

The Careers Profession Task Force: Vice Chair's perspective

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The article gives an account of the Careers Profession Task Force, from the perspective of its Vice Chair, and considers its mission, methods, processes and challenges. This independent group was asked firstly; to articulate the vision for high quality careers provision, and secondly; to advise the government on what actions would be needed to equip careers professionals to deliver high quality services. In particular the group was asked to consider whether careers professionals should be required to hold a specialist qualification in careers, and whether there is a need for a professional specialism in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM). The Task Force was convened by the Labour administration, but reported to the coalition government, formed of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. All fourteen of the formal recommendations are presented. The article concludes that with the work of the taskforce now completed, the challenge for career professionals gathers apace.

Introduction

This article presents an insider's view of the independent Task Force on the Careers Profession (TFCP). Although it is a personal perspective, the courtesy and discipline of collective responsibility are maintained; this is not an exposé of unseemly infighting, rather a partial account of one member's experience of taking part in an independent review.

The formal invitation to be vice-chair of the Task Force on the Careers Profession (TFCP) came from the Labour member of parliament (MP) Mr Iain Wright, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for 14-19 Reform and Apprenticeships. Several months later, the formal letter thanking me for my input into the task force and its report came from the Conservative

MP Mr John Hayes, Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning in the coalition government (formed of the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrat party). If a week is a long time in politics, the half year in which the TFCP deliberated was an aeon. The political and economic landscape and its impact on public services (including the provision of career guidance) changed beyond recognition, and not, on closer consideration, for the better. This article confines itself to the workings of the TFCP and considers, in order, its mission, methods and processes. It presents all fourteen recommendations and touches on the challenges the task force worked through. It concludes with the author's retrospective of the process.

The Mission

Impetus

The impetus for the task force can be traced to the Skills Commission which published (The Skills Commission, 2009) a report on its inquiry into the provision of careers education and guidance. It expressed strong reservations about the training for career guidance professionals; training both on the job and in higher education institutions, career professionals delivering guidance and those working in schools with responsibility for careers education and career learning. It questioned whether training was fit for purpose in the current climate, suggesting that present provision would not equip the career workforce to help their clients deal with an increasingly complex world. In response, the then Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, 2009) set out a range of policy commitments. Key among these was the crucial role afforded to effective careers education and guidance to promote social mobility through raising aspirations and achievements

(The Cabinet Office, 2009). As part of its promise to enhance the quality of careers education, information, advice and guidance (CE/IAG), the DCSF pledged to create an independent task force on the careers profession.

Terms of reference

The detailed terms of reference were agreed by the membership within the earliest meetings, but the overall task entrusted to the group was to advise the government. It was asked to 'provide the vision for high-quality delivery of CE/IAG and make recommendations on the actions needed to ensure careers professionals in England have the knowledge and skills required to enable young people to make informed decisions...and...plan their own careers' (DfE, 2010:36). A number of specific objectives followed. These pivoted around high standards of professional training and subsequent practice, including the concern to 'attract entrants to the professional who are well-qualified, from a variety of backgrounds and who reflect the make-up of the working population' and the need to 'strengthen the integrated working of careers professionals with other members of the youth and adult workforce' (ibid). In addition, the task force had to answer two questions. Firstly, if they don't do so already, should all career professionals hold a specialist qualification? And secondly, whether professional careers advisers should be offered continuous professional development as a specialist for Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM).

Methods and processes

Gathering evidence and becoming informed

Members of the task force were appointed to 'bring a range of relevant experience and interests' (DfE, 2010:2), but the wide reach of the careers professional workforce issue made for a sizeable group of seventeen. The task force met regularly for seven months; whole group meetings considered findings and evidence, considered arguments presented and, crucially, sought to arrive at an agreed position which everyone in the group could adhere to. Experts outside of the task force were invited to present their perspective and any relevant evidence. For example

the chief executive of the science council briefed the group on the STEM agenda, sharing research undertaken on career thinking and career progression within STEM sectors. An open call for evidence reaped rich findings, which were formally received. Links were maintained with parallel groups whose work could inform the task force: these included the Education and Employers Task Force and the Children's Workforce Development Council/Lifelong Learning UK joint review of skills requirements for careers professionals. Task force members consulted with their own networks, formally so if they represented a member organisation e.g. the Institute of Career Guidance or the Association of Careers Education and Guidance. The expertise within the group was not lost, and several members were invited to submit working papers or to present in person to the whole task force. The secretariat, comprised of civil servants in the department, kept us informed of pertinent policy developments: no mean undertaking given the churn of a general election and the subsequent formation of a coalition government.

