

# IEP JOURNAL

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Latest research | Current policy priorities | Good operational practice  
Dialogue and debate from the employability sector

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# A note from the editor



Dr Jo Ingold FIEP  
Guest Editor

**W**elcome to Issue 5 of the IEP Journal. 2021 was a stellar year for the IEP and this issue is full of thought-provoking articles from contributors in the UK and Australia that I hope will stimulate your thinking and practice and push the frontiers of debates amongst employability professionals.

The theme of the issue is Continuous Improvement: Better Synergies Between Employability and Skills but the articles in this issue also cohere around themes of blending technology and human service delivery as well as collaboration and sharing of good practice.

Following her keynote at the second IEP Summit in London, **Professor Christina Beatty** puts the case for why place matters to the design and delivery of tailored employment services.

**Gary Workman** shares learning from the Group Training Model for apprenticeship delivery in Australia which is an effective and employer-led way of joining up employability and skills.

**David Barron MIEP** reflects on his experiences of working with Indigenous communities in Australia to suggest ways of joining up employability and skills to empower informed choices.

**Adam Davey MIEP** provides advice on how we can develop an integrated HR strategy that capitalises on and retains employability practitioner talent.

**Orla Baker and Emma Crichton FIEP** draw on the developments in commissioning of Australian employment services to suggest ways of attracting and developing talent to better service jobseekers and employers.

**Chris McMillan** talks about the importance of digital skills and points to examples of successful collaboration with employers to build digital capability.

**Christine Brown FIEP** reflects on the IEP Digital Technology Conference and suggests evidence-based methods for overcoming barriers to digital inclusion, with a call to us all to share our learning.

**Jeff Greenidge MIEP** argues that post-pandemic employability services need to be joined-up, collaborative as well as data-driven.

**Mark Cosens FIEP** emphasises the importance of collaboration at different levels of employability delivery and puts forward a novel model for Universal Credit.

Thank you to all our contributors to this issue. Please join in the debate on social media and by penning a Letter to the Editor for future issues of the journal.

Wishing you happy reading and a very happy, healthy and productive 2022!

# Levelling up: Why place as well as people matter for the design and delivery of employment support



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**Increasingly, the importance of personalised approaches to employment support has been recognised including: tailoring provision to meet individuals' needs; holistic approaches working in partnership with wider local services; and involving employers as well as potential employees. But to what extent does employment support also need to be tailored to the local labour market context?**

Given the unprecedented upheaval for the economy during the pandemic and the Government's focus on a *Levelling Up* agenda then perhaps now is the time to revisit the role of place as well as people in shaping future provision.

## The impact of the pandemic on the labour market

Often, it is engagement with the benefits system and Jobcentre Plus, rather than being unemployed per se, that triggers a referral to employment support provision. This article therefore aims to get beyond national Labour Force Survey (LFS) data by considering those within the benefits system and how this varies between different types of places.

The pandemic caused unprecedented shockwaves in the UK economy. A series of national lockdowns resulted in sharp downturns in GDP and recession. By the end of 2020, LFS unemployment<sup>1</sup> had risen by just over 400,000 to 1.7 million but this was one million lower than following the Financial Crisis of 2008/09.

This owes much to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) which supported 11.7 million jobs<sup>2</sup>. Under-recording of LFS unemployment during the pandemic was also recognised by ONS leading to adjustments in the data<sup>3</sup>. In addition, many people were not actively seeking work during the pandemic and so did not meet the LFS unemployment definition.

## Claimant unemployment

In contrast, claimant unemployment more than doubled from 1.26m February 2020 to 2.69m in August 2020. As restrictions were gradually lifted from March 2021 this fell steadily and was 610,000 lower (2.08m) in September 2021.

The claimant unemployment rate was consistently lower than the LFS rate before the pandemic as might be expected given there are always people who may be out-of-work but not eligible for unemployment-related benefits.

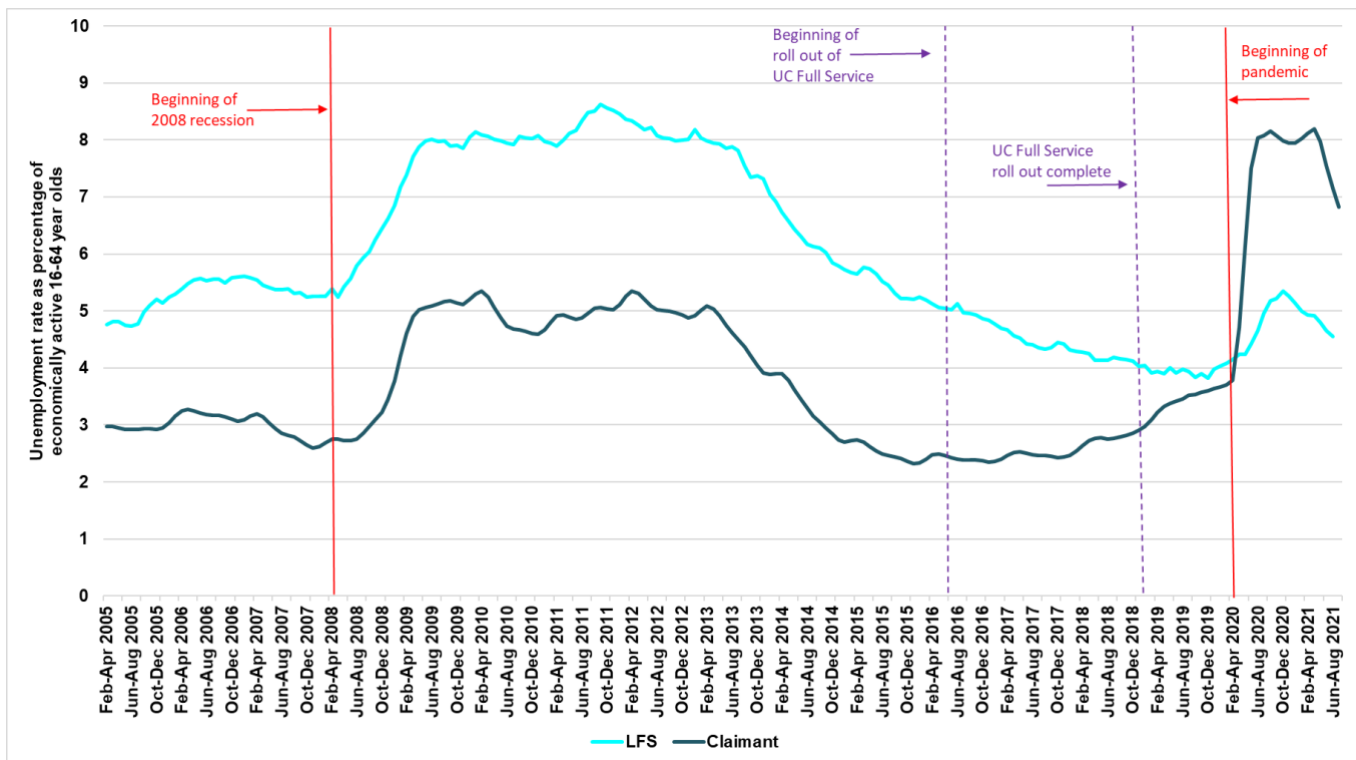
<sup>1</sup>LFS uses the International Labour Organisation (ILO) international definition of unemployment: being without a job, actively seeking work in the past four weeks and available to start work in the next two weeks; or are out of work, have found a job and are waiting to start it in the next two weeks.

<sup>2</sup> HMRC (2021) [Autumn Budget and Spending Review 2021: A Stronger Economy for the British People](#). London: HMRC. p19.

<sup>3</sup> ONS (2021) [Population of the UK by country of birth and nationality: 2020](#).

“Often, it is engagement with the benefits system and Jobcentre Plus, rather than being unemployed per se, that triggers a referral to employment support provision.”

Figure 1: Claimant and LFS unemployment rates, 2005-2021



Sources: ONS LFS; DWP.

The gap increased during the 2008/2009 recession, then narrowed as the economy improved and LFS unemployment fell alongside an increase in claimant count driven by more UC claimants being subject to conditionality as Universal Credit (UC) Full Service rolled out from May 2016-December 2018. The rates were almost on parity by February 2021 (3.7 versus 4.0 per cent). UC claimants are also required to demonstrate they are actively seeking for work which brings the claimant definition more in line with the LFS definition.

Figure 1 indicates a major disjuncture between LFS and claimant unemployment rates in the post-pandemic period. Claimant unemployment rose to 8.2 per cent before falling back to 6.8 per cent (2.22m) contrasting with the LFS which peaked at 5.3 per cent and is now at 4.5 per cent (1.48m). This suggests there are far more unemployed and in need of employment support than the LFS figures might indicate.

### Economic recovery

A sharp economic recovery followed the gradual easing of restrictions between March to July

<sup>4</sup> The timetable varied across UK nations.

<sup>5</sup> Nabarro, B. (2021) 'UK economic outlook: the future isn't what it used to be', in Emmerson, C., Johnson, P. and Zaranko, B. (eds.) *IFS Green Budget October 2021*. London: Institute of Fiscal Studies, pp46-117.

**“Record numbers of vacancies have been recorded as the economy springs into life again.”**

2021<sup>4</sup>. Claimant unemployment fell rapidly but is still a long way off pre-pandemic levels. The headline figures also mask the complexities of the current labour market situation:

- Institute of Fiscal Studies recently pointed out that the recovery is not complete and is *very uneven by sector*<sup>5</sup>;
- current data does not take account of the end of furlough – although the [ONS Business insights and impact on the UK economy: 4 November 2021](#) estimates 87 per cent of furloughed employees returned to work and only 3 per cent were made permanently redundant;
- we are yet to see if responses to the pandemic are semi-permanent rather than temporary including: the shift to home or

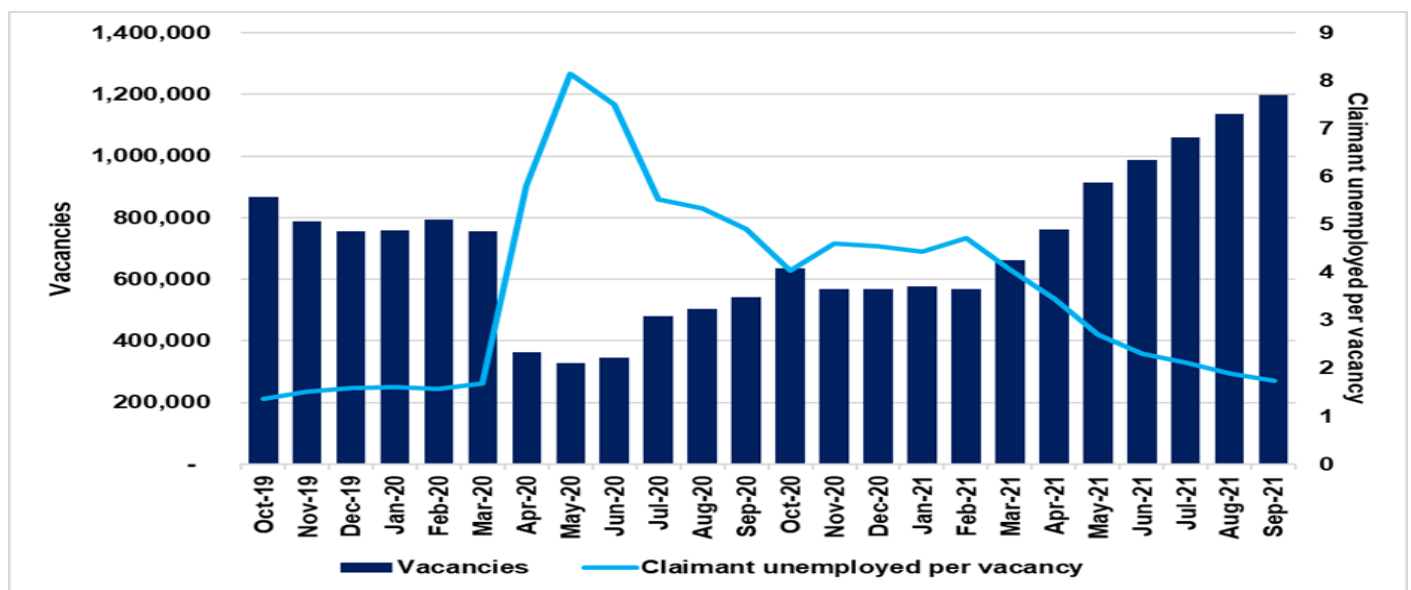
hybrid working; economic activity being displaced from city centres to areas of residence; and the decline of physical retail and rise of e-commerce intensifying a trend already underway;

- structural changes in the labour market by sector which lead to a mismatch in experience and skills of workers displaced relative to the jobs available;
- and these processes are very uneven across different types of places in different parts of the country.

