



Executive Summary: An International Evidence Review: Targeted and Effective Careers Support Interventions

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dmh associates background

In 2008, Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE established dmh associates to encourage collaboration and fresh thinking in careers, education and skills policy, research and practice. The outcomes from the organisation's work are designed to inform and influence policies, research and practice in the UK, Europe and internationally.

Our expertise includes consultancy, evaluation, evidence and impact assessment, literature reviews, qualitative and quantitative research, digital and labour market intelligence / information (LMI). We provide a full range of activities each tailored to meet specific organisational or individual needs

Executive Summary

Introduction

In October 2023, dmh associates were commissioned by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to conduct research investigating the careers service provisions that ‘Small Advanced Economy’ (SAE) countries target for their career guidance strategic and operational planning and delivery. The SAE countries, as defined by the Department for the Economy, include Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Luxembourg, Republic of Ireland, Israel, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Scotland and Wales. However, the Czech Republic and Luxembourg were unable to participate. Therefore, New Brunswick, Canada¹ and England were substituted to provide further examples of effective career guidance policies and practices. Israel was unable to fully participate.

The research was undertaken between late October 2023 – late February 2024. The scope of the research has purposely narrowed down to concentrate mainly on career guidance in secondary schools, technology-focused provision, work with vulnerable individuals and professionalisation arrangements. It refrains from an in-depth exploration of further education (FE) and higher education (HE) and vocational education training outside of schooling, as these fall outside the boundaries of the scope of the investigation.

The Careers Service in the Department for the Economy (DfE) resides within the Apprenticeship, Careers and Vocational Education (ACVE) Division. It provides impartial guidance on career planning to individuals in education, employment, training, and to the unemployed, with a priority focus on clients who are facing or vulnerable to social exclusion. It offers personalised careers information, advice and guidance on an all-age basis provided by professionally trained and qualified advisers.

Aims

- to provide an evidence base for priority-setting within the Careers Service in the Department for Economy,
- to increase organisational knowledge and support dialogue with stakeholders on all-age careers support and, more widely, effective labour market and skills strategies; and
- to identify good / interesting policies and practices to feed into forward planning at a strategic and operational level.

Methodology

The research focuses on mutual policy learning (Sultana, 2008) whereby policymakers, researchers and practitioners engage in dialogue with counterparts in other countries to learn from each other highlighting good / interesting careers policies and practices. The author undertook a rapid evidence search (RES) drawing on publicly available literature and personal library resources, followed by interviews with expert lifelong guidance informants.

Simultaneously, Dr Chris Percy (Senior Associate) conducted a detailed analysis of data received from the Careers Service to produce robust findings on return on investment (RoI). Refer to a separate detailed report for more information (dmh associates, March 2024).

1 New Brunswick was selected as the Canadian case study because the province has been going through a recent process of renewal and development of its school-based career guidance. Canada’s provinces all have distinct policy and practice in education, and there are other provinces that may also be worthy of further study.

Definitions

In various countries terms such as ‘career counselling’, ‘career development’, ‘careers information, advice and guidance’, ‘career education’, ‘vocational counselling’, ‘vocational guidance’, ‘guidance counselling’, ‘educational and vocational orientation’ are used to refer to the diverse activities encompassed by the term “career guidance”, as used throughout the reports.

Findings

Tables 1-9 in the main report briefly summarise detailed data extracted from each jurisdiction. Appendices 1 - 2 outline key expert informants, Country and New Brunswick case studies, and Strategic National Lifelong Guidance Fora (Appendix 3). A separate Appendix report is also provided on how legislation in each country unfolds into practice. The findings in the main report include:

Aim 1: Evidence base for priority-setting within the Careers Service

Globally policymakers are considering how best children from an early age (and their parents) can learn more about the changing world of work. Career-related learning in primary schools in countries such as England, Iceland, New Zealand, Sweden, and Switzerland are underway, prioritising awareness raising, horizon broadening, and world of work inspiration activities including running events in schools with employer volunteers. Careers Wales and Skills Development Scotland (SDS) have adopted a distinctive approach to designing their own customised version of Microsoft Minecraft, including immersive career education games and resources for teachers.

