

What is career development?

Career development is the lifelong process of managing progression in learning and work. The quality of this process significantly determines the nature and quality of individuals' lives: the kind of people they become, the sense of purpose they have, the income at their disposal. It also determines the social and economic contribution they make to the communities and societies of which they are part.

Why is career development becoming more important?

The traditional concept of 'career' was progression up an ordered hierarchy within an organisation or profession. The notion was that people 'chose' a career, which then unfolded in an orderly way. It was an elitist concept: some had a career; many only had a job; some did not even have that.

For some time now, however, this traditional concept has been fragmenting. The pace of change, driven by technology and globalisation, means that organisations are constantly exposed to change. They are therefore less willing to make long-term commitments to individuals; where they do, it is in exchange for flexibility about the roles and tasks the individuals will perform. Increasingly, therefore, security lies not in employment but in employability. Individuals who want to maintain their employability have to be willing to regularly learn new skills.

So careers are now increasingly seen not as being 'chosen' but as being constructed, through the series of choices about learning and work that people make throughout their lives. Career development in this sense need not be confined to the few: it can, and must, be made accessible to all.

Why does career development matter for public policy?

Career development is not only a private good, of value to individuals: it is also a public good, of value to the country as a whole. This is true in three respects.

First, it is important for effective learning. If individuals make decisions about what they are to learn in a well-informed and well-thought-through way, linked to their interests, their capacities and their aspirations, and informed realistically about the opportunities to which the learning can lead, then they are likely to be more successful learners, and the huge sums of public money invested in education and training systems are likely to yield much higher returns.

Second, it is important for an effective labour market. If people

find jobs and career paths which utilise their potential and meet their own goals, they are likely to be more motivated and therefore more productive, enhancing national prosperity.

Third, career development has an important contribution to make to social equity, supporting equal opportunities and promoting social inclusion. It can raise the aspirations of disadvantaged groups and give them access to opportunities that might otherwise have been denied to them.

What is the relationship of career development to lifelong learning?

Career development is crucial to the success of lifelong learning policies. Governments regularly state that such policies need to be significantly driven by individuals. The reason is simple: schooling can be designed as a system, but lifelong learning cannot. It needs to embrace many forms of learning, in many different settings. It is the individual who must provide the sense of impetus, of coherence and of continuity.

This places career development centre stage. It means that if, as many governments believe, lifelong learning is crucial to their country's economic competitiveness and social well-being, then their country's future is significantly dependent on the quality of the decisions and transitions made by individuals.

What support do individuals need to manage their career development?

If individuals are to manage their career development effectively, they need support, in three forms:

- Help in developing their career management skills.
- High-quality information on the opportunities open to them.
- Personal support in reviewing the options and converting information into personal action.

What are career management skills?

Career management skills include the skills of understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses, and needs and wants; of being able to identify relevant opportunities, and access information on them; of being able to take career-related decisions; and of being able to present oneself effectively in order to gain access to courses or jobs.

Recent OECD work on human capital¹ suggests that these career management skills may play an important role in

¹Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2002). Rethinking human capital. In Education Policy Analysis 2002, chapter 5. Paris: OECD.

economic growth. It points out that less than half of earnings variation in OECD countries can be accounted for by educational qualifications and readily measurable skills. It argues that a significant part of the remainder may be explained by people's ability to build, and to manage, their skills. These 'meta-skills' include career management skills.

What is the role of career information?

Good-quality career information is essential for good-quality career development. It needs to include information on education and training opportunities, on occupations and their characteristics, and on labour market supply and demand. It also needs to include information on the occupational implications of educational decisions, and on the learning pathways that lead to particular occupational destinations. In addition, it needs to include information on how these opportunities relate to the characteristics and preferences of individuals, so that individuals can identify opportunities appropriate to them. Information and communication technologies need to be harnessed creatively in order to improve the quality, interconnectedness and accessibility of such information.

What forms of personal support are needed?

Information is necessary for good-quality career development, but it is not sufficient. If individuals are to be able to find the information they need, to understand this information and relate it to their personal needs and circumstances, and then to convert it into personal action, many will need some form of personal support.

Some of this personal support can be provided by family and friends, or by teachers and tutors or managers and supervisors. But it is important that people also have access to individual advice and guidance, offered in a variety of locations by competent and accredited practitioners who are:

- Skilled in the professional techniques of career guidance.
- Knowledgeable about learning opportunities and labour markets.
- Impartial, and able in an untrammelled way to serve the individual's needs.

Such services may be provided on an individual or group basis; they may be face-to-face or at a distance (including helplines and web-based services).

What is career guidance?

Career guidance, as defined by OECD², covers services intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers. The services include career information (in print, ICT-based and other forms), assessment and self-assessment tools, counselling interviews, career education and career management programmes, taster programmes, work search programmes, and transition services. They therefore cover all three of the forms of support outlined above.

How can access to career guidance be provided?

The OECD Career Guidance Policy Review³ indicates that the development of career management skills is an important task for schools. It needs to be embedded in the curriculum in the form of career education programmes, with a strong experiential component (work experience etc.). Profiling and portfolio arrangements also have an important contribution make to this task.

International experience demonstrates, however, that guidance programmes provided totally by schools tend to be remote from the labour market and subordinated to personal and study guidance. The OECD review accordingly concludes that school guidance needs to be supported and supplemented by specialised external career guidance agencies that visit the school on a regular basis. Denmark, which traditionally has had an education-based guidance system, is currently setting up new external services in the light of this recommendation.

Beyond school, the OECD review indicates that a variety of services are needed: some targeted at particular groups; some offering more universal access. These include services in universities and colleges, in training and work-based learning institutions, in public employment services, in the voluntary/community sector, and in the private sector, plus services offered by employers. Some of these may be free to users; some may be on a charged basis. Attention is however needed to ensuring co-ordination so that these diverse services are well publicised, are quality-assured to robust standards, and are as seamless as possible from the viewpoint of the individual.

²Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004). Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap. Paris: OECD.

³Ibid.

What recognition are these issues receiving internationally?

The OECD Career Guidance Policy Review has both reflected and stimulated greater awareness among OECD countries of the policy significance of career development and career guidance services. A number of countries are introducing significant reforms in the light of this review and of parallel reviews undertaken by the European Commission and the World Bank (together, these reviews have covered 36 countries⁴).

The European Commission's Memorandum on Lifelong Learning⁵ identified information, advice and guidance as one of the key components of national strategies for the implementation of lifelong learning policies and a priority area for action at European and national levels. Under the Irish Presidency, the need for proactive guidance policies in the context of lifelong learning is to be the topic of a special meeting of EU Education Ministers in April 2004 and of a formal Resolution of the EU Council of Education Ministers.

Summary

- Career development matters, both for individuals and for the country as a whole.
- Career development needs to be at the heart of lifelong learning.
- Individuals need help to develop their career management skills. Schools have an important role to play in this respect.
- High-quality information is essential for effective career development, and needs to be supplemented by personal support.
- This personal support needs to include access to individual advice and guidance from qualified practitioners. This can be provided face-to-face or at a distance.
- The policy significance of career guidance is now receiving widespread recognition at international level.

⁴See Watts, A.G. & Sultana, R.G. (2003). Career Guidance Policies in 36 Countries: Contrasts and Common Themes. Thessaloniki: CEDEFOP.

⁵European Commission (2000). Memorandum on Lifelong Learning. Brussels: EC

Why Career Development Matters

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