**Vacancies and labour shortages – an opportunity for employment support?**

Record numbers of vacancies have been recorded as the economy springs into life again. Whilst CJRS was still in operation this caused some ‘stickiness’ in labour supply as fewer people looked for new work opportunities. Migrant labour supply was also curtailed by the simultaneous impact of BREXIT alongside some migrants deciding to return home due to the pandemic (although ONS substantially downgraded original

**Figure 2: Vacancies and claimant unemployment, 2005-2021**



Sources: ONS Vacancy Survey; DWP.

**“Older industrial Britain, seaside towns and former coalfield areas display far higher worklessness benefits claimant rates than London.”**

estimates). These factors have contributed to continual media headlines about shortages in labour, unfilled jobs and skills shortages.

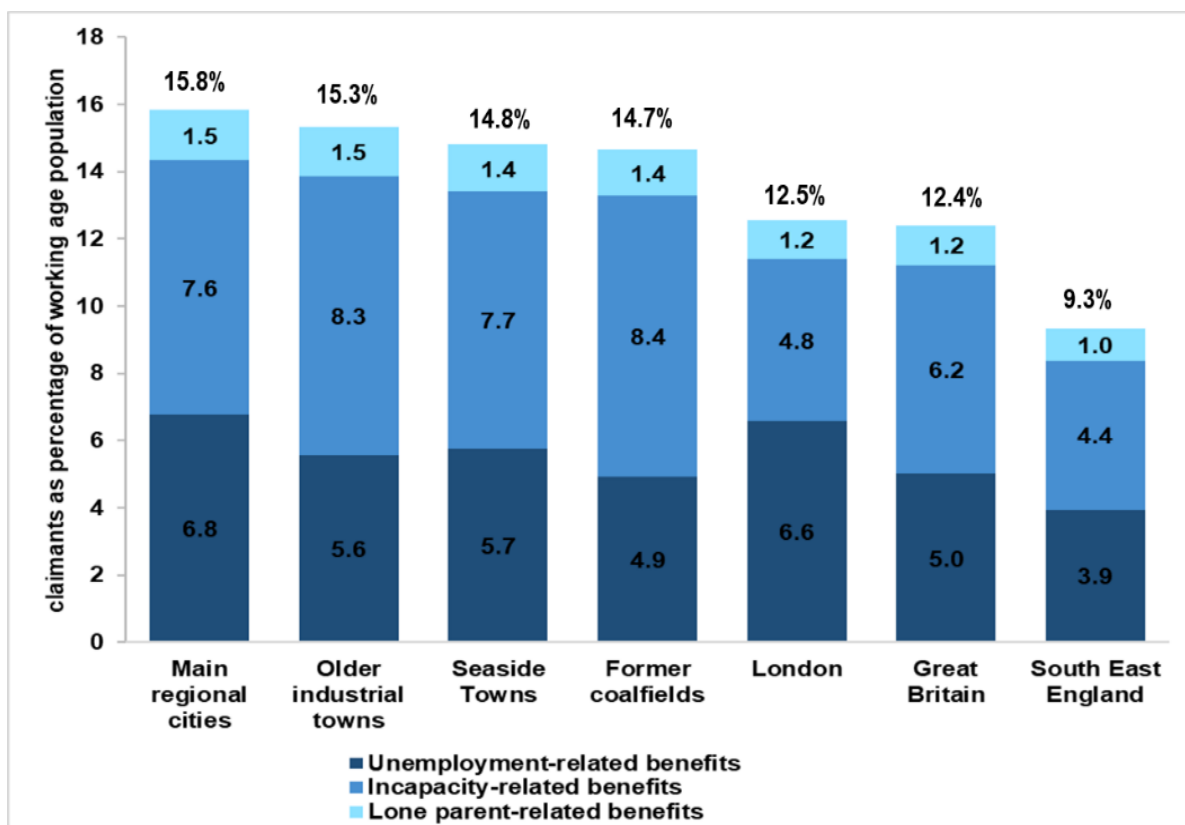
Figure 2 shows the substantial fall in vacancies as the pandemic took hold, rising vacancies as the restrictions were eased from March 2021, and a record 1.2 million vacancies in by September 2021. However, whilst the situation has improved greatly there are still more unemployment-related benefit claimants competing for every job available than

before the pandemic (1.7 compared to 1.4). The lack of local level vacancy data also means the extent to which there is a mismatch between the types of jobs available locally and how this relates to the available workforce within an area with requisite skills needed to fill these jobs is also unknown.

**By no means the same everywhere**

Figure 3 illustrates the working age out-of-work benefits claimant rates across different types of places<sup>6</sup> in Britain highlighting two key issues. First, older industrial Britain, seaside towns and former coalfield areas display far higher worklessness benefits claimant rates than London, which is on par with the national average, and the South East of England which has consistently had strong employment rates over time.

**Figure 3: Out-of-work benefits claimant rate by types of places, 16-64 year olds, September 2021**



Sources: ONS; DWP.

<sup>6</sup> Main regional cities=Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle, Sheffield, Leeds, Nottingham, Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow, Edinburgh; Older industrial towns=Sheffield Hallam definition based on 91 local authorities with substantial job losses in industry since 1980s; Seaside towns= 16 principal seaside towns around English coast where the resort makes up the bulk of the local authority; Former coalfields=Sheffield Hallam definition of all British coalfields based on LSOAs.

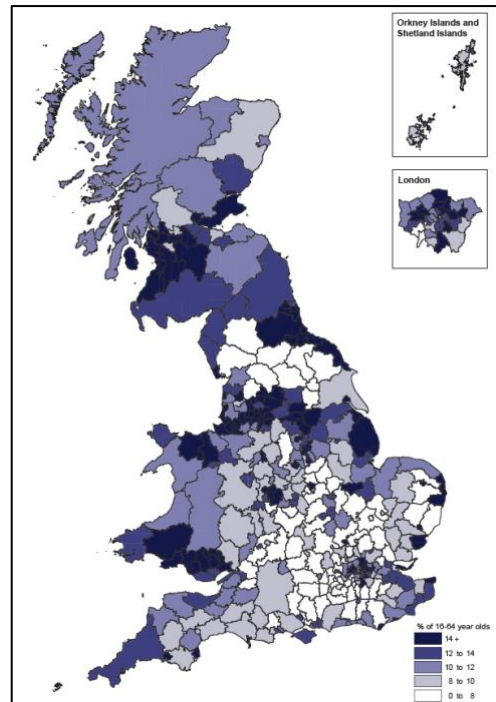
**“Those with health conditions who live in tighter labour markets with shortages in labour supply (e.g. South East of England) are more likely TO be in employment.”**

Second, unemployment-related benefits are only part of the picture. There are currently 2.5 million people with long-term health conditions or disabilities on incapacity-related benefits and this also varies by types of places.

Whilst incapacity-related benefits are a function of the underlying health of the working age population, which also varies by place, it is correlated with localities with weaker local economies. People with health conditions in these areas are more likely to fall out of work, find it difficult to get back into work, and be at the back of the queue of jobs compared to people without health conditions.

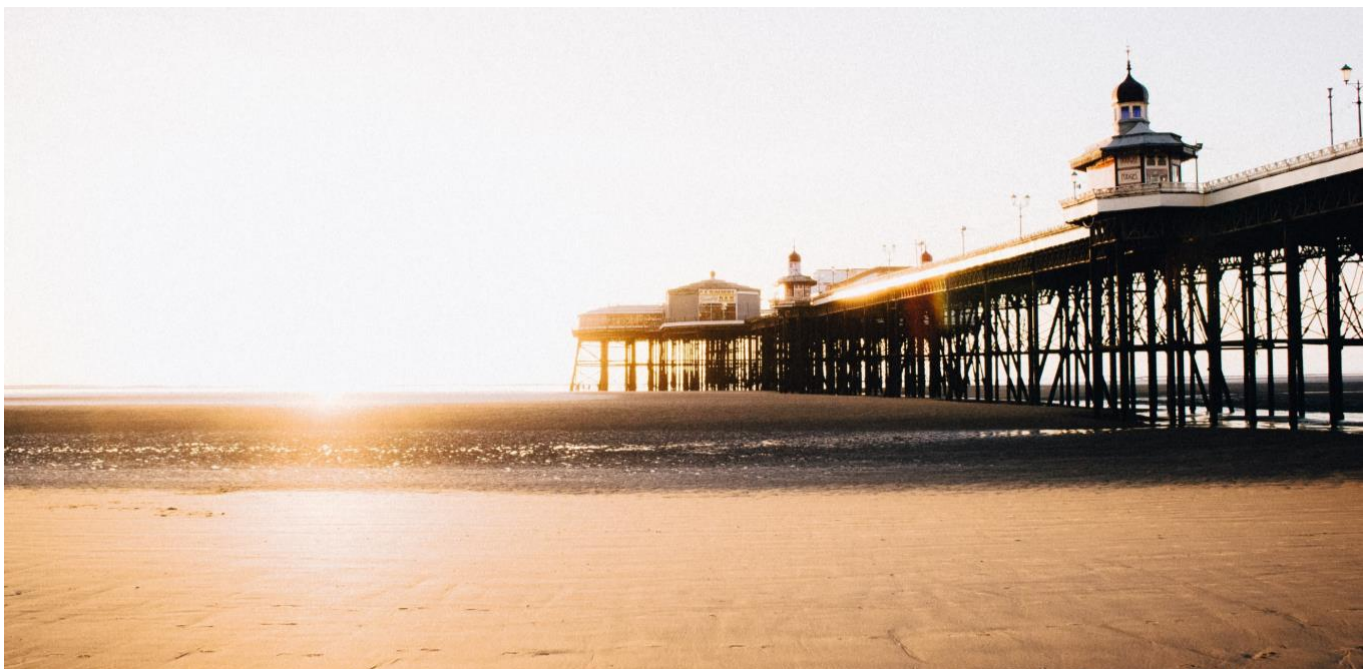
Those with health conditions who live in tighter labour markets with shortages in labour supply (e.g., South East of England) are more likely TO be in employment as employers are more amenable to retaining staff or offering opportunities to people with health conditions.

