeking employment, regardless of current employment status or personal circumstance, have access to a highly visible national careers service both online and embedded in local communities. Employer engagement is a key feature of the national careers service’s work. The Future Generations Act (2015) is a key driver in tackling the decent work and careers support agenda. The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales highlights the need for employers to consider their use of workers in the gig economy within their supply chains and day-to-day practices, particularly where there is no specific justification for the use of zero-hour contracts, or where they are used to avoid protections afforded by employment law.

Cyrfa Cymru/Careers Wales will launch a new vision and careers strategy in Spring 2021, including evidence on how it supports the Future Generations Act and other government priorities. A new national Curriculum 2022, with statutory guidance to support schools to embed Careers and Work-Related Experiences (CWRE), alongside a new Careers Wales Quality Award is well underway. In December 2020, the Minister for Education in Wales announced a discontinuation of a

Gatsby Benchmark pilot, favouring a more quality-assured approach. A strong partnership approach prevails between schools and colleges and professionally-trained careers advisers in the national careers service.

In May 2019, a new government-backed flagship 'Working Wales' programme '#Change YourStory' was launched, managed and delivered by Careers Wales. The idea was for a simpler approach to employability support for individuals with a single point of contact through which they can access personalised career guidance to help find and maintain appropriate opportunities. Pre-pandemic, this was made available at Careers Wales offices, local job centres, libraries, community hubs and co-location within health and wellbeing centres. Careers advisers offer career guidance and coaching, workshops, career information and advice.

At present, the service is delivered mainly over the phone, in virtual meetings or through a new, dedicated website. It is available to people over the age of 16 who are not in full time education, regardless of location, accessibility or personal circumstance, to support them into employment. In essence, a coherent partnership approach exists with a clear brand and focus. Adults registered with Working Wales (WW) participate voluntarily and receive a personalised programme of support. This results in a wide variation in the number of one-to-one hours and additional support that adults out of work might typically receive dependent on need.

The rationale for highlighting Working Wales is the specific responsibility allocated to professionally-trained careers advisers, whereby the Welsh Government has positioned Careers Wales to be 'the gateway' for referrals to community providers, in stark contrast to disjointed arrangements in England. Careers Wales works closely in partnership, not competition, with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to provide specialist careers guidance and coaching to those most in need. This dual approach is designed to improve the prospects and ability of individuals to find employment or to increase their earnings capacity through engagement with a range of activities and interventions. In a typical month prior to Covid-19, Working Wales was serving around 1600 new adults not in paid work, being around two thirds of their overall caseload (Percy, 2021). Over a typical year, approximately 19,200 adults not in paid work can be served by Working Wales. Adults registered

with Working Wales (WW) participate voluntarily and receive a personalised programme of support. This results in a wide variation in the number of one-to-one hours and additional support that adults out of work might typically receive dependent of need. Since March 2020, the impact of the pandemic has reduced the number of adults using the service, in line with similar trends across all UK careers support services – see Figure 1: WW Trends 2019-2021

[Figure 1]

This has heightened awareness of the need for more spaces and places to reach vulnerable adults during the pandemic and to support their job search and transitions in learning and work. In response, Working Wales has begun to utilise new technology to help both themselves and their partners target careers support for redundant customers and businesses facing redundancies. For example, they have developed innovative redundancy ‘heat maps’. Yeap and Uy (2014) describe heat maps as geospatial data on a map using different colours to represent areas with different concentrations of points — showing overall shape and concentration trends. The Working Wales Redundancy ‘Heat Map’ is an interactive a map of Wales populated by the redundancy notifications that the service receives daily. This helps staff to identify the geographical location of actual and upcoming redundancies. The maps are searchable by geography and density (impact). They enable staff to see up-to-date information on current and upcoming redundancies in their area; and managers to easily generate Local Authority-level information for sharing with partner agencies. At an all-Wales level, this provides Welsh Government with essential data on the effectiveness of support programmes, and where additional support may be needed.