Approaches to identifying needs

In the broader scope of delivering careers guidance beyond primary schooling, various approaches to identifying individual needs are employed. These include **applied skilful practice** such as 1:1 career guidance interviews, groupwork, assembly and classroom sessions, careers fairs, youth/adult employment progression assessments, and visits to careers centers, coaching and mentorship activities etc. Additionally, **tools and frameworks** like career check/talent surveys, strengths assessments, card sort exercises, interest inventories, career management skills, progression and engagement assessment frameworks each support a triage approach to identifying need. Follow-up destination data or post-careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) surveys capture individuals’ experiences as a feedback loop for quality assurance, and improvements in design, and delivery principles. Additionally, **teacher or third-party community referrals** are also common to discuss and agree on targeted career guidance for those most in need. Professionally trained careers advisers/guidance counsellors utilise a wide range of approaches to identify individual needs. The DfE Careers Service employs an online Application for Guidance system. Across all jurisdictions, tailored and targeted programs for vulnerable young people and adults are common within innovative approaches outlined in the main report.

Ratio of careers adviser/guidance counsellor to students in post-primary schools

The ratio of trained professional careers advisers working in schools varies considerably when assessing the deployment of resources. This is not a fixed or static allocation. Governments and national professional associations in countries such as Austria, Finland, Ireland, Canada (New Brunswick), Scotland, Sweden and Wales provide guidelines. In most cases, there is no robust published, comprehensive overview that allows for reliable comparisons. The range of ratios from the lowest to the highest across the countries e.g.

- Lowest Ratio: Finland (FI) with a recommended ratio of 1:150.
- Highest Ratio: New Brunswick (CA) with a ratio of 609 students to 1 guidance counsellor.

This range demonstrates the diversity in resource allocation and approaches to career guidance provision among the countries included in the comparison. The American School Counsellors Association recommends that “schools strive to maintain a ratio of no more than 250 students per counsellor” (p.2). Meyer and Bell (2023) build on these findings and report “the modal ratio is a 300:1 ratio, though states set target counsellor caseloads from 250 students to 500 students per counsellor.” The DfE Careers Service current ratio is 300 Year 12 pupils per full-time equivalent (FTE) Careers Adviser (CA), based on a Year12 cohort of 25,556 and 74.72 FTE CA staff resource. This allocation does not include services provided to other school pupil year groups and/or work with other clients – e.g. adults – *Refer to Table 2 in the main report.*

Professional qualifications, learning and development

The role of career advisers/guidance counsellors is paramount in assisting individuals in making informed decisions about their education, training, and other pathways. It is imperative to equip these professionals (and colleagues working alongside them in allied fields) with the tools and expertise needed to address the diverse needs of individuals to foster resilience in the face of uncertainty. By investing in the professional development of careers advisers/guidance counsellors, societies can better support individuals in achieving their aspirations and navigating the ever-changing landscape of learning and work.

Governments either legally require that careers professionals in schools have a minimum level of training (e.g., Austria, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, New Brunswick, Canada, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland) or strongly recommend it (e.g. England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland). Career guidance training for guidance work in schools ranges from Bachelor’s Degree to Masters’ level. The Trainee Careers Adviser pathway introduced by the Careers Service is an innovative solution aimed at boosting recruitment and retention in the field. This demonstrates a proactive approach by the Careers Service to address workforce challenges and further improve the design and delivery of career guidance provision – *Refer to Table 3 in the main report.*

Aim 2: Increasing organisational knowledge and dialogue with stakeholders on all-age careers support and effective labour market and skills strategies

Reducing NEETs

Every country has the goal of reducing youth and adults not in education, employment and/or training (NEET) high in their agenda. In communities and online a wide range of initiatives are unfolding with career guidance experts working with vulnerable young people. Some specific target group examples include girls and women, those young people with special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, children of armed forces personnel and veterans, youth offenders, Roma travellers, refugees, unaccompanied asylum seekers, home educated or more generically those NEET. The DfE Careers Service stands out for providing a comprehensive range of careers guidance activities to vulnerable young people and adults not in education, employment, or training (NEET), alongside other countries in the study. It considers up to date information from companies and other employers to be critical in careers guidance. The Careers Occupational Information Unit (COIU) actively liaises with key sectors to scope developments in order to inform careers guidance. High quality publications are made available to school pupils, careers teachers, careers advisers and adult career-changers – *Refer to Table 4 in the main report.*

Adults in and outside of the workplace

For adults in and outside of the workplace, governments in countries such as Switzerland, Wales and England, have invested in mid-life career review initiatives. In Sweden, collaborative arrangements are in place involving the individual, the trade union and the employer to incentivise upskilling and reskilling on a lifelong basis. Belgium (Flanders) has a well-established voucher system implemented by the Public Employment Service (VAB). The DfE Careers Service works closely with the Department for Communities to offer career guidance to those facing redundancy or unemployment etc. – *Refer to Table 5 in the main report.*

Multi-agency partnerships

There are strong advantages to having a national careers service such as scalability, cost-effectiveness, consistency, and centralised expertise and resources. However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of such a service depends on its design, implementation, and its ability to strike a balance between centralised oversight, delivery, and local adaptability. Nearly all countries have hybrid models that involve collaboration between a national service (e.g., careers service/public employment service, schools, municipalities, industry, and local/regional labour market partnerships to maximise mutual benefits.

Multi-agency partnerships such as one-shop centres involving careers professionals working closely with health, social, psychological, and youth work sectors are prevalent in Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, and Finland. In some cases, services are designed for people of all ages or for specific groups such as young people up to the age of 30 or adults over 19 e.g. Norway. Careers Centres in Austria and Switzerland are places where young people and parents expect to attend to orientate themselves to the service offer, supported by school teachers. Estonia has openly an Interactive Careers Centre for innovation. The Careers Service in Northern Ireland has formal partnership agreements with labour market and community support agencies – *Refer to Table 6 in the main report.*

Aim 3: Informing career guidance policies and practices feeding into forward planning

The issue of career guidance policy in Northern Ireland involves many differing stakeholders such as central government (Stormont Parliament), the DfE, Department for Communities, the Department of Education, the Education Authority, local and district authorities, City Deals, Local Labour Market Partnerships, schools, colleges, universities, private and third sector bodies, and industry. Northern Ireland has a unique opportunity to build on its many strengths within the career guidance system for future generations. Largely all the component parts of the system are in place and sit within central government control. With agreement at a strategic, political and policy level – career guidance can be best placed close to where people need it. Technology advancement findings highlight:

Career guidance tools

Career guidance tools encompass a rich spectrum of offerings, catering to various needs and preferences. In addition to examples used for identifying need, a diverse range of tools include virtual reality experiences and psychometric testing. Virtual reality initiatives feature mostly in European-funded or province specific initiatives. Both Finland and New Brunswick, Canada are using virtual reality to enhance students' exposure to work experience. AI tools to guide individuals with job applications are used in Austria and Norway. Job hunters toolkits and other tools are regularly embedded in government-funded national careers services. In Wales, Scotland and England gamification tools are used with children, young people and adults. Findings show there is scope for collaborative digital development work. Assessing the impact and effectiveness of each platform, tool or service requires a more dedicated examination in a separate study. The DfE Careers Service offers a suite of online career software tools to support clients of all ages. This includes diagnostic tests, personality quizzes and career lessons. An A-Z of Career sectors/jobs, and CV Builder are also provided. Careers advisers have recently piloted a toolkit of careers resources for use during client face to face interventions – *Refer to Table 7 in the main report.*

Digital national careers portals

Digital careers portals funded by government is common in all countries, with some longer established than others. Examples in Denmark, Ireland and Norway are noteworthy. New national careers platforms are being launched in Spring/Summer 2024, for example, in New Zealand and Scotland. There is a growing recognition that plug-in systems (pre-built solutions) combined with in-house development allow for quicker implementation. Interoperability is essential in creating a cohesive and integrated personalised user experience. Public, private and third sector partnerships are considered as potentially yielding higher benefits to keep pace with digital advancements. In some countries areas, such as Austria and Switzerland cantons each develop their own career guidance websites, therefore mechanisms to avoid duplication of effort and resources become essential. The DfE Careers Service maintains approximately 100 pages on the [NI Direct Careers - nidirect.gov.uk website](https://nidirect.gov.uk) Government public facing portal. Work is under way to develop a dedicated Careers Portal – *Refer to Table 8 in the main report.*

AI applications

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in a career guidance context has emerged in Austria, Belgium (Flanders), England, Finland, Ireland, Norway, and Scotland. Public sector organisations have this high on the agenda whilst adopting a cautious approach until the ethics and effects are better understood. The ODICY Digital Observatory on Digital Technologies in Career Guidance for Youth has over 40 career readiness case studies, including some innovative examples of AI services and tools. The Career Development Institute (CDI) in the UK published guidelines in AI and chatbots in careers (CDI, 2023). The DfE Careers Service has an interest in developments in this field. It actively partakes in a UK-wide careers policymakers AI forum. – Refer to Table 9 in the main report. There are numerous examples in the main report that highlight good and/or interesting careers policies and practices to inform and feed into forward planning. See also: Appendix 2 for detailed jurisdiction case studies and Appendix 3 Lifelong Guidance Strategic National Fora – Refer to Table 10.