**Figure 4: Out-of-work benefits claimant rate, 16-64 year olds, September 2021**



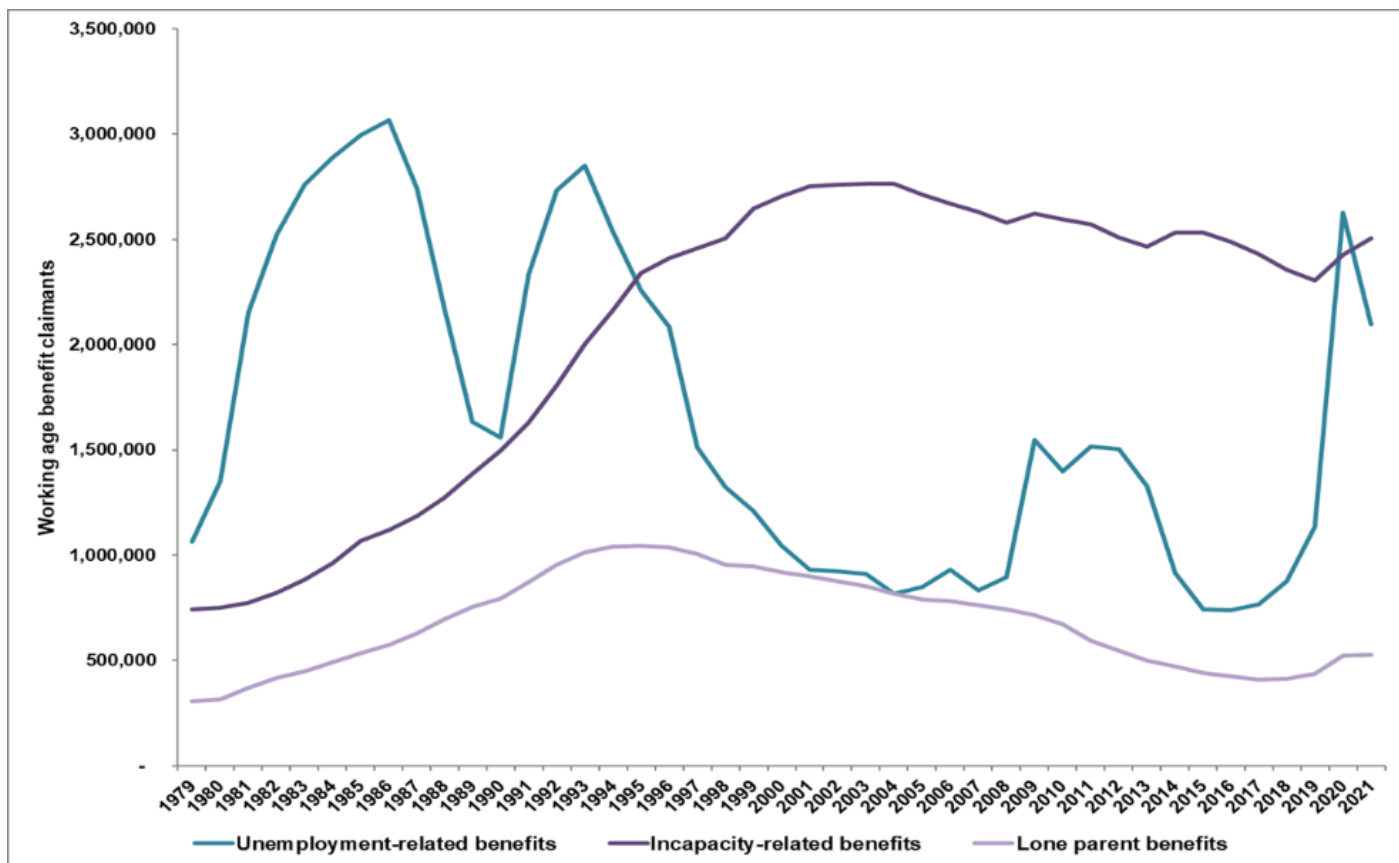
Source: DWP

Figure 4 indicates that when individual local authorities are considered the variation in out-of-work claimant rates is even more extreme: Blackpool (23.6), Middlesbrough (21.5), Knowsley (20.8) and Blaenau Gwent (20.5). These are around four times the rates seen in Hart and South Northamptonshire (both 5 per cent), Wokingham (5.3) and Guilford (5.7).



“There are still more unemployed claimants for every job available than before the pandemic.”

Figure 5: Great Britain out-of-work benefits claimants, 16-64 year olds, 1979-2021



The issue of large numbers of people out of the workforce and on incapacity related benefits is not a new one, although it has once again increased since the pandemic.

Figure 5 shows the increase in numbers is rooted right back in the 1980s and 1990s as the economy restructuring away from manufacturing and industry towards the service sector. The number of claimants has stayed persistently high even when through periods of economic growth or changes to the benefits system.

This contrasts with the number of claimants on unemployment-related benefits which is responsive to the economic cycle rising at times of recession and falling back in times of economic growth: over 3 million in the 80's recession; nearly 3 million in the 90's recession; only 1.5 million in the 2008 Financial Crisis but taking longer to downturn; and 2.7 million at the height of the pandemic even with CJRS.

<sup>7</sup> Beatty, C., Crisp, R. and Gore, T. (2020) Co-design in the WorkingWin programme: good practice and learning Co-design in the WorkingWin programme: good practice and learning. Sheffield: CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University.



**“Out-of-work benefits claimant rates differ substantially by place – a one size fits all approach is unlikely to be effective.”**



## Implications for employability support

The analysis presented here illustrates the importance of taking a holistic, long-term view of the labour market which gets beyond national headline figures. This demonstrates:

- There are still more unemployed claimants for every job available than before the pandemic.
- Those on unemployment-related benefits are only part of the picture and there are still large numbers of people detached from the labour market and on incapacity related-benefits.
- Out-of-work benefits claimant rates differ substantially by place – a one size fits all approach is unlikely to be effective.

The Levelling Up agenda may therefore provide a perfect opportunity to think once more about place as well as people in the design and delivery of employment support. This idea is not new schemes such as the Northern Way Worklessness Pilots or the more recent Health Led Employment Trials<sup>7</sup> but they have demonstrated the benefits of taking a tailored approach to local provision which is place specific, more holistic, involves partnership working, tackles health as well as employability, and also includes support for employers.

Even if employment support is designed specifically for areas with high claimant rates this still needs to be nuanced by the local labour market context. For example, considering the seasonality or precarious nature of tourism related employment

opportunities in a seaside town such as Blackpool may provide a model which is more replicable in a Great Yarmouth or Margate than in older industrial areas such as Merthyr Tydfil or Easington.

At the same time, some elements of provision which tackle health as well as employability may be replicable in both older industrial areas and seaside towns since both have large concentrations of incapacity-related benefit claimants. Inner city urban areas might display a completely different set of challenges, demographic characteristics and employment opportunities which need to be taken into consideration. All in all, employment support which takes into account local context as well as providing a personalised service to jobseekers and employers is more likely to achieve success.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Professor Christina Beatty | Professor of Applied Economic Geography | Centre of Regional Economic and Social Research | Sheffield Hallam University**

Professor Christina Beatty has 30 years' experience of undertaking applied policy research funded by national, regional and local government, charitable bodies and third sector organisations. Christina presented at this year's IEP Summit 2021. Her research focuses on the interaction of the welfare system and the labour market and how this varies across different types of places.

# What can employability professionals learn from the Australian Group Training Method?



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**A**n Australian-designed apprentice training and employment model developed in the 1980s and refined over the last decades could provide insights for improving other apprenticeship systems around the world.

In 2017, an OECD report 'Engaging Employers in Apprenticeship Opportunities: Making It Happen Locally' called out the Australian group training method as a case study for best-practice group training methods.

Similar to a labour hire agreement, a Group Training Organisation (GTO) is the employer and places apprentices with various host employers. These organisations are registered by State authorities and follow national standards and mainly focus as community based or industry specific not-for-profits.


## The Australian Context

The current GTO system was established in Australia in the 1980s with the goal to employ apprentices on behalf of small businesses that were either not able to offer the full range of skills needed to become a tradesperson, or not able to commit to taking on an apprentice for four years. They were originally used by leaders in the Automotive and Building sectors, then branched out into all other trades. The Apprentice Employment Network was established as the association for not-for-profit GTOs.

There are about 120 GTOs employing approximately 24,000 apprentices and trainees across Australia. These GTOs operate in every region and across all industries, with over 35,000 host employers participating. In some regions, GTO apprentices make up a substantial proportion of all apprentices employed. In the state of Victoria over 210,000 apprentices have been employed since the inception of GTOs in the region; GTO apprentices make up a substantial part of some industries. For example, GTO apprentices make up 14 percent of all Victorian agriculture apprentices, and 18 percent of all automotive apprentices.

All Australian GTOs are monitored for quality by a national system, National Standards for Group Training Organisations, which provides a formal framework for consistency and quality. The Standards were developed in 2002 and revised in 2017, and cover recruitment, employment and induction, monitoring and supporting apprentices and trainees to completion, and GTO Governance and Administration. We also have State or Territory Training Authorities (STAs), which are responsible for registering GTOs in their jurisdictions, and checking their compliance with the National Standards.

A key distinguishing feature of Australian GTOs is that they are the legal employer of



## **“GTOs act as the intermediary between learners and employers and provide many benefits to all stakeholder”**

apprentices and trainees, and thus take on the responsibilities that an employer normally would. In this sense, GTOs act as the intermediary between learners and employers and provide many benefits to all stakeholders. These benefits are the reason why GTOs have withstood the test of time in Australia as they service both the supply- and demand-sides.

### **The benefits of GTOs**

One of the main benefits that apprentices and trainees enjoy from GTOs is that they provide stable employment. GTOs match learners with an appropriate host employer and monitor the relationship. If the two parties have to part ways, the employee's salary is covered by the GTO, and the GTO works to find them a new workplace. Another benefit is that a learner can taste-test several trades and industries through rotations organised by the GTO.

If an apprentice or trainee goes it alone, without the support of a GTO, they can often feel uncomfortable navigating any problems that inevitably arise with their employer over the course of four years. This is one of the key reasons why learners don't complete their training. When employed by a GTO, they're paired with a Field Officer who helps them mediate any issues and provides them with support and invaluable wisdom. GTOs also provide enormous support by organising an apprentice's training, pay, safety equipment, paperwork, and administration.

The ways in which GTOs benefit businesses, especially small businesses, are numerous.

Businesses enjoy a hassle-free supply of apprentices and trainees and a decreased risk in the case that they can't take the apprentice on for the entire four years. Many small businesses are ill-equipped to understand, manage or resolve many of the issues that can occur with an apprenticeship placement, and this often leads to termination of employment. GTOs remedy this by providing a high level of support and streamlined administrative services.

For example, Workplace Health and Safety training and administration are made easy for both the employer and trainee/apprentice when working with a GTO. The GTO knows exactly what paperwork needs to be completed, easing headaches for business owners. GTOs have codified and detailed systems in place to combat bullying and to maintain other healthy industrial relations, human resources, and workforce planning and development. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) can be quickly and easily arranged when working with a GTO.

GTOs benefit governments as they help meet skill needs in areas where employment cycles or the size of employers make long-term employment difficult, rotating apprentices at risk of retrenchment with another host employer and ensuring future skills and regional employment can be addressed. GTOs are often made up of local experts who have a deep understanding of their communities, employers, industry needs, and the apprenticeship system.

Society in general benefits from the way in which GTOs provide successful employment outcomes for learners who need extra support through individual mentoring and pastoral care plans. These plans are tailored for indigenous apprentices, females in male-dominated trades, culturally and/or linguistically diverse learners, and people with disabilities. GTOs also help advocate for trainees and apprentices who have suffered from long-term unemployment, mental health issues, substance abuse, or domestic and family violence.

**“Young people have borne the brunt of the COVID pandemic in the UK, with workers aged 16-25 twice as likely to have lost their job compared to older workers.”**

## The UK context

Like in Australia, 60% of the UK workforce is employed by small employers. There are over 2 million small employers in England and from January 2020 they have had a choice in the way they engage with apprenticeships. With the goal of improving the quality of apprenticeships, the UK government introduced the Apprentice Intermediary Service. This is a centralised support service delivered by National Skills Academy for Rail (NSAR) in partnership with the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). The Apprentice Intermediary Service can now be accessed by businesses regardless of whether they pay into the Apprenticeship Levy or not.

In the UK many employers that have skill shortages are part of the Apprenticeship Levy system and can gain support from intermediaries to set up an apprenticeship scheme. Take, for example, NSAR, which has used a team of experts to create apprenticeship standards designed to be flexible and focused to address the current and future needs and challenges faced by the transport industry.

While it's great to see the UK government focusing on apprenticeships, since 2016 small and medium-sized enterprises have seen falls in the number of apprenticeship commencements (down by 51% and 54% respectively), while large enterprises saw a smaller decrease of 11%.

