

Briefing paper: Learning and skills for economic recovery, social cohesion and a more equal Britain (The Blunkett Report)

Implications for career development

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Summary

This paper analyses Lord Blunkett's report for the Labour Party, *Learning and skills for economic recovery, social cohesion and a more equal Britain* and particularly focuses on the vision that it sets out for the career development system. While the Blunkett Report has no formal power it provides a very strong indication of the direction that the Labour Party is likely to travel on education and skills as it develops its manifesto and seeks to become the government.

The Report argues that 'skills are the currency with which future opportunity will be bought by British companies' (p.8). An overhaul of the skills system is therefore viewed as central to Labour's economic policy which seeks to accelerate growth, improve the quality of jobs and the functioning of the labour market and manage the social and economic changes created by net-zero and the wider transformation in the nature of work.

To achieve this end the Report argues for reforms in six main areas and sets out 21 detailed recommendations.

The six areas of proposed reform to the skills system

National Skills Taskforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a new National Skills Taskforce made up of all stakeholders. Decentralise decision making on skills
Early years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refound Sure Start Improve funding and support for childcare
Primary and secondary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a National Curriculum Authority to reshape the curriculum Improve the teaching of digital skills Reform assessment to make it less reliant on exams Retain teachers Reform and embed the National Tutoring Programme
Career guidance and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overhaul the career guidance system for both young people and adults
Further and higher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen further education Reintroduce the Educational Maintenance Allowance
Adult and lifelong learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop Individual Learning Accounts Create a learning and skills passport Ensure that all public procurement has a clause on the upskilling of workers Transform the Apprenticeship Levy into an Apprenticeship and Learning Levy Support SMEs to engage with apprenticeships Create a right to retrain Improve the Access to Work scheme for people with disabilities Introduce a passport for disabled people to help link up support throughout life Establish a National Occupational health scheme

With respect to the career development system the report makes the following recommendations.

Schools	Adults
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools should follow the Gatsby Benchmarks, abide by the Baker Clause, and have a trained careers leader in place. • The Careers & Enterprise Company should continue to oversee the national roll out of this system and strengthen the local support and collaboration through the careers hubs. • Work experience, work-related learning and mentoring should be strengthened and supported by the careers hubs. • Parental engagement in career education should be encouraged. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployed and low paid adults should access career support through Jobcentre Plus • Working adults should access career support through the National Careers Service • The current system should be improved and strengthened.

Blunkett's Report contains a substantial section on career guidance and proposes a number of broader reforms that would create a fertile environment for career guidance. Despite this, there are six areas of constructive criticism that we would hope that the Labour Party would engage with as it takes this report forward.

There is no careers strategy. If career guidance is going to coalesce into a national system, there is a need to provide it with more governance and strategic direction.

There is no promise of funding. The omission of any discussion of funding leaves a lot of questions unanswered about both the current system and the desired future system.

There is no mention of the careers profession. There is a need to spell out the importance of having well qualified careers professionals across the lifecourse and to address the sector's issues with recruitment and retention.

One-to-one forms of professional career guidance are largely ignored. The opportunity for an individual to seek professional advice and guidance on their career and pathway choices should be at the centre of an effective career guidance system, but the report offers few insights about how this part of the system can be developed and delivered.

Career guidance in schools needs to continue to develop. The report underestimates the challenges of meeting the Gatsby Benchmarks. Schools need funding, particularly to meet Benchmark 8. A future government should also build on the Gatsby Benchmarks e.g. starting career education earlier.

There is a need for a stronger vision for adult guidance. It would be good to see an unambiguous statement that every citizen should have the right to access lifelong guidance.

Introduction

The Labour Party asked Lord Blunkett to undertake a review of education and skills policy to help it to develop policy before the next election.¹ Blunkett was the Secretary of Education and Employment during the Blair governments and remains an influential voice on educational issues within the Labour Party. He brought together Kevin Rowan (Head of Organisation, Services and Skills at the TUC), Praful Nargund (Entrepreneur, CEO and Local Counsellor), and Rachel Sandby-Thomas (University of Warwick, former senior civil servant and Head of the Institute for Apprenticeships) to work on this review. This group were collectively known as the Council of Skills Advisers and were charged with investigating the current education and skills system and making recommendations.

