

# Skills, growth and the role of career development: Report from NICEC's 50th anniversary event

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## Abstract

This article summarises an event which celebrated NICEC's 50th anniversary and set the context for future discussions about career development policy. Speakers from various policy contexts discussed skills, employment and workforce development strategies and explored the challenges and opportunities for providing career support services.

**Key words:** career development, celebration, NICEC, skills, work

In September 2025 NICEC held a one-day event entitled *Skills and growth: The role of career development work*. The event celebrated NICEC's 50th anniversary and set the context for forthcoming NICEC discussions around the future of career development.

The audience was addressed by John Hall (West Midlands Combined Authority), Stephen Isherwood (Institute of Student Employers), Claudia Jaksch (Policy Connect, a UK wide cross-party think tank), Sandra Orbine (Skills Development Scotland) and Chris Percy (Independent researcher). The discussion explored the current labour market and examined the challenges and opportunities for providing career support services. Participants emphasised the importance these services have in addressing broader societal issues and concluded that there was a need for better communication of career development's value to policymakers and employers.

## Speaker contributions

John Hall discussed the *West Midlands Growth Plan* and noted the need for integrated skills and employment support and career development provision. He argued that a robust all-age careers strategy is critical to achieving economic growth objectives. He described career development services as the glue which holds the skills and employment strategy together and would ensure that every young person has access to employment and skills support.

Stephen Isherwood highlighted the pressures that are shaping employment for graduates and others in early career. He stressed the importance of demographic changes, with the population of the UK getting older, living longer and the retirement and pension age is going up. There are fewer people aged 15 to 19 now in the UK than there are aged 55 to 59 leading to a change in the shape of the labour market. Employers are reflecting on these longer-term structural issues in the economy and society and are rethinking talent strategies accordingly. Inevitably this means that careers education must evolve to reflect the changing nature of work and broaden access to opportunity.

Claudia Jaksch highlighted the challenges young people face in accessing career development services and emphasised the need for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to career development. *Policy Connect* are currently working on a UK wide research inquiry entitled *Learning or earning: A new agenda for youth NEET reduction*. The inquiry examines policies and strategies from across the UK including Scotland's *Developing the young workforce* strategy and the *Young person's guarantee*, Wales' *Youth engagement and progression framework* and *Jobs Growth Wales+*, and labour-market interventions in Northern Ireland. She asked how all of this activity can be used to inform the development of UK policy in ways that support investment in skills and training and ensure access to career development services.

Sandra Orbine from *Skills Development Scotland* shared Scotland's approach to career development. She noted the important role of career development services in addressing issues of social mobility. She argued that career development remains central to Scotland's policy for growing an inclusive workforce.

Chris Percy presented an analysis of the impact of career development interventions. His analysis of the data demonstrates that the benefits associated with careers interventions increase as the volume of interventions grow. Exposure to multiple career options helps young people navigate a vast job landscape and the repetition of this exposure, when paired with varied delivery (e.g., different speakers and formats) increases the impact that interventions have. As career conversations become more frequent in classes, among peers, and in activities, they normalise and reinforce career exploration improving the outcomes for young people. Chris Percy reflected that AI tools such as chatbots may offer scalable ways to enhance access to career development and therefore contribute to improved outcomes.

## Discussion

Following the contribution of the speakers, the discussion explored how to better communicate the value of career development services to policymakers and employers. Participants argued that a more strategic approach to career development which could demonstrate clear returns on investment was needed. Features of a more strategic approach should include:

- the adoption of long-term strategy and funding approaches, rather than a series of short term initiatives and projects;
- a focus on helping people to find meaningful and good work;
- a recognition of the importance of geography and an approach to localising service provision;

- the provision of strong services for young people which are capable of engaging them;
- the provision of career development support for those in mid- and later-life; and
- exploration of the role that AI can play in the delivery of career development services.

The event explored the role that career development services have in addressing the diverse skills needs of the UK. There was strong agreement that such services were critical in meeting a range of societal challenges and that there is clear evidence of the wider impacts of career development. Participants discussed the need to improve career guidance and increase public awareness of its value, emphasising the role of career development as a connective tissue in the education and employment system.