Collaborative opportunities for co-working and co-location of services remains a high priority. For example, by targeting refugees and asylum seekers in Cardiff city and co-developing a careers support programme with the Oasis Cardiff charity – a non-profit charity – this supports individuals and families to integrate within their local community. With 100 –150 visitors daily, customers include people from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Mali and the Congo. Working Wales encourages participants to ‘volunteer’ as group session facilitators/translators, thus supporting

individuals whilst also enriching the skills and experience and adding to their CVs. They also support those in hardship to access British equivalences to their existing overseas qualifications.

Discussion

Comparisons between the four home nations shows what works well is investment in capacity building within schools, colleges and local communities through *a partnership approach* harnessing the expertise of professionally trained careers advisers. Where governments have recognised the added-value of such expertise, this has provided a clear brand, narrative and communication to young people and adults on where they can go for careers support. In the Celtic nations, young people have more equitable access to careers guidance compared to those in schools and colleges across England. What does not work well is a narrowly defined pre-Covid criteria applied for those who can access face-to-face careers support and those who cannot. The *payment-by-results approach* in England, where careers advisers delivering careers support services are reliant on referrals from a separate competing Job Search service is potentially doomed to failure. Personal agency is core to human support services. Practice, theories and frameworks position *personal agency as socially mediated*, but assume that people possess personal agency to play determining roles in their lives and livelihoods. Rather than ignoring this, achieving decent work and inclusion requires policymakers alter social structures where personal agency can be actively supported.

Waves of economic recovery and possible Covid-19 resurgence will drive individuals to adopt a new socially-distant normal that will transform behaviours, ways of living and livelihoods. For careers advisers and national careers services this has been a significant year, as individuals driven to stay home spend more time on their devices to engage with the outside world. Multi-channelling careers support has become the new norm. The benefits of increased access to career interventions continues to expand as technology develops (Sampson et al., 2020). Digital spaces and places for careers support now include social media (Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter) and chatbots (Hughes et al, 2021) to reach out into communities so that people who face difficulties – sudden unemployment – are not left alone and can access help and support. Social technology can be a force

for good. The pandemic has forced careers services to redefine and make explicit their strategic digital roadmaps. In the same way Amazon.com has crafted algorithms to refine its logistics to ensure fast delivery from its warehouses to customers, careers services will have to meet the challenges of harnessing technology whilst ensuring those most disadvantaged receive quality-assured human support when needed. But there are also other fundamental dimensions to be addressed in relation to decent work and inclusion. Mann et al. (2021) argues teenage uncertainty, career ambition, career misalignment and opportunities for part-time work merit greater attention. In the UK, it is young people from the most advantaged backgrounds who are most likely to report receiving career guidance activities (op. cit).

Vulnerability

Whilst evidence shows increased use of digital in the UK, just under 12 million people do not have access to what the UK government defines as essential digital skills. In addition, just under two million households do not have access to the internet at home (Heathman, 2020). With this lack of access, these individuals and households are missing out on opportunities to find work, learn skills, save money and access important services. Many are coping with issues such as loneliness, poverty or unemployment. Overcoming these barriers and gaining access to decent work and achieving social inclusion requires new strategies for engagement in learning/re-learning, skilling and upskilling on a continuous basis. To address this challenge, careers support embedded in places and spaces where citizens feel most comfortable is an urgent imperative.

Piketty (2020) argues every human society must justify its inequalities. Non-digital roadmaps in our society which feature the interplay of decent work, inclusion and careers support are crucial, particularly to support those most vulnerable in society. This assertion does not attempt to occupy some high moral ground, but instead puts the spotlight on the need for leadership in finding ways to build better futures (Hughes, 2021). Individuals' access to professional careers expertise positioned visibly at a national and local level is essential. However, it is important to note that marketisation as a delivery model means that careers provision is unstable and vulnerable to governmental shifts in priorities.