Reflections

This report captures targeted and effective careers support initiatives adopted by the Careers Service², situated alongside small, high-income countries and the province of New Brunswick, Canada. The Careers Service has established strong foundations, and the service is focused on targeted support at key transition points and beyond in a lifelong guidance context.

Some selected examples of its good and interesting careers policies and practices

- a cadre of well-trained and professionally qualified Careers Advisers (CAs) with recruitment of Trainee CAs underway
- a Careers Occupational Information Unit (COIU) actively liaises with key sectors to scope developments in order to inform careers guidance. Online publications provide citizens with the latest information from important sectors including growth areas, career profiles, progression routes, and new or emerging opportunities. These publications are made available to school pupils, careers teachers, careers advisers and adult career-changers
- a series of careers management skills and CIAG quality-assured support services offered mainly (though not exclusively) to secondary schools, with service level agreements in place approved by headteachers/principals, including systems designed to identify those most at risk
- career guidance support for apprentices at the start and throughout their training, with CA support offered as part of the lifelong guidance approach.
- a growing number of interactive digital and hybrid approaches to careers service delivery. These are designed enhance the user's careers guidance experience and deliver better-targeted support for those clients with additional needs; and
- a focus on community partnerships (and new capital spend projects) designed to address the needs of young people and adults facing, or vulnerable to, social exclusion, including those with special education need (SEN) and/or disability.

The Careers Service 'blanket interviewing' approach during the Covid pandemic was highlighted by Cedefop (2022) as an exemplar providing 'a safety net' for all young people during the health crisis.

2 See also: The complementary report on ROI and ideas for future analysis, prepared by Dr Chris Percy, Senior Associate, March 2024.

The service, based on findings from this study, is leading the way in its approach to supporting young people joining government-funded apprenticeships. Even in countries with well-established apprenticeship training systems, career guidance is often overlooked as part of the learning lifelong experience. The emphasis on career guidance within apprenticeship training not only enhances career decision-making but can also contribute to reducing drop-out rates and supporting the overall wellbeing of young people, regardless of whether they are on apprenticeships or not.

Significant strides have been made focusing on supporting the learning of others through the production of labour market intelligence (LMI) resources via the COIU. A dedicated team is working on crucial elements within a potentially world-class national careers portal.

Some challenges

- The Careers Service is universal, but awareness, engagement, and uptake is not universal for both young people and adults
- Balancing services for young people and adults, particularly for those most in need
- Poorly connected careers dialogue shared in and across institutions on student journeys
- Supporting mid-life career reviews for adults in work
- Unclear roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the careers support eco-system
- Lack of a full-time university careers adviser training programme in Northern Ireland. This is an anomaly compared to other countries.
- Ageing workforce and the need for diverse role models.
- Strengthening capacity building through upskilling the education, training, and community development workforce.
- Need for better co-ordination of lifelong guidance policies between and across government departments.
- Limited domestic evidence base on the impact of specific interventions (e.g. lack of comparison group or quasi-experimental evaluations), hindering efforts to improve or prioritise services.

Future considerations

The Careers Service plays a pivotal role in expanding individuals' awareness of evolving workplace dynamics, fostering career management skills and decision-making abilities, supporting individuals to adeptly manage transitions, challenging gender stereotypes, contributing to the reduction of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rates and social inequalities. Theoretical work and longitudinal case study reviews have documented the likely value of career guidance to enhanced wellbeing. A separate report presents positive Return on Investment (ROI) evidence, shedding light on the cost-benefits and returns to the Treasury resulting from key aspects of the Careers Service's work in two beneficiary groups, students in school (Years 10-14) and unemployed adults, representing 86% and 3% of frontline delivery time respectively during the 2022/23 academic year. Finally, this paper serves the Department for the Economy Careers Service with its partners as a working document, aiding in the formulation of strategic plans and ongoing dialogue with Ministers, policymakers, and key stakeholders committed to building dynamic and sustainable career guidance support mechanisms for the people of Northern Ireland, both now and in the future. It may also provide useful insights that other countries can benefit from.