Organising the work plan: four theme groups

The task force tackled their work plan by pursuing four themes, namely: recruitment; workforce development; standards/inspection and linkages to the wider workforce. Each theme group was led by a task force member, with support provided by a member of the secretariat. The chair, Dame Ruth Silver, introduced the intriguing concept of a 'stalker' – someone who, during the course of the groups' deliberations, physically comes out of their designated group and goes into one of the others. The stalker role is akin to the critical friend in that she is permitted to ask questions and to challenge assumptions, thereby inhibiting the creep of group-think. However, the stalker's crucial brief was actively to seek out and bring back to their 'home' group any intelligence that would illuminate their own investigation. This approach afforded two benefits: it enhanced the work of each theme group, and forged connections between the parallel lines of inquiry. The four strand leaders had to ensure that work was done in between the whole group meetings; as these were fortnightly, the pace of work was not insignificant.

Refining the work plan: four sub-groups

In the best traditions of ‘real world’ research, no sooner was one summit conquered than another mountain was thus revealed. So, once the theme groups had started performing and reporting, there was a sifting of outstanding issues, and four new groupings were proposed. Not only did each group have a new brief, each group was re-constituted in a new formation of members. Although these were allocated, individuals were reassured that they could move to another group and some people did indeed do this, homing in on the issue they felt they could make the greatest contribution to. This was to ensure that the focus was firmly on what most needed doing. The issues tackled by the new sub groups were: what it means to be a professional; continuing professional development; what are the boundaries of the careers profession and excellent careers guidance. For these sub groups, the brief was to think the unthinkable, and not to let reality hamper vision. The sense was that the civil service would do that job for us; our task was to envisage, to dare to dream. But we were also reminded of our collective charge to advise the government; and the need to distill our thinking into concrete proposals, which transmuted into the fourteen recommendations.

Recommendations

The full set of recommendations is presented below (DfE, 2010: 3ff). It is striking that the task force entrusts the careers profession with much of the responsibility for change. This is entirely in keeping with core principles of professionalism, including autonomous action and the concomitant responsibility. It also challenges the professionals involved to shape their destiny: to forge a stronger profession rather than responding to government demands for more professional practice. Clearly, for these recommendations to secure greater recognition of professional work by careers practitioners and educators alike, key stakeholder must be onside. This would include schools and colleges, employers and providers of work based learning. Government too can help to strengthen the profession, to realize their ambition for an effective career workforce.

Recommendation 1: The Task Force is persuaded of the importance of the partnership model, and recommends that Government should seek to maintain and strengthen this model as it develops its future vision for careers education and guidance.

Recommendation 2: The Task Force welcomes the action recently taken by the main careers professional associations to establish an overarching group for the membership bodies, the Careers Profession Alliance, as a single authoritative voice, and recommends that Government should demonstrate its active support and encouragement for this process.

Recommendation 3: The Task Force recommends that the Careers Profession Alliance should develop common professional standards and a common code of ethics for careers professionals, and that all organisations represented in the Alliance should expect their members to adhere to these standards.

Recommendation 4: The Task Force recommends that members of the careers profession should be expected to achieve a minimum level 6 (QCF) qualification before starting to practise, that the Careers Profession Alliance, working principally with Careers England (and involving the broader base of employers of careers professionals), should support such transition arrangements as are necessary for those individuals currently practising below this level, and that consideration should be given to raising the minimum level to level 7 within five years.

Recommendation 5: In support of a more diverse workforce, the Task Force recognises the importance of the work-based route into the profession (leading to a level 6 qualification) and recommends the development of a single career progression framework which is capable of incorporating the concepts of ‘Careers First’ and ‘Careers Last’.