This Report has no formal power and it may not become Labour Party policy. However, the fact that the Report was commissioned by Sir Kier Starmer and conducted under Blunkett's authority with the help of the team of Bridget Phillipson (Labour's current Shadow Secretary for Education), suggests that it provides a very strong indication of the direction of travel in the Labour Party. The Report will be submitted to Labour's National Policy Forum, which will draw on it as it frames the next Labour manifesto.

This briefing will summarise the proposals made in the Report and particularly focus on its implications for career development. It will then conclude by setting out some critical commentary on the Report.

Key proposals

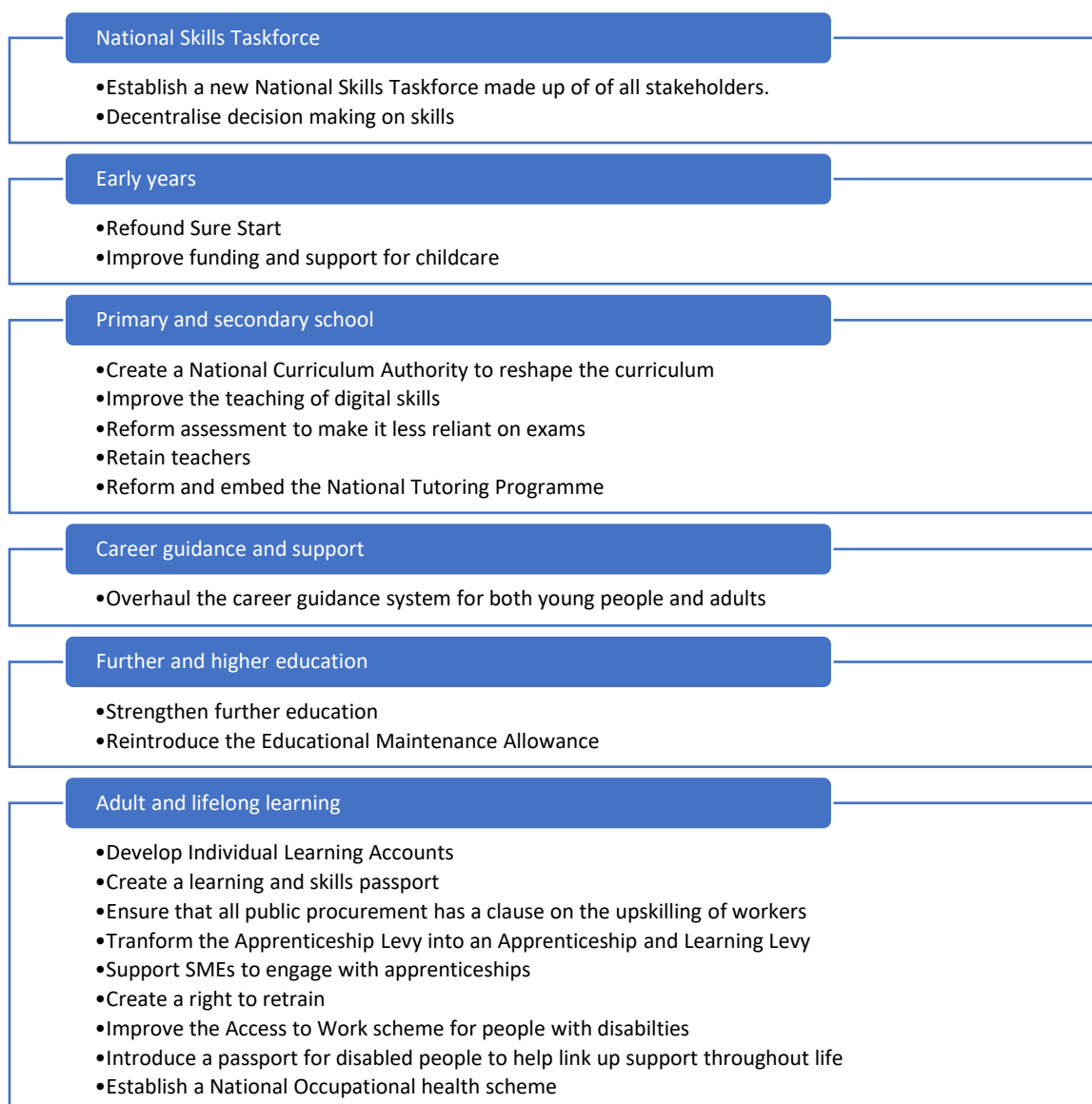
The Report argues that 'skills are the currency with which future opportunity will be bought by British companies' (p.8). An overhaul of the skills system is therefore viewed as central to Labour's economic policy which seeks to accelerate growth, improve the quality of jobs and the functioning of the labour market and manage the social and economic changes created by net-zero and the wider transformation of work.