A number of problems have stemmed from the ‘careers experiment’ in England whereby in particular young people, face inequalities and inequitable access to professionally trained careers advisers. These manifest in highly *fragmented and competing structural* arrangements. Also, under threat is the universal access to professionally-trained careers advisers’ *impartiality and advocacy* in supporting a route to decent work and inclusion. The prevalence of neo-liberalism remains (Hooley, et al., 2018). However, it is important to attune to the emergent culture in finding new spaces and places in which to do things differently considering the current crisis. The careers profession will need to garner support on the latent demand for its services and expertise (Gough & Neary, 2020). It will need to articulate clearly the digital and non-digital spaces and places it occupies in providing quality-assured inclusive careers support.

Seeds of hope

The national career services in the Celtic nations have carved out a distinctive partnership role working online and with schools, colleges and community agencies to provide highly visible careers support for people of all ages. They have demonstrated that education, careers, training and employment providers work closely together to better prepare and support citizens for employability, the deployment of lifelong learning and ongoing skills acquisition. Professionalisation and quality assured provision are key priorities in stark contrast to government policies in England, as illustrated earlier.

This is a moment in time when publicly-funded national careers services and the careers profession needs to assert its position as a vital service that supports decent work, inclusion and high-quality careers support as a tenet for public and private good. Encouragingly, in England and Wales a return on investment (ROI) case is being made to help policymakers to justify their investments to Treasury (Percy, 2020; in press). Decent work and inclusion activities from national careers service are typically bound up in rapid responses to redundancies. National careers services can, and often do, go beyond this but their efforts and achievements are often hidden. We argue the most likely outcome of the current ‘reforms’ in England – a market in careers services – will not create the level of support needed by individuals, particularly those most vulnerable in the aftermath of Covid-19, to build better futures for themselves. A key element of individuals’ employability is the concept of ‘*deployment*’ –

the extent to which they are aware of what they have got and how they choose to use it (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). This deployment relies on all individuals having career management skills, being adaptable to labour market developments and realistic about labour market opportunities. The spaces and places-paradigm can assist in posing the wicked question to policymakers i.e., where can people go to access a quality-assured careers support? Career recovery cannot be left to chance with those most vulnerable served by those least trained and qualified to deliver.

Conclusion

National careers services in the UK have the chance to revisit their long-standing and, in some cases, relatively new careers strategies in light of the pandemic. There are opportunities ahead to address fragmentation, quality-assured provision and new digital and non-digital spaces and places for careers activities. The work of professionally-trained careers advisers and their contribution to decent work and inclusion should be at the forefront of policy solutions. Closer alignment between careers and mental health services, especially for marginalised and vulnerable groups, should be a priority. Improved digital access and digital competences of clients and practitioners is essential. Not only is there a moral responsibility to help individuals respond to Covid-19 challenges, but also, as growth returns to the economy, there is a social and economic imperative to enable people to take advantage of the new opportunities which are likely to emerge. Professional careers guidance helps people to make good choices, both for them and for the wider economy, matching skills supply more closely with demand.

There is no single approach that all careers services can adopt to guarantee decent work and inclusion. To be effective, the deployment of human talent, skills and inclusive education, training and employment will have to be firmly embedded in policies, strategy and practice, not treated as an ad-hoc addition. Moreover, there needs to be a new mentality to adapt and develop decent work and inclusion throughout the careers system with the new demands and significant changes taking place. A final point that needs to be kept in mind is that digital and human careers support are both pivotal for achieving decent work, inclusive growth and sustainable provision.

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ⁱ The ILO's Decent Work Agenda has 12 dimensions: 1) social dialogue; 2) workers' and employee representation; 3) employment opportunities; 4) adequate earnings and productive work; 5) decent working time; 6) combining work, family and personal life; 7) abolition of certain types of work (e.g. child labour, forced labour); 8) stability and security of work; 9) equal opportunity and treatment in employment; 10) safe work environment; 11) social security; 12) economic and social context for decent work.

ⁱⁱ Department for Economy and the Department of Education joint ministerial responsibilities (N. Ireland); Department for Fair Work, Business and Skills (Scotland); Department for the Economy, Transport and North Wales lead with responsibility for Careers Wales.