Recommendation 6: The Task Force recommends that the organisations forming the Careers Profession Alliance should expect their members (whether individual members of the 4 careers profession or employers of careers professionals) to demonstrate a commitment to CPD [continuing professional development].

Recommendation 7: The Task Force recommends

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that initial training and CPD should include a focus on labour market information (LMI), information and communications technology (ICT), and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), all of which are crucial to all members of the careers profession in delivering high-quality career guidance; and that, through CPD, there should be opportunities for further development of 'specialisms', leading towards the concept of an Advanced Careers Practitioner.

Recommendation 8: The Task Force recommends that the organisations in the Careers Profession Alliance should consider requiring their members to self-declare the nature and amount of CPD they have undertaken each year, with a random sample being required to provide evidence to assure quality.

Recommendation 9: The Task Force recommends that both Careers Advisers and Careers Educators, where they consider themselves to be careers professionals, must uphold the professional standards and meet other expectations of the careers profession.

Recommendation 10: The Task Force recommends that an overarching national kite mark should be established to validate the different CEIAG quality awards for schools, colleges and work-based learning providers.

Recommendation 11: The Task Force recommends that any organisation that is making arrangements for the provision of career guidance to young people should ensure that the provider meets a relevant, nationally approved quality standard, and that Government should support the establishment of such a standard.

Recommendation 12: The Task Force recommends that the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, the Training and Development Agency for Schools and the Learning and Skills Improvement Service, working with Ofsted, the Careers Profession Alliance and Careers England (and involving the broader base of employers of careers professionals), should help schools, colleges and work-based learning providers to learn from and share examples of good practice.

Recommendation 13: The Task Force recommends

that Ofsted should carry out a thematic review of CEIAG for young people, in a variety of contexts, to help identify excellent CEIAG provision and to establish a baseline for future development; and should carry out a further such review within three years to evaluate the progress that has been made.

Recommendation 14: The Task Force recommends that Government should assure itself that the careers profession is rising to the challenge of implementing the Task Force's recommendations by commissioning reports on progress in March 2011 and March 2012. (DfE, 2010: 3ff)

Retrospective

Complexity and boundaries

At one of the earliest meetings, possibly the very first navigation meeting, the chair asked us to delineate the boundaries of the career guidance and education workforce. This proved absurdly taxing, and demanded return and review before a consensus could be reached. The landscape is really is very complex: it runs along a spectrum of provision from youth to any age, by way of targeted groups needing particular attention; it includes people in education (secondary, further, vocational, professional and higher) and training (off the job and on the job) and those not in education or training with provision ranging from formal publically funded services to informal grassroots activities either of which may experience management by target or by self-regulation.

More than once, our chair depicted the career domain as tentacular i.e. having the nature of tentacles. This workforce, our workforce does indeed have a sprawling footprint, with various degrees of occupational identity and commitment. Those within the community of practice have kept apace of changes in policy and, therefore, changes in service provision; those looking in from outside can be forgiven for seeking to discern a unifying logic in our evolution.

Through argument to consensus

A prurient reader, eager to glean graphic accounts of dissent from this insider perspective, would have been disappointed to note the opening promise of

adherence to collective responsibility. But only a naïve reader would believe consensus sprang, fully formed, from a group of people with relevant experience, interests – and opinions. As outlined earlier, the methods and processes ensured that opinion and conviction within the group was triangulated against research evidence and external expertise. It was, at times, hard – both to make arguments and to hear arguments. But the formation and re-formation of theme and sub groups ensured group energies were consistently channelled into the challenge we signed up for: to advise on the career profession work force.

Conclusion

The independent Task Force on the Careers Profession delivered. It respected its terms of reference whilst keenly attending to the possibility of policy change in the future, particularly with regard to all age provision. Given the change of government within the lifespan of the task force, this was prescient. The task force has challenged individuals to continue their professional development throughout their professional life. It has also challenged all the member organisations to find new ways of working together in order to strengthen the profession. Since reporting in October 2010 two things have happened. Firstly, the minister has accepted all of its recommendations, and secondly, public spending cuts have severely affected the provision of career guidance in England. The publication of the task force report, far from being the end of the story, may well mark its beginning.

References

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