Unsurprisingly the Report is critical of the current education and skills system following 12 years of Conservative Government. It argues that Britain is experiencing major skills challenges, regional disparities, and economic and social inequalities and that these problems have been exacerbated by declining investment in skills from both Government and employers.

To address this the Report creates a vision of 'cradle to grave... lifelong learning... where our young people, regardless of background, will be inspired to progress into the world of work, and where those already working can continue to develop and succeed.' (p.21).

To achieve this end the Report argues for reforms in six main areas and sets out 21 detailed recommendations.

The six areas of proposed reform to the skills system



The focus of this briefing is on the section of the Report which addressed ‘career guidance and support’ but it is also worth looking in a little more detail at each of the other sections first, as many of them have implications for careers professionals.

National Skills Taskforce

The heart of the Report’s recommendations is contained within the section on the ‘National Skills Taskforce’. This section critiques the lack of strategy and co-ordination in the existing skills system and argues that there is a need for an inter-departmental collaboration (picking up the perennial Labour Party theme of ‘joined up government’ⁱⁱ). One important example of this is the need to connect the discussions on skilled migration to wider discussions on the skills base of the country.

The Report also looks beyond government, arguing for the involvement of key stakeholders such as employers, trade unions, and academic institutions in the development and implementation of skills policy. These stakeholders would be recruited to a new body called ‘the National Skills Taskforce’.

The Report recommends that the Labour Party start the work on establishing such a body in advance of the next election.

The review also promises to clarify and simplify local decision making around skills and to devolve more power and funding to localities.

Early years

The development of childcare and early years education was an area that the previous Labour government was very active in.ⁱⁱⁱ It argues that strong childcare offers the double benefit of allowing parents to access work more easily and improving the behavioural, cognitive, social and educational development of children.^{iv} To this end the Report recommends the refoundation of the Sure Start Programme which was designed to support both parents and children. There should also be a review of existing funding to simplify entitlements for parents.

Primary and secondary school

The Report argues that the Conservative Government has narrowed education in a way that reduces its utility. It recommends an overhaul of the curriculum and a greater focus on oracy, work-relevant skills (as defined by the Skills Builder framework^v), cultural and creative subjects, citizenship and digital skills.

The Report also suggests broadening assessment practices beyond exams towards ‘multimodal assessments’ (p.39) and argues that teacher training and CPD should be overhauled to help teachers move away from ‘chalk and talk’ (p.40). This assertion has led to some advocates of more traditional knowledge-based approaches to education to argue that Blunkett is threatening a swing towards progressive pedagogy. But there is actually very little detail about what the pedagogic philosophy of a future Labour government should be.

There are also calls for more family learning and a renewed National Tutoring Programme. There is also a somewhat vague suggestion that schools should make more use of data on students’ destinations, although it is not clear how this would work, whether the data-gathering infrastructure should be invested in, or to what end such data could and should be used.

Further and higher education

Further and higher education get surprisingly little attention within the Report. The Report makes the specific recommendation to bring back the Education Maintenance Allowance for 16–19-year-olds in England (essentially a small weekly payment for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds who are staying in education or apprenticeships).^{vi} However most of the other suggestions essentially amount to a promise to run the post-secondary system better than the current government and to reduce fragmentation and confusion. Higher education is largely ignored, except for the suggestion that all HE (and some FE) providers should develop an enterprise and employability module in all courses.

Adult and lifelong learning

Finally, the Report makes several recommendations for the improvement of adult skills and lifelong learning. Many of these have similarities with the kind of proposals that have emerged from the current government.^{vii} A cross-party consensus has emerged that lifelong learning is important and that the current system is not fit for purpose. It is also worth noting that the government’s White Paper in this area, and the Blunkett Report, both include substantial sections on career guidance, acknowledging that career guidance should be at the heart of a lifelong learning system.

The creation of a new infrastructure for funding and managing lifelong learning through individual learning accounts and learning and skills passports is at the heart of the Blunkett Report's approach to lifelong learning. In essence this would be about trying to establish a tripartite basis for post-compulsory education funding in which individuals, employers and government all contribute towards costs.

For workers in employment there is an expectation that employment rights should include an entitlement to access funding for training and time off to train. This could be paid for by repurposing the existing Apprenticeship Levy to allow employers to use it more flexibly. This is accompanied by a range of other reforms to the Apprenticeship Levy to address a variety of criticisms about its inflexibility and bureaucracy. There is also a recommendation to refund UnionLearn to leverage the union movement to provide support and advice on retraining in unionised workplaces.^{viii} This would also be accompanied by a 'right to retrain' for lower skilled workers, who should be able to access training for free and receive benefits along similar lines to the Education Maintenance Allowance.

There is some detailed critique of the current government's approach to programmes for unemployed people. While the Report is short on details about what an alternative might look like it suggests an overhaul, with some suggestion that there might be more support for employers who take on new employees who are 'hard to place' (p.66). One proposal is to loosen up benefit conditions to allow people to study whilst continuing to receive benefits.

Finally, the Report makes several suggestions designed to help adults with disabilities transition from the education system, attach to the labour market and receive the support they need. Alongside this it suggests the creation of a National Occupational Health Programme.

Career guidance and support

The Blunkett Report makes detailed and informed proposals on the future of the 'career guidance and support' system.

Schools

In schools it endorses the fundamental elements of the existing system. Schools should follow the Gatsby Benchmarks, abide by the Baker Clause, and have a trained careers leader in place. The Careers & Enterprise Company should continue to oversee the national roll out of this system and strengthen the local support and collaboration through the careers hubs.

Work experience and other forms of work-related learning should be strengthened, including the provision of all students with a mentor from the world of post-secondary education or work. The Report views the careers hubs as a critical infrastructure for delivering the necessary brokerage between education and employers. Ensuring that 'each student is provided with access to a mentor or role model support' (p.9) is the main innovation offered in relation to careers provision in schools. However, such a promise is more easily made than delivered upon. Were this to be implemented it would require a very substantial strengthening of the Careers Hubs as the brokerage agent. In addition, the report could have said more about how the proposed mentoring could be integrated into the existing (Gatsby Benchmark) model in schools and in particular to more sharply distinguish between the role of the proposed mentor and that of a careers professional.

There is also an interest in expanding parental involvement in careers education, with the Gatsby Charitable Foundations' Talking Futures offering a model for this.^{ix} There is also an interest in providing more continuing professional development for teachers to help them deliver on their role as career informants and to ensure that they can embed career learning into their subject teaching.

Adults

For adults the Report suggests that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should have responsibility for the career development of unemployed and low paid adults through Jobcentre Plus and that the Department for Education, through the National Careers Service, should focus on the career development of working people. However, there is also a statement that ‘Labour should develop a high-quality national all-age careers and IAG service, available in partnership with Job Centre Plus, that provides all young people and adults with opportunities for face-to-face contact with qualified guidance professionals as well as access to online resources.’ (p.49). Which seems to point in the direction of a more systemic overhaul of adult career guidance.

The report also contains several interesting suggestions around the partnership between the National Careers Service and further education colleges, the development of a national mentoring scheme for adults, and strengthening the robustness of the quality assurance of public guidance providers. Very little detail is given about these ideas and it is not clear what the critique of the current quality assurance system is (which for National Careers Service providers includes the requirement to engage with matrix^x, Merlin^{xi} and Ofsted^{xii} making it difficult to sustain a criticism about a lack of rigour).

There is also an important, albeit tentative, suggestion around the development of a mid-life career review.

Consideration should be given to testing out a new entitlement to be offered a mid-life skills review for all workers, with an initial focus on those who are not offered annual reviews by their employer. (p.50).

Given the extensive experiments that have already been conducted with the mid-life career review it is not clear why this needs to be so cautiously phrased.^{xiii} However, it does make an implicit case for a more universal conception of the value of career guidance.

Commentary

The Blunkett report has broadly been well received by the education and skills sector with many seeing it as offering several sensible suggestions to move the system forwards.^{xiv} However others have been more critical, arguing that Blunkett is too fixated with his own past ideas and that the Report lacks innovative thinking.^{xv} Inevitably such criticisms reflect the political position of those making them, reminding us again that we should be sceptical about any claims, such as those made in this Report, that education will ever be ‘free from Party Political interference’ (p.30).

Overall Blunkett has done a pretty good job at setting out a programme for education and skills around which it will be possible to build a consensus. But it is somewhat short on big picture vision. The 137 pages of the report are full of detailed proposal, but it is a bit more difficult to see how all of this coheres together into an exciting and mobilising vision that might engage both educational professionals and the wider population. And it does lean heavily on the policies of the last Labour government such as the Education Maintenance Allowance, Sure Start and Independent Learning Accounts.

The limited number of new ideas in the report perhaps speaks to the fact that it was written by a small group of Labour Party insiders. It might have benefitted from wider consultation with the education sector including people with career development expertise. Hopefully this consultation can still happen as the Labour Party moves to develop the National Skills Taskforce and write its manifesto.

For those of us who are primarily interested in career guidance the Report should be broadly welcomed. Not only does it contain a substantial section on career guidance, but the broader vision that it sets out for the education system could also create a fertile environment for career guidance. This is particularly the case in schools where the adoption of Skills Builder and the strengthening of citizenship education could both link positively with career education.

Similarly in higher education the suggestion that all courses should include an enterprise and employability module opens up space for career learning, albeit without many details about how institutions would be incentivised to engage with this. The value of career guidance is also evidenced in relation to the individual learning accounts which, were they to be implemented, would need to be accompanied by a guidance service which could help individuals to understand how to use them and to consider where the money held in their account could best be invested.

Despite this broad welcome there are six areas of constructive criticism that we would hope that the Labour Party would engage with as it takes this forward. These are as follows:

1. **There is no careers strategy.** While the paper does set out a framework for the development of strategy in the wider skills system, it does not include a strategy or approach to cross-sectoral governance for career guidance. Given its recommendations for an increase in devolution and the division of responsibility for career guidance for adults across DfE and DWP, this seems like a major omission. If career guidance is going to coalesce into a national system rather than a series of disconnected projects and activities, there is a need to provide it with more governance. One option would be for the National Skills Taskforce to appoint a sub-committee to develop a careers strategy and monitor its implementation. The report is also somewhat confusing on the question of whether an 'all-age careers and IAG service' is actually going to be developed, presumably uniting some of the existing institutions, or whether this would be delivered through partnerships between existing providers. It will be important to clarify this as Labour develops its manifesto.
2. **There is no promise of funding.** While the paper makes several large and small proposals in relation to the delivery of career guidance and related areas, it does not specifically address funding. While it is not reasonable to expect a fully costed proposal from this kind of report, the omission of any discussion of funding leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Some of the proposals could be quite costly and it is not always clear that this is fully understood. Furthermore, there is no engagement with existing funding issues such as the payment by results system in the National Careers Service, the lack of any funding for career guidance in schools and the general need to raise salaries as part of the professionalisation of the field. These are important issues that will need some attention as this moves forwards.
3. **There is no mention of the careers profession.** While the Report presents a range of useful ideas about how to create a high-quality career guidance system, it has little or nothing to say about who should be doing this work. It endorses the importance of training for careers leaders but ignores the issue of training and professionalism for the wider careers workforce. There is a need to spell out the importance of having well qualified careers professionals across the lifecourse and to address the issues that the sector is having with recruitment and retention.^{xvi} This particularly applies where the report discusses the DWP having responsibility for career guidance, as Job Centre Plus staff are not currently recruited with the qualifications to provide career guidance and the service is not subject to quality assurance by Ofsted or Matrix.
4. **One-to-one forms of professional career guidance are largely ignored.** The opportunity for an individual to seek professional advice and guidance on their career and pathway choices

should be at the centre of an effective career guidance system. At the moment there are huge problems in relation to access to careers professionals, the quality assurance and regulation of who is able to provide career guidance and the funding of such activity. Within schools, careers professionals can support individual career leaning and help students to integrate the learning that they do in school and when engaging with employers and other career informants. The Blunkett report misses most of these issues and offers few insights about how this part of the system can be delivered and developed. It would be useful to provide more clarity about whether the proposed all-age careers service would offer a universal entitlement to one-to-one guidance and whether it should also be involved in delivering career guidance in schools.

5. **Career guidance in schools needs to continue to develop.** A consensus has formed around the Gatsby Benchmarks and it is good that the Blunkett Report endorses this consensus and supports the other key elements of the current system such as careers leaders, the careers hubs and The Careers & Enterprise Company. However, at present the report underestimates the challenges of meeting the Gatsby Benchmarks. Schools desperately need funding to move things forwards, particularly in relation to Benchmark 8 which focuses on personal guidance. It would also be possible to build more actively on top of the Gatsby Benchmarks, for example by reinstating the statutory duties for career education and work-related learning and by advocating more strongly for careers education to start earlier in primary schools. The main new element that is introduced is the offer of a mentor for all students, which would be welcomed, but requires considerable resourcing as well as some more thought about how to integrate it with existing provision.
6. **There is a need for a stronger vision for adult guidance.** The Report includes useful ideas on improving adult career guidance, including investment in the National Careers Service, Union Learn and the midlife career review. But, it also contains some that would need further debate and discussion, notably the suggestion that people on Universal Credit would only be able to access career support through Jobcentre Plus, while others could access career guidance via the National Careers Service. Such a suggestion ignores the fact that Jobcentre Plus staff are not qualified to provide career guidance. Without a robust programme to upskill JCP workers, such a division could easily become a two-tier system with the unemployed relegated to lower quality services. More fundamentally it would be good to see a more unambiguous statement that every citizen should have the right to access lifelong guidance. The strengthening of the careers hubs for schools and young people begs the question as to whether these hubs could also have a utility for the general population and to link more clearly with the National Careers Service.

Final thoughts

Learning and skills for economic recovery, social cohesion and a more equal Britain is an important document which provides an excellent starting point for what education, skills and career guidance policy might look like under a Labour Government. There is much in it that career professionals should welcome.

If the current polls are to be believed, there is a very strong possibility of a Labour government within the next two years. The Blunkett Report is the basis of such a government's education policy, but at present it lacks detail and would benefit from further debate and development. However, if the Labour Party is willing to continue to consult on these ideas and to evolve them, there is a strong possibility that the career development system could be greatly strengthened under a Labour government.

Endnotes

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- ^{viii} UnionLearn, <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/>.
- ^{ix} Talking Futures, <https://www.talkingfutures.org.uk/>.
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- ^{xi} The Merlin Standard, <https://assessmentservices.com/merlin/>.
- ^{xii} Ofsted, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>.
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