Adding to this, young people have [borne the brunt](#) of the COVID pandemic in the UK, with

workers aged 16 to 25 twice as likely to have lost their job compared to older workers (World Economic Forum, 2021). By the end of October, nearly 370,000 under-25s were on furlough. These people could greatly benefit from an apprenticeship or traineeship, and there's a clear demand for their work.

[Research](#) shows that in the coming decade, the UK will most likely experience a sort of industrial revolution, which will give UK manufacturers the opportunity to embrace Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies such as digitization, artificial intelligence, robotics, and additive manufacturing. As a result, the UK will see the creation of many new jobs not only in manufacturing and engineering, but also in public administration, defence, energy utilities, health and social work.

Where traditional apprenticeships sometimes fail learners and employers in terms of support, GTOs excel. Based on trends in employer demand for apprentices since 2012, researchers in the field argue that the traditional apprenticeship model is not universally highly valued by employers, and that employer support seems to be on the decline in many occupations. If so, the role of GTOs is likely to become more important for countries that want to produce a sufficient number of qualified workers. A good way, shown to be effective in the Australian context, to prepare and increase the number of workers in these industries is through high-quality GTO-based apprenticeships and traineeships.

The UK could look to the Australian model of group training organisations to prepare the workers of tomorrow. GTOs have succeeded in Australia thanks to the ongoing support they give to apprentices and businesses. The main benefits of GTOs are high retention rates, great outcomes for communities and government, and high satisfaction rates for all stakeholders. It would be beneficial for employability

**“Where traditional apprenticeships sometimes fail learners and employers in terms of support, GTOs excel”.**

professionals to have conversations about how this could be achieved, building on existing activities and networks.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Gary Workman | Executive Director | Apprenticeship Employment Network**

Gary Workman is the Executive Director of the Apprenticeship Employment Network, which represents not for profit group training organisations. Within Victoria, group training organisations employ over 7000 apprentices and trainees across all sectors of industry through a large network of host employers.

Within Australia, Group Training Organisations employ over 26,000 apprentices, and are a large employer in regional towns and supporting small employers with skill shortage trades and indigenous participation. Gary assumed the role in 2009 and leads AEN and its members

on public policy and research activities, including overseeing relationships with a wide range of industry and government stakeholders.

In 2018 AEN joined the Global Apprenticeship Network as the Australian network member – one of 18 countries. GAN brings organisations together to highlight best practice in youth employment through workplace training and career development.

Gary brings over 20 years’ experience in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector and has worked on numerous government and industry projects including the areas of workforce development, apprenticeships, OH&S and the environment.

He was a member of the Victorian Governments Apprenticeship Taskforce between 2016-2019 through the Victorian Skills Commission Office.


Gary is also an ambassador for the Bullyzero Australia Foundation which supports the awareness of workplace bullying and mental health issues.



# Going Beyond 'Closing the Gap'



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**In this article my aim is to provide insight into employability and skills in the context of my experience of working with Aboriginal communities on their journey towards parity and a better quality of life. I also reflect on what working with this amazing and incredibly resilient culture can teach us how to better support their communities towards inclusion and employment equality.**

'Closing the Gap' is the flagship phrase from the Australian Commonwealth Government used to describe its commitments and strategies towards equality for Aboriginal people. The concept was originally conceived in 2005 by the then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Professor Tom Calma AO. He convinced the government through the Social Justice Report 2005 that something had to be done about the terrible disparity of health and life expectancy within Aboriginal communities.<sup>1</sup>

While health and life expectancy were the main drivers in 2005, they still unfortunately remain relevant for Aboriginal communities today. Further indicators have also been added to the list of targeted outcomes, such as high child mortality, low levels of reading, writing and numeracy, low school attendance, high unemployment, poor quality early childhood education and low Year 12 attainment. These


reflect the deep intergenerational trauma and inequalities that are a consequence of colonisation, the ongoing lack of sovereignty, and the inherited poverty this creates.

Writing this previous paragraph prompted me to reflect on my own experiences growing up. I was born and raised in Glasgow, Scotland, a beacon of the Industrial Revolution but also with stubbornly persistent low socio-economic issues. It is with this reflection that I begin to draw my parallels.

## The Algabonyah Employment Program

Working in Shepparton, a regional Victorian town 2 hours' drive from Melbourne is where I managed the Algabonyah Employment Program (AEP) that drives Aboriginal economic development through employment participation within the Goulburn Valley region.

The AEP is the flagship program of the Rumbalara football and netball club, a proud Aboriginal-led community sporting club founded by Yorta Yorta man Paul Briggs OAM. The AEP, which Paul also established, was funded by the Victorian State Government and aimed to provide extensive support for employability and skills development to the Yorta Yorta community. The AEP was a critical program in that region, and I am exceptionally lucky to have worked for, and learned from, this unique man



## **“Given the infrastructure was already in place, the real transformation was the servicing of clients via telephone, Zoom/Skype and FaceTime”**

and the Yorta Yorta community, who always put family first and have the underlying value which I hold in the highest regard - kindness.

Paul encompasses all that is true and honest about Aboriginal culture, which is clearly visible by his leadership, his selfless lifelong career in supporting the advancement of his people and his community-honoured title of 'Uncle Paul'.

In 2016 the unemployment rate for Indigenous people in greater Shepparton was 17.6%. Improvements had been made since 2011 when the unemployment rate was 20.1% and significant gains made since Paul founded Rumbalara in the early 1990's when he witnessed an unemployment rate in excess of a staggering 80%. These numbers are a far cry from the overall Australian unemployment rate of 6.4% but it does show promising signs of how community-led and -controlled employment programs, by a community focused on reviving their cultural identity, can generate incredible employability outcomes and support upskilling their future workforce. <sup>2</sup>

One day I was listening to Paul tell his own story which for anyone reading this I hope you get to hear one day; I'm sure if you are ever in Shepparton and you call him up for a coffee and a yarn at Little Lipari, you may be able to coax it out of him. In his story he mentioned the ongoing Aboriginal issue of sovereignty. This was not long after the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum and I couldn't help but notice some similarities between our vastly different cultures from lands that couldn't be any further away. In Scotland, we had the Highland clearances and land was taken, here they had

colonisation and land was taken, and we both share underlying issues of sovereignty. The more I thought about it that night, the more I started to think about 'closing the gap' and what it really is. Closing the Gap as a policy strategy has so far done little to change the underpinning system of entrenched structural inequalities and racism. But the intent is good, and it made me ponder: what if all cultures applied the same philosophy taken by the AEP, where would inclusion be? Where would employability and skills be?

To name a few of its successes, the AEP led by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people created 298,176 hours of paid employment which, in turn, generated a staggering \$6,559,891 in household income. It also provided the government with \$3.10 social outcomes return for every dollar spent. Running the AEP, I saw what a job can do not only for a person, but for a family and, in turn, how that positively effects a community. I cannot highlight enough the importance of community-controlled employment and skills services. If we want to better link employability and skills maybe we should be looking at the communities themselves to see what good work is going on already and how we can work with them and support them and harness this. For larger service providers this means procuring supply chain services from culturally appropriate providers.

We need to try to see through the eyes of people who experience disadvantage. This is not to say that employability professionals do not have experience of this themselves and there are examples where employability providers have employed people from the communities they support. My point is that we always need to be learning about the individuals, households, and communities we support - and how better to learn this than working closely with them to co-design services.

“...at one stage of the project 12 Aboriginal people were working on site out of a total of 100 employees.”

### Linking employability and skills to empower informed choices – Ruby’s Story

Ruby Winmar contacted our AEP mentor seeking support to find a sustainable employment opportunity. She was finding it tough financially as a trainee administrator - but not only that, her dream was to be a nurse. The Rumbalara Football club has a strong and proud history which has generated a leadership with which most employers in the region engage and provide employment opportunities.


One example of this work is Rumbalara’s network, and the IP that has been established over the years, which helped build a great relationship with Lendlease, a construction and infrastructure company.

Lendlease collaborated with Paul Briggs and built a partnership to create employment opportunities on the Goulburn Valley hospital redevelopment. An MOU was established and through its implementation I was able to engage with Robert McGregor, Lendlease site manager. During this period Rob experienced his own personal learning and growth and saw inclusion from a different perspective and his engagement with the community was one of the defining factors in this success. Rob chose to do more and at one stage of the project 12 Aboriginal people were working on site out of a total of 100 employees. This is significantly higher than the average Aboriginal workforce representation in Australia of 3%.



Ruby Winmar, with Rob McGregor (Lendlease Site Manager at GV Health Hospital Redevelopment) and David Barron MIEP (Rumbalara Football Netball Club Partnerships Manager). Photo credit: Jobs Victoria.





**“If we are to succeed in our endeavours of equality, we must teach early the skill of making informed choices.”**

First, the AEP supported Ruby by helping her obtain the required construction White Card and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and to negotiate a job with Lendlease as a construction worker on the Goulburn Valley Hospital project.

Ruby’s goal was simple – to go to work in a highly-paid, unionised construction job where the minimum wages were in excess of \$50 per hour with the hope that one day it would lead to a nursing qualification and a job in the health service.

Ruby’s comment at the time for a case study that was reported to the Department was *“I was born in this hospital. A few years back I worked as a nursing assistant, now I’m working on the construction site. Hopefully once I finish studying, I’ll be able to come back and work here as a nurse.”*

I contacted Ruby while writing this article to see how she was going and to ask her permission to tell her story. I was delighted to find out she has managed to get into her nursing training and has just over a year left until she is qualified. Ruby is making great choices, and she is doing that because of her strength, her community strength and the opportunities that are created between community organisations who understand the nuances of culture, and this Victorian government program that helped remove bureaucracy for a more flexible style of employment delivery.

If we are to succeed in our endeavours of equality, we must teach early the skill of making

informed choices. Ruby made an informed choice to work in a high paid construction job, despite all the odds in her long-term quest of becoming a nurse. We must support our communities and their development through strong leadership and co-design.

At the end of my pontificating, I realised that there are more similarities between many cultures of this world than you might at first think. The one thing that won’t stop getting in the way of inclusion and equality - and I, as a white western male, have very limited exposure too - is systemic racism and limited access to opportunities. If we can solve those issues with skills and good decision making, we will all be living in a much more pleasant and inclusive world.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David Barron MIEP | State Manager JVES | Asuria Australia**

David is the State Manager for Asuria’s Jobs Victoria Employment Services. He has an extensive network in the employment industry, both in the public and private sectors in Victoria, Australia.

He is the co-founder of Yurringa, an Aboriginal-owned and managed company that uses a diversity and inclusion consultancy model and the Victorian Social Procurement Framework to subsidise employment services for disadvantaged Australians. Yurringa was established to disrupt the current employment system and create a model where employment services operate outside the regular government-dependent models. He also established the Algabonyah Driving Mentor Program in 2021 for the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club and is a member of Asuria’s Reconciliation Committee.

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<sup>1</sup> [History of Closing the Gap | Closing the Gap](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Indigenous employment status | City of Greater Shepparton | profile.id](#)

# Setting up your Team for Success



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**If we are to create better synergies between employability and skills, it stands to reason that an employability workforce set-up for success and able to deliver consistently high performance would be a major plus.**

But where to start? How can you ensure your workforce is aligned to your business goals and do you have a plan of action to achieve this?

In our article on HR Strategy, we sum up this complex area of people management in just six words:

- Get 'em
- Keep 'em
- Use 'em

In essence, get this right and you are well on your way to achieving this. Whilst the Get 'em and Keep 'em elements are vitally important, for the purposes of this article we'll be focusing on Use 'em. In other words, how do you ensure you get the best from your workforce to maximise their capability, so that customers of employability services receive the best and most appropriate service? Setting-up teams for success requires focus on the 3P's – Preventing People Problems – and is a proactive approach to HR that aims to prevent problems from arising rather than spending time and energy dealing with the impact of something that has gone wrong.

When creating an integrated HR (or People) Strategy, we advocate designing this on six core pillars to ensure everything you do supports a sustainable, long-term culture designed to meet the business' requirements. These are:

1. **Values and Behaviours** – setting expectations and defining the key characteristics of a company employee.
2. **Career Family Framework** - a simple framework that sets out how the business will organise, manage and develop their people.
3. **Workforce Planning** – linking business demands with resource requirements to ensure the business has the right people in the right place at the right time.
4. **Reward and Recognition** – structuring the way employees are rewarded. This isn't just about salary, but also about the whole range of financial and non-financial benefits. In the context of the employability sector, this could also include performance-based incentive schemes. These are an important tool to help drive the achievement of the performance measures of employability programmes, however there is also the need to balance this (clear goals and expectations, managing performance etc.) with encouraging innovation and demonstrating the right behaviours.

**“Much easier to put the necessary frameworks in place early rather than trying to retro-fit when the business is bigger, and inevitably more complex.”**

5. **Performance and Development** – the continuous process of reviewing performance against expectations, dealing with under performance in a timely manner, recognising and rewarding performance above expectations and supporting people to succeed through ongoing coaching and development. This is, of course, not to be mistaken for an approach to performance management that consists solely of an annual or biannual appraisal, but instead an ongoing and continuous dialogue that helps the employee to succeed.
6. **Communication and Engagement** – winning employees’ hearts and minds and communicating effectively.

See our website for a [case study](#) that brings these six core pillars to life.




Of course, any strategy needs to be underpinned with a solid foundation consisting of the basics; clear contracts of employment, straightforward policies and procedures, a robust governance / assurance framework and, where relevant, HR software that reports meaningful management information.

Whilst this may sound like a lot of work, it's all relative to the size and scale of the business and the aim must always be to keep it as simple and straightforward as possible. And this isn't just in the domain of larger organisations with their own, in-house HR team. Smaller organisations, with the help of an appropriately skilled and experienced HR expert, can achieve this too. After all, investing in the business in this way will ensure that solid foundations are in place to support the business in its future growth. Much easier to put the necessary frameworks in place early rather than trying to retro-fit when the business is bigger, and inevitably more complex.

It's amazing to consider that a significant investment, such as a building or new technology, would (generally) never be made without a business case, clear return on investment (ROI) and a plan for its utilisation to ensure the business benefits are realised. So why is it, that given the investment we make in our people (salary, pension, benefits, training etc.) many businesses don't have a clear people plan; one that will align their people activities with business success?

However, there's no requirement to do everything at once and indeed, most businesses don't have the capacity to take on this amount of change in one go. Key is the articulation of the strategy so that the workforce can understand the direction of travel. The plan will help to identify the sequence of activities and key milestones, so that incrementally the overall picture begins to take shape.

Whilst the strategy and supporting plan are being developed and implemented, and even once the key components have been delivered, it is down to inspiring leaders to create an environment where high performance is inevitable. In a people focused industry, such as employability,



**“Key is the articulation of the strategy so that the workforce can understand the direction of travel.”**

where the challenge is to equip and inspire clients to attain their dream job, this is hardly surprising. Inspiring leaders create a high-performance culture by consistently:

- Having an authentic leadership style. They build on their strengths and are comfortable with their own vulnerabilities. They build trust and create a safe environment where people can learn from mistakes.
- Ensuring everyone knows the why, what and how of the team and has bought into it. Purpose is at the heart of everything they do.
- Collaborating, empowering and being comfortable allowing people to act with autonomy.
- Ensuring they keep the team on track by setting clear goals and being explicit in their expectations.
- Encouraging great ideas and innovation to flourish.
- Keeping things simple.
- Building team resilience with a high challenge and high support culture.
- Encouraging learning and driving curiosity to develop and nurture capability.
- Joining the dots and delivering through people and teams.

You don't have to do all the above, but a few steps can really help you capitalise on the talent in your organisation. 'Preventing People Problems', our 3Ps mantra describes a proactive approach to HR which encapsulates the above. Hire great people, monitor and review their effectiveness and retain that great talent in the employability sector must be the way forward.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Adam Davey MIEP | Co-Founder and Director | Petaurum HR**



Adam brings over 25 years of professional expertise to the team from both the public and private sectors. With extensive experience of supporting businesses with proactive, straightforward HR advice, including those in the employability and skills sector, Adam has designed, developed and implemented HR strategies in a range of organisations and sectors from SMEs to PLCs. Whilst working in employability and skills, Adam was heavily involved in the HR elements of bidding, mobilising and transitioning contracts such as New Deal, Flexible New Deal, Pathways, OLASS, NDDP, Community Task Force and Work Programme. His past career in the sector also included a spell as the interim HR Director of an international business based in Australia.




Supporting growing businesses and those facing change is a particular speciality which has required Adam to understand and manage many complex projects involving TUPE, pensions, trade union engagement, organisational change and risk.

# Attracting Talent into the employment services industry in Australia



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**T**he Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment's (DESE) *I Want to Work Report (2018)* aimed to set out a blueprint for employment services from 2022.

For this, the Department undertook a user-centred design process with critical customers of employment services - the employer, the jobseeker and the service provider and this innovative approach was utilised to inform the DESE New Employment Services Model (NESM) which will launch in July 2022.

Prior to the release of the *I Want to Work* report, Asuria commenced an internal review and overhaul of talent identification and acquisition; and internal systems and processes, spurred on by feedback from employers and Allied Health practitioners. Asuria's response to the evaluation was multifaceted and included: partnerships with Deakin University and Recruitment Coach Ross Clennett; localised staff recruitment and training strategy; and the utilisation of data and DESE open-source material. Ross Clennett was engaged to co-create solutions which better help employers fill vacancies. This places a focus on skills/competency-based selection in job adverts and interviews, rather than prior experience which

can limit participants' opportunities, it also encompassed the [National Skills Commission's Core Competencies](#).

Continuous improvement is also central to Asuria's partnership with Associate Professor Jo Ingold FIEP and Deakin University. The unique and exclusive partnership spans, research, employer engagement, data science (using machine learning for better applicant matching).

This review demonstrated to us, more than ever, that staff on the frontline of employment services are required to successfully build multiple relationships simultaneously. It is critical for relationships to be sustained across industry peak bodies, employers and job seekers. Thinking beyond the paradigm that the jobseeker is the only client was further emphasised in *The I Want to Work Report* and new guidance from DESE on their new model for employment services. Importantly, the clients cannot be ranked, none is more important than the other.

**“Our process of hiring staff utilising the same success methodologies that we use for the very long term unemployed, is having profound impact.”**

But what does success look like? It is the ability to meet the desired outcomes of each party – matching the right jobseeker to the right employer; building capacity of employers, providing guidance about recruiting, inducting and supporting the jobseeker in the workplace; and understanding the trajectories of industries and communities to anticipate demand in the local economy.

Traditionally, employment services have sought and attracted staff from within the sector, including existing staff from competitor providers. After reviewing who were high achieving staff, as part of imbedded evaluation practices, we observed intriguing points of difference amongst high performing team members. Yes, they shared the company's values, vision and mission, but unlike their peers they were from non-desk-based traditional industries, including, building and construction.

Our process of hiring staff utilising the same success methodologies that we use for the very long term unemployed, is having profound impact. Long-term unemployed participants listen and act on advice from mentors of a similar background and experience Curtis et al 2016. Therefore, our workforce statistically matches that of our case load i.e. percentage of CALD participants within the Employment Region is matched by the same percentage of staff representation. Securing the right staff, results in greater outcomes and stronger relationships with employers in the local labour market.

We sat down with our Miranda, Sydney Eastern Metro Employment Consultant Evan Thomson, who embodies this profile.

*Prior to joining Asuria 18 months ago, Evan Thompson was an experienced trade worker. Every day he utilises his skills in relationship management and motivation. We talked to Evan to find out more about his experiences of being a new employability professional.*

**Where were you employed prior to Asuria?**

*I was a trade assistant for a gas company. I put panels together piping them with pressure sensors and then on-selling them to pubs. I have had so many varied roles that were predominantly outdoors. When I speak to jobseekers I am able to relate to their experience, understand the intricacies of the roles that I am putting them forward for and the locations. My varied experience has provided me with this.*

**How did you find yourself working in employment services?**

*I wanted to work in an office and do something different. I knew that the Job Coach role would be good for me and play to my strengths. I have a large extended friendship network, I thought that anything that I do with people will be suited to my attributes.*

*I am also able to relate to people, when they talk to me about sport, music, different things in life. I knew that these skills would assist, and I was keen to utilise my strengths in a work environment.*

**Asuria hired you for your transferable skills: relationship management, motivation and leadership. Do you think you need a specific personality type to be a successful Employment Consultant?**

## **“...our workforce statistically matches that of our case load.”**

*I think it helps me being extraverted, I don't think it's essential though, we all bring skills and talents that will lead to relatability. That's the key to success, finding a common point of interest, relating to someone (jobseeker or employer) and helping them solve their problem. Most of my day is about solving problems.*

*I recognise that we are all different. When I first started with Asuria, I was hired as a Job Coach. I completed the job coach modules in 1 day. I really wanted to get started. It was then suggested that I listen in on calls, but I felt that I had been immersed into the environment whilst completing the induction modules. So, I asked to just get started. I know that I learn best by doing.*

*I want to emphasise here, that we don't all need to be extraverted ex-building assistants. Having a wide variety of people in our team helps, as we have a wide variety of people on our caseload.*

### **How do you utilise your transferable skills day to day?**

*I am proactive and I am able to relate to people. If I get an inkling that a jobseeker is attending a job interview I text/call them wishing them good luck. Recently, I worked with a client who is a gymnast. I was trying to motivate him, he didn't want to do the role that we sourced for him (we knew he would be suited, his transferable skills matched perfectly). I knew he was*

*competitive and fit, so I drew on these attributes and positioned the labouring job as a challenge. Two months later we received a call from the employer, “that guy is the best worker we have ever had here.” I have played sport my whole life, I believe I have an understanding on how to get the best out of people.*

### **How has Asuria supported your ongoing learning?**

*I attended the Ross Clennett workshops. This was helpful for a large cohort of my colleagues, his approach however is what I utilise on a day to day, i.e. I utilise ‘the Challenger approach’ (sales people can be categorised into different behaviour approaches, which can provide insight into professional strengths). I am also doing a Cert IV in employment services. I see value in the ongoing learning and I am able to draw on this when discussing learning opportunities with jobseekers.*

### **How do we attract more staff?**

*Maybe people don't know about it? I knew about recruitment services, but I didn't know about employment. You want to look at people from different areas, anybody with a hobby. This is a way you can change people's lives. I have placed refugees, who speak no English. Ex-offenders with long criminal histories.*

### **What's the secret to success for employment services?**

*Nurturing employers that give people chances, that see the benefits in the work that we do, both for their business and the jobseeker. We want to attract and retain employers that give job seekers a go. It is really critical that they are supported not only by the employment services provider but also the employer. I am also a very straight down the line guy, I use language that can be understood, I stay well clear of jargon that is often used in the sector.*

**“Securing the right staff, results in greater outcomes and stronger relationships with employers in the local labour market.”**

As Evan’s reflections shows, positioning and placing the very long-term unemployed for employment opportunities with employers, requires an ability to build relationship and map transferable skills and attributes across their previous roles and for the new position. Asuria staff have been using the potential of open-source material made available by DESE through Job Outlook and The National Skills Commission (NSC) to better engage employers which leads to jobseekers getting and keeping a job. Attracting the right talent to the employability sector is also a critical part of the success story. Importantly, though, they cannot work in isolation. Setting them up for success looks like: co-

locating experienced staff from the sector, providing ongoing professional development from leading experts; and utilising open source, smart algorithms to improve efficiencies and strengthen relationships with employers.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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Orla Baker and Emma Crichton FIEP are members of the Growth and Innovation team at Asuria. The team are focussed on informing best practice, for the sector in Australia and internationally. Both Orla and Emma have had careers spanning Business Development in the for profit and not for profit sectors and have worked in employment services for a combined total of 24 years.





# Digital skills are central to our future employability success



**Chris McMillan**  
General Manager of Work  
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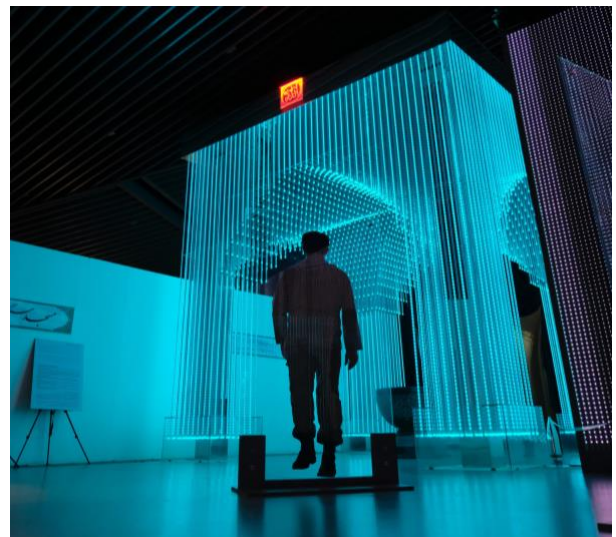
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**A**t ReadyTech, we live in a world of digital skills. As an ASX-listed tech company, we hire software developers, cyber security experts, IT project managers and quality assurance analysts.

We're part of an industry employing 861,000 people in Australia – a number Accenture and the Technology Council of Australia expects [could soon top 1 million](#) (Tech Council of Australia, October 2021). This makes us an eyewitness to one part of Australia's digital skills gap. Right now, it's difficult to source and hire skilled technology professionals from the local employment market. As well as driving up salary costs, the situation could hold our local technology ecosystem back from the innovation and growth required to make a predicted [potential contribution of \\$250bn to our economy by 2030](#).

Australia's digital skills deficit is wider than just the tech sector. Because technology has been eating its way into many industries at a fast rate (even those jobs traditionally considered manual or 'blue-collar') we are all being forced to confront the importance of digital skills for employability. Recent [high-level analysis conducted by the Australian Industry Skills Committee](#) of skills needs (as determined by its wide network of individual Industry Reference Committees) found 'digital skills' were the fourth

highest priority generic skill requirement across all industries. Interestingly, the top three generic skills identified (adaptability, collaboration and analytical skills) are becoming prominent or are heavily influenced by the emergence of technologies in those industries (for example, adaptability becomes important when trends like automation or digital transformation change the way we work, while analytical skills become important in a world driven by complex information and 'big data'). RMIT and Deloitte Access Economics' recent survey, [Ready, Set, Upskill – Effective Training for the Jobs of Tomorrow](#) (which probably leaned towards survey respondents from the medium to large business world), made the claim that 87% of jobs now require some form of digital skill.



## **“Out of all digital skills needs, it is basic digital skills that are demanded by the highest number of employers.”**

The AISC found the demand for digital skills fell into two buckets: digital skills relating to industry specific software or technology, and general digital skills and digital literacy. This is evidenced in job advertisements. For example, in jobs advertised for professional, clerical and administrative workers (which the AISC’s [National Industry Insights Report](#) found are the mostly likely to want digital skills), jobs ask for specific experience or skills in particular software systems or packages, like experience in Microsoft Office, as well as general computer literacy, software development or data entry experience. There are also two broad occupation types where digital skills are most requested; IT professions where high levels of specific digital skills are needed, and non-IT focused occupations where digital skills are often more basic or broad tasks.

Out of all digital skills needs, it is basic digital skills (rather than advanced skills in areas like coding, blockchain, AI and data visualisation) that are demanded by the highest number of employers, according to [research from Australian Industry Group](#).


We believe digital skills and digital literacy should now be at the forefront of any employability discussion. Like soft skills, digital skills have become one of those durable skills that have a critical influence on someone’s ability to win and sustain employment, whether we are talking about a jobseeker in employment services seeking an entry-level clerical role, or an employee in the gas supply industry, whose upskilling in ‘digital literacy, digital map reading, cybersecurity, data analytics and other data-related technologies’ has been deemed essential

to future success (Gas IRC’s 2019 Industry Skills Forecast). Because the trend will not stop. [Four in five business leaders surveyed by RMIT](#) said new technologies will be important to their future goals. When exploring the trends driving the need for labour market skills, the AISC found technology-related factors like automation and robotics (including drones), digitisation and the Internet of Things and mobility and connectivity were raised more often than any other trends in skills forecasts, in industries as diverse as agriculture, community services, forestry and wood products, manufacturing and tourism. Because these trends have implications for the way people work in these industries, they impact the skills mix required.

### **How can our workforce go digital?**

The digital skills challenge we face is complex. One of the reasons for this is the changing nature of work has come upon us faster than we’ve been ready for (despite many warnings, like one from the [World Economic Forum in 2018](#) which predicted 42% of in-demand skills across all industries would change and 54% of all employees would require significant upskilling and reskilling between 2018 and 2022). COVID-19 only accelerated the change and digitalisation (although it also showed how adaptive we can be when we have to).

ReadyTech saw this change in the education sector, where the higher, vocational and international education sectors were suddenly thrown into delivering learning online to local or international students, often without the requisite digital delivery capabilities required. Across the sector, this led to sub-par learning experiences and a decline in overall student satisfaction, largely due to under preparedness and under-utilisation of the capacities of digital technologies ([only 43.2% of students were satisfied](#) with learner engagement in 2020).



**“The bottom line is we don’t have enough digital skills and we’re not learning them fast enough to meet our future needs.”**

The bottom line is we don’t have enough digital skills and we’re not learning them fast enough to meet our future needs. This could make us incrementally less employable on an individual level and erodes our capacity as a workforce to meet the challenges of changing industries and roles. This has repercussions for participants right across the learning and work landscape. From individuals themselves, who are too often being thrown into the deep end of shapeshifting jobs with little to no support for upskilling and reskilling, to employers, education and training organisations and public sector policymakers, who are all having to do their best to adapt during difficult times, we need to work together to change the way we think about skilling and learning. We need to commit to following through on those understandings with the financial and practical commitments that will see us thrive as a skilled and digitally skilled workforce that’s ready for the rest of the 21st century.

**How can different participants in our learning ecosystem evolve? Here’s just a few ideas to consider.**

### **Individuals**

The biggest contribution individuals can make to their own employability through digital skills is to adopt and practice lifelong learning or continuous professional development. While not removing responsibility from other participants in the equation (see more on this below), there does need to be a realisation that to live in a volatile, uncertain, complex

and ambiguous working world being reshaped by technology will require the continual acquisition and updating of digital skills. This needs to be supported by enhanced education and guidance about the changing environment and opportunities. Individuals should be empowered in the knowledge they can access skills through various channels to mitigate and overcome any digital vocational barriers that they may encounter.

### **Employers and industry**

Employers and industry will need to shoulder more of the digital skilling burden in future. By investing in upskilling and reskilling (including learning on the job and more formal training), employers and industry groups will be able to ensure their workforces are digitally capable. This includes making work flexible enough to integrate time for learning as well as making learning engaging. In just one example, carmaker Volkswagen (one of our clients) has a strategic Australia-wide training programme for its dealerships to ensure all sales staff and technicians are on clear learning pathways for progression that align with company needs and a changing industry. Through a learning culture, VW also ensures these staff maintain the currency of skills within existing roles on an ongoing basis.

### **Education and training**

The education and training market will be a critical channel for delivering digital skills. With a growth in online and hybrid learning modes, movement in areas such as short courses, micro-credentials and the non-accredited learning space, as well as new challenger players (including large technology companies), the education market is in the process of reshaping itself in multiple ways to fit in with the need of individuals for ‘just-in-time’ digital skills delivered when they need them in ways they can consume amidst the



## “Employers and industry will need to shoulder more of the digital skilling burden in future”.

flow of work and life. Education and learning providers have a strong opportunity to cater to this market for current digital skills, whether that is direct to learner or by partnering with employers and industries to support them in the delivery of digital skills to their workforces.

### Policymakers

While opening Skills Week, Stuart Robert, the Minister for Employment, Workforce, Skills, Small and Family Business asked challenging questions around digital skills, like why the vocational education and training sector is not developing more digital accredited courses to compete with moves from the tech giants. There is no doubt that Australian Federal and State governments and regulatory bodies are aware of the digital skills problem and the opportunities we face. They are making strong headway in evolving the learning environment to encourage things like more industry participation in skilling workforces and more streamlined creation of qualifications and the delivery of skills to meet the pace of change. The Digital Skills Organisation is a great example of that investment in the future.

### Examples of digital skilling in action

There are many examples of educators, employers and individuals coming together in new ways to build digital skills capacity. One of these is a [specialist project in the Melbourne suburb of Cremorne](#), where tech companies like Carsales.com.au, MYOB and Live Tiles have come together with Bendigo Kangan Institute TAFE through the [Digital Skills Organisation](#) to

deliver tech skills to local learners, in areas such as programming, digital UX and UI design, quality assurance, project management and cyber security. Designed to deliver entry level talent through industry collaboration, it has the potential to be scaled nationwide to meet demand for 156,000 new technology workers.

The Digital Skills Organisation also undertook a Train 100 Data Analysts Trial to test innovative solutions for sourcing and training data security analysts into employment. With a focus on delivering training content specific to employer needs, the trial took in a diverse range of participants and collaborated with a range of different training providers (including both accredited and non-accredited providers) to deliver specific skills that employers needed. These included the insertion of specific soft skills requirements like the need for ‘hustle’ in a technology environment, as well as the technical capabilities that would see these data analysts succeed in future roles in industry.

Innovation extends to other industries and different employment candidates. The [Mining Skills Organisation](#), for example, is undertaking an apprenticeships project drilling down into everything involved in a heavy diesel fitter role (including technology components) and are looking to accelerate training design and delivery. Training and employment firm [WithYouWithMe](#) is taking ex-veterans and assessing what jobs would suit them in the tech industry, including getting them job-ready for entry-level cyber defence roles in as little as 100 hours. It is also looking at the aptitudes that neurodiverse candidates can bring and matching candidates with suitable technology-related opportunities.

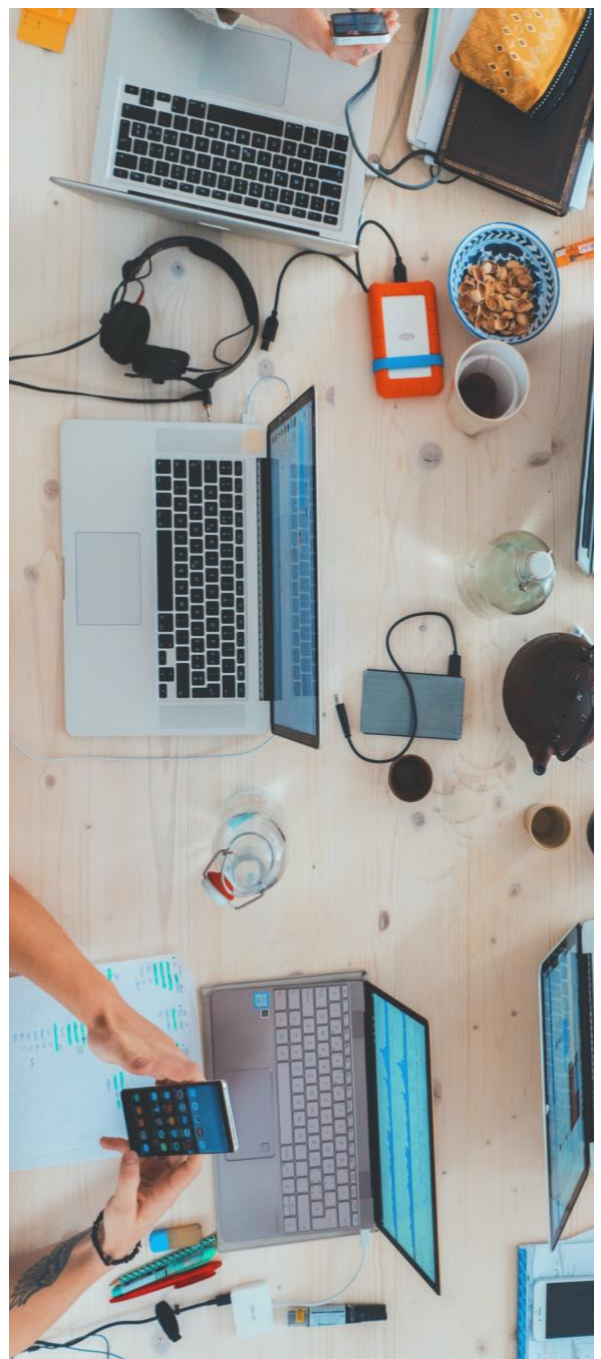
**“A lack of digital skills (like any other skills required by an employer) can and does act as a barrier to employment and can make workers less effective in their roles.”**

### **Mindset, the key to digital skills success**

For employability professionals, there are a few insights to take away from this. Firstly, a lack of digital skills (like any other skills required by an employer) can and does act as a barrier to employment and can make workers less effective in their roles. This is not a static problem. As digital skills needs change, workers need to learn to remain employable. It brings more urgency to the phrase, ‘if you are standing still, you are falling behind’. The problem may become even more acute in the future. If we are concerned about enhancing employability in individuals or workforces, we need to be conscious of the growing importance of digital skills within this mix, and seek out ways to mitigate the problem, working with individuals, our education and training system, employers and policymakers.

But secondly (and perhaps more importantly), we need to know digital skills are inherently learnable. What we’ve seen in our business is there is nothing particularly special about a digital skill. While it can come with a higher education (that might nurture higher-level skills like problem solving and critical thinking or even creativity), the ability to adapt and thrive in an environment demanding digital skills is fundamentally about curiosity and learning how to learn continually with the right mindset.

Employability professionals can play an important role in recognising that with a growth mindset - where workers believe they can learn new skills, that it is possible to teach an old dog (or young dog for that matter) new tricks – backed by broader changes in our learning culture and skills environment, there is no reason why individuals and workforces are not up to the challenge of a digital skills age.



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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



**Chris McMillan | General Manager | Work Pathways | ReadyTech**

Chris McMillan is the General Manager, Work Pathways at ReadyTech – helping organisations to activate, support, place and retain the right people in the right jobs and apprenticeships by combining technology with human understanding.

# The Digital Inclusion 101



**Christine Brown FIEP**  
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**It is widely accepted that the COVID 19 pandemic accelerated the development of digital strategies and solutions for most of the sector. However, it was recognised early in the pandemic by government and funders alike that for some types of organisations, primarily community and voluntary sector organisations, additional support and funding would be needed to develop and implement the solutions. This led to a range of additional targeted funding during 2020/2021.**

It is learning from these projects and initiatives that I want to share with employability colleagues. In sharing some of the findings, I hope that much will resonate, some will be surprising, and some will challenge assumptions held about what it means to be digitally included. It also recognises that digital exclusion is not an issue exclusive to our individual service users or customers but within our sector for some organisations too.

Through my organisation, Future Excel, established in October 2011, I now work almost exclusively with locally rooted, voluntary, and community-based providers, supporting them not only to survive but thrive in the competitive world of public procurement. I was therefore privileged to have been invited to support them in the delivery of a range of digital research and

development programmes during the pandemic including:

- A user-research, solution development and user-testing project on behalf of a specialist employment support provider in the West Midlands, funded through the CAST Discovery, Definition and Continuation Programmes from October 2020 through to the end of July 2021. CAST is a charity supporting organisations to use digital for social good. They are part of Catalyst who are a network of experts and funders helping UK charities improve their digital skills through knowledge and learning.
- A digital inclusion research and development programme involving 17 community and voluntary organisations in the West Midlands delivering a range of services including employment, skills, advice, welfare rights, community development, health, wellbeing, and social care. Collectively working with more than 20,000 service users.
- Research and evaluation services for the first year of a community based digital skills and confidence project targeted at neighbourhoods within the Black Country that experience high levels of deprivation and digital exclusion. Importantly the

**“In general, more people got online during the pandemic widening further the digital divide for those without digital access, skills, and confidence.”**

project was conceived pre-pandemic, and funding commenced the day after the first national lockdown was announced.

Below is a snapshot of findings across the range of projects and initiatives outlined above. For all projects, the findings are based on collecting a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data including primary beneficiary data including initial assessment/baseline data and review/outcome data, secondary data sources/research, qualitative one to one and group interviews with beneficiaries/stakeholders and observation of interventions/activities:

### **COVID 19 specific:**

- The development of digital inclusion work amongst voluntary and community sector providers was accelerated because of the pandemic.
- However, much of the developments and activity were short term because they were funded through COVID emergency funding.
- It also exposed a lack of digital infrastructure, skills and capacity in many smaller voluntary sector organisations making them less able to make an effective digital response to users’ needs during the pandemic.
- In general, more people got online during the pandemic widening further the digital divide for those without digital access, skills, and confidence.

## **Digital Exclusion within our communities**

- There are 3 key components of digital exclusion - lack of digital infrastructure, lack of skills and confidence, and barriers to access.
- The people our voluntary sector providers worked with were those most likely to be digitally excluded.
- Those people most at risk of digital exclusion included older people, people with poor health, poor employment and education outcomes, people with physical and learning disabilities, and people living in areas of high deprivation and/or facing multiple disadvantages.
- More could be done to identify and address need through embedding digital inclusion assessment/audit into initial conversations/assessments with service users.
- Around 20% of service users didn’t have internet at home and half of those with internet didn’t have access to devices (internet was used for TV only).
- Around 40% of older service users reported having no Smartphone.
- The closure of community IT facilities during the pandemic e.g., libraries and community centres exacerbated access for those without either internet at home or their own data enabled devices.





## “Around 40% of older service users reported having no Smartphone.”

- Even when service users had access to devices and the internet, they lacked the digital skills/confidence to get online without support. Over half of those who had access to tech and the internet/data reported they were not confident in using it without support.
- Supporting people to get online is labour intensive and time consuming and often not funded as part of the core service delivery work.
- Over 90% of voluntary sector organisations reported they needed additional resources to support digital infrastructure development or build digital capacity.
- Lack of digital skills and confidence was also an organisational issue affecting board members, staff, and volunteers, in the same way it affected service users; and similar solutions needed to be developed.
- There were already some digital skills and confidence resources in the public domain but often they were not easily accessible and/or needed adapting/developing to meet specific needs.

To address some of the challenges above, a range of interventions and solutions were identified, developed, and delivered by the projects including:

- A data enabled tablet loan scheme that was accessible to both:
  - Individuals, that combined with practical hands-on support and training to get online safely; and
  - Voluntary sector organisations who were lacking up to date and quality digital infrastructure and devices to be

able to support their service users and customers consistently.

- Developing a digital access, skills and confidence assessment and review tool that can be used as part of an organisations core initial assessment and review processes with beneficiaries.
- Developing a voluntary sector organisation digital assessment tool to identify current position and digital development needs.
- Bespoke community based digital skills and confidence sessions targeted at getting people online, delivered initially remotely over the telephone or on the doorstep to later being rolled out into well-known and trusted community venues, including a hub of community centres, to a wide range of beneficiaries including residents, trustees, staff and volunteers. Evaluation has shown that impact can occur quickly and can be transformational. For example, at initial assessment circa 80 participants reported no digital knowledge, skills or confidence including having never used a device or being online before moving to a third reporting being confident to get online without any support after just a few sessions.

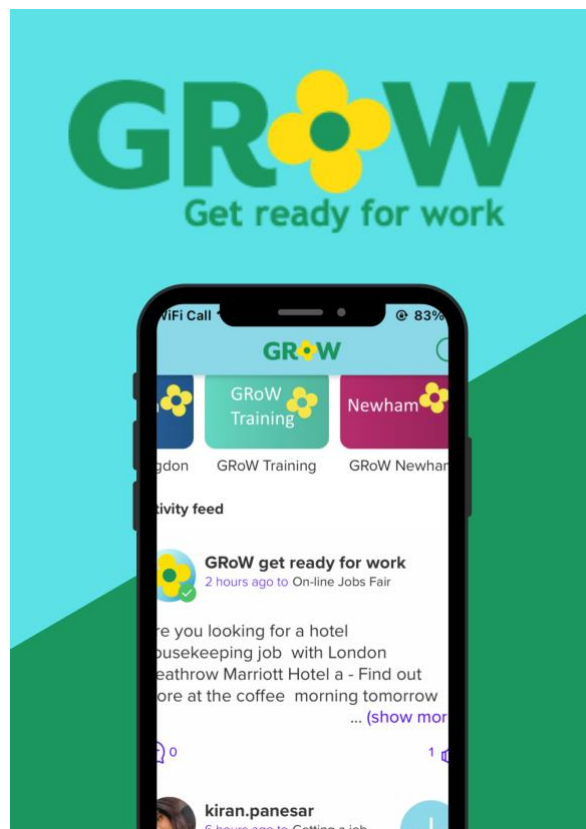
There are many other interventions and solutions in development but the most exciting for me personally is the development of ‘super’ network/partnership of voluntary sector providers. The purpose is to form a voluntary-led movement which drives the digital inclusion agenda locally and is a powerful collective driver to sustain the positive changes we have started to see. It is early days for the ‘super’ network. Currently they have no dedicated funding or resources to support their structure or development. But the commitment and tenacity of the founding network partners, comprising of over 80 member organisations has meant that 9 months later they are still regularly meeting, share learning and engaging with funders and stakeholders to join up the dots in tackling digital poverty.



“Around 40% of older service users reported having no Smartphone.”

My final reflections relate to this year’s IEP Digital Technology Conference ‘Employability in a Digital World’ in September 2021. It was an inspiring conference which showcased some fantastic digital development work across the sector. I was particularly inspired by the work of Belina Get Ready for Work (GRoW) programme in the development of their new GRoW App developed specifically to be used on a smartphone by the parent jobseekers they work with. Belina is another example of a small but mighty provider; showing you don’t need to be a prime or large provider to develop and implement innovative digital solutions.

I finish my article with a few questions for my employability colleagues to consider. What does your user-research tell you about your user needs? How can you use this to better design and develop digital solutions? What sort of difference are your current digital delivery solutions making? How are you sharing your learning with others?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR





**Christine Brown FIEP | Owner & Principal | Future Excel**

Christine Brown FIEP has worked in the employment, skills and community development field for nearly 30 years. She is a Fellow of the Institute of Employability Professionals. During her career she has worked on high profile national change programmes including career service privatisation and the ONE Programme (merger of Employment Services and Benefits Offices), as well as managing many large sub-regional employment and skills programmes. She founded Future Excel in 2011 to provide specialist and capacity building support to third sector delivery organisations and community businesses. In recent years, she has led several high-profile research and evaluation projects including a City Deal project around the positive impact placed based employment support models can make in areas experiencing high levels of deprivation.

# 'Build Back Better' with hands and hearts



**Jeff Greenidge MIEP  
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**The last 18 months has been a horrendous time for all of us. As we emerge from the perfect storm of Brexit and the pandemic, we are seeing widening inequalities, with some members of our society increasingly more at risk than others.**

There are many reports highlighting this issue. In the Skills sector Pearson has hosted a [Post-COVID Inequality Forum](#) in which witnesses were invited to present to the panel on key issues. The final report will be published in November 2021 and will contain evidence of how COVID has impacted the inequalities gap and will define the role that learning and skills can play to address it to re-invigorate our economy. UCL researchers as part of the [Covid-19 Social Study](#) identified that people who were struggling financially before the pandemic are more than twice as likely, compared to people who were already living comfortably, to say they are now even worse off.

As a Board member of the IEP, I have been reflecting on the role of the employability sector and employability professionals in facing up to these new challenges; and in particular how we can ensure individuals have access to opportunities and resources that meet their needs.

The other question that comes to mind is how employability and skills can counteract the systemic barriers and multiple disadvantages such as deprivation, ethnicity, disability, and poor

health? It has never been a level playing field, and it is becoming more uneven, and from my perspective, the first step must be flexibility in learning and guidance opportunities to make sure that more and different people get the equity, the 'leg up' to get that equality of opportunity that they deserve. Some will say that this is already being done, however as a sector, can we hand on heart say that it is ubiquitous and of consistent quality?

The pandemic highlighted the value and contribution of those who work with their 'hands and their hearts', I cannot recall where or when I first heard that phrase. Still, it resonated with me that workers in health and social care, construction, electricians, engineers, and others in the vocational arena were then seen as essential.



**“As life and work become more complex, volatile, and ambiguous, it will no longer be sufficient to signpost and develop ‘just in time’ skills.”**

In the recent June 2021 OECD report [‘Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Vocational Education and Training’](#), the OECD has highlighted that *“high-quality vocational education is the cornerstone of effective youth transitions into the labour market and, if anything, the pandemic has revealed how much the jobs for which vocational education and training prepare are the backbone of our economies”*.

As we begin to ‘build back’ we are likely to see a growth in ‘hand’ occupations, including architects, engineers, electricians, carpenters, and other skilled tradespeople and construction workers. As the population ages, we anticipate new demand for a range of ‘heart’ occupations, including doctors, nurses, and home-health and care support.

Post-16 education will have a pivotal role to play if the UK is to have people with the skills and competencies to bridge the widening inequalities post-pandemic and to create those hand and heart employment opportunities that we will require post-Brexit. The CBI in November 2020 argued for a *“long-term strategic vision which can guide the country through a vital post-Covid recovery and towards long-term prosperity by addressing key challenges in growing skills, enhancing connectivity and attracting investment”* key to this would be *“increasing local capacity to deliver back-to-work programmes alongside a long-term focus on the devolution of adult skills to meet our growing skills and retraining gap.”*

In reimagining the post-pandemic skills and employability ecosystem, a key feature will be local employability and skills services that are joined up and quickly accessible to both adults and young people. Local skills and employment services with robust local knowledge will need to respond to evolving local labour markets by providing clarity on the multiple routes into employment through both vocational and non-university pathways as well as the usual, so-called, academic routes. This clearly presupposes more regional autonomy.

As life and work become more complex, volatile, and ambiguous, it will no longer be sufficient to signpost and develop ‘just in time’ skills. At the core of this new ecosystem will be delivery partners who offer bespoke all-age employability and skills services that support individuals to gain the skills, confidence, and the experience to enter employment, stay and progress in work and achieve their aspirations. This support service has to be tailored, flexible and person-centred and capable of identifying strengths, weaknesses and helping individuals plan for complex and constantly changing life and work choices.

The core of such services will be skilled coaches and tutors who see the whole person and can bring to life learning programmes where authentic, real-world skills development and assessments can occur. This employability and skills service will require the capability to respond to and create the demand for skilled, adaptable workers in a wide range of new and developing occupations. The depth and breadth of knowledge and understanding required by service providers will necessitate increased use of real time labour market information with high-quality data that is consistent, standardised and in plain language and readily accessible to the service user.

**“Education and skills providers must ensure that learners have the breadth of knowledge and skills relevant to the world of work and not only those that make them productive.”**

Whilst the growth of online learning during the last 18 months has brought flexibility it also provides a window to what access and flexibility might be like. Technology has the potential to provide timely and tailored learning opportunities, performance-improving feedback, and opportunities for individuals to self-serve and analyse their performance. Technology may also provide individuals with various ways and opportunities to access advice, learning and development opportunities. However, there are still considerable barriers for many people with poor or no access to broadband or a personal laptop. The internet is no longer a nice-to-have. Still, it is an essential service in the same vein as water and electricity. More investment will be required to improve the hardware infrastructure and increase the capacity and capability of the provider network to create and deliver engaging digital learning. The innovation stimulated by thought leaders such as **Ufi VochTech** trust which through its grant funding champions the power of vocational technology to improve skills for work.

Post-16 education and adult learning attract proportionally, higher numbers of disadvantaged



learners and learners from black and other minority ethnic backgrounds. The pandemic significantly impacted these same groups. Why would we not use the **apprenticeships and traineeships routes** to offer real opportunities for a diverse range of young people to prepare for and secure exciting careers. This provides an opportunity for the employability and skills ecosystem to increase the workforce's diversity and demonstrate their leadership role in communities.

**In conclusion**

A responsive and flexible vocational education and employability system can play a key role in the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. An offer and content of programmes that is flexible, accessible and driven by data can equip individuals with the skills the labour market needs and provide those already in work with relevant up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities.

The last 18 months have shown that local solutions and local collaboration do work. We must learn from that collaboration; perhaps rethinking regional solutions and Job Centres work with local Skills Hubs and how the local ecosystem of LEPs, Growth Hubs, Skills and Employability Providers can best develop locally specific skills and employability support.

We know that employers are looking for a broader range of skills in the workforce: workers who can communicate, collaborate, solve problems, and think critically alongside these technical skills. Education and skills providers must ensure that learners have the breadth of knowledge and skills relevant to the world of work and not only those that make them productive.

There is much good practice, but the reimagined system and offer must be consistent and available to all. Our local leaders will therefore need to influence

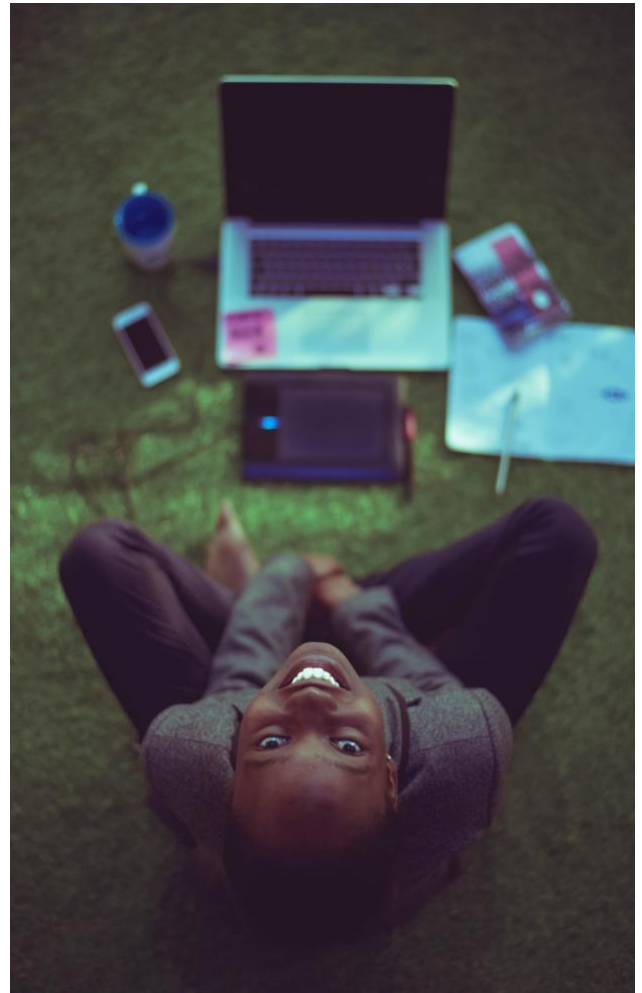
**“For the ecosystem to respond to the needs of individuals and employers, the time is right to re-focus on collaboration.”**

Government to secure the funding and support for the inspirational practitioners in this sector to continue to develop the tailored programmes these prospective workers and employers need.

It will also require emotional and an intellectual commitment to those hearts and hands vocational routes as well as the well-trodden academic routes. These vocational routes will be indispensable as technology continues to disrupt.

For the ecosystem to respond to the needs of individuals and employers, the time is right to re-focus on collaboration. Pat Russell FIEP Chair of the IEP reminded us that in *‘Collaboration Is Key’*. *At the heart of the IEP’s mission are the values of collaboration and support.... we believe that this is the best way that we can achieve our objective of supporting the people who support others to gain work, progress in work and retain work.”*

The time is now for employability and skills providers, employers, and other enabling organisations such as the IEP to pull together to ensure that people in the UK all get the opportunities they need to succeed.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jeff Greenidge MIEP | Director for Diversity | Association of Colleges**

Jeff Greenidge’s career in education and training began as a teacher in the South Wales Valleys. He then went on to develop the National Curriculum for Languages, before working in the private sector on European Vocational Education projects. After 17 years working at Ufi / Learndirect supporting the roll out of online teaching and learning in the UK, Jeff left to take on several pro bono roles to support the education and training sector. He is a Board Member at the IEP.

Since 2019 Jeff has been working with the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) and the Association of Colleges (AoC) to shape the diversity and in leadership coaching and development programme and is now the Director for Diversity at the ETF and the AoC.

# Universal Credit, to Universal Budget, to Universal Outcomes



**Mark Cosens FIEP**  
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**It was heart-warming and inspirational to gather at this year's IEP Summit. I'm always impressed with how special a sector this is. I saw people I've known over many years and made some new connections. All shared a common sense of purpose: to lift the lives and employment prospects of people less fortunate than themselves.**

## More collaboration for employability services

There were lots of challenges under discussion, but it was the networking that gave us most licence to engage in the most universally and frequently pronounced requirement for moving our sector forwards: that of *collaboration*.

From IEP Chair Pat Russell's foreword to the centre-word in the word-map in the Nous report 'Building Sustainability in Employability Services'<sup>1</sup>, to constant theming in talks and presentations; collaboration was clearly on everyone's minds.

## Repeating this theme

The recognised value in employability professionals around collaborating isn't new, but it is becoming increasingly important. I think there are many reasons for this: from cultural

shifts in our not-quite-post pandemic society, to strategic imperatives in a world where sectors collide, to changing work and recruitment needs, to practical, operational advantages in working together for the good of each person at the heart of our services.

## We need to collaborate on several levels

There are many areas ripe for collaboration, from data-sharing, to shared employer engagement/management, to creating personalised, accessible learning modules that transcend providers, employers and sectors, to coordinated communications that emphasise the importance and value in expanding Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)...

Nous recommended that we: "*consider formalised partnership arrangements and mergers to... navigate siloed departmental funding streams... vertically integrating different areas of provision to create more complete customer journeys, from first engagement through to higher skills development.*" Because: "*This could position providers to better respond to customers receiving flexible funding packages from other public services*"<sup>2</sup>. My hope is that this would lead to coordinating more services through Personal Budgets.

**“The recognised value in employability professionals around collaborating isn’t new, but it is becoming increasingly important.”**

## The macro-level

Petrol problems and supermarket shortfalls reveal systemic issues linked to the labour market. For example, demand for industrial drivers exceeds 100,000. But how do such fundamental mismatches persist? We have struggled to face up to them for some time now, but the consequences are now burgeoning, to more dramatically affect us all.

On a macro-level, several important sectors in our economy are experiencing difficulties in recruiting skilled workers, including health and social care, teaching and digital, which we all rely on. So how can employability and skills leaders respond, so that services work together better for recruiters looking for skilled workers and people needing employment or better employment? That’s a macro challenge, now manifesting itself across all our delivery areas and impacting on our organisational strategies.

## The strategic level

In a recent report, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) asked: “to what extent do labour shortages reflect fundamental, durable challenges in our post-pandemic economy due to a mismatch between demand for certain skills and the supply of them?”<sup>3</sup>.

One example is Apprenticeships. I worked for twelve years in a training provider that ran a skills business within an employment business and sometimes found myself frustrated at systemic barriers to aligning the businesses. There were employment

programmes that couldn’t feasibly fill apprenticeship vacancies, simply because candidates were still too precarious in their employment. Any dropouts would risk impacting on our achievement rates (for our own apprenticeships), and negatively affecting our contract allocation. If outcomes and funding incentives had aligned, we could have wrapped services together around the customer much better, leading to more sustained (and upskilled) employment outcomes.

We are now also seeing more funding invested in Sector-Based Work Academy programmes (SWAPs) and Skills Bootcamps. In the employability sector we know a bit about SWAPs, but while the name ‘Bootcamps’ isn’t everyone’s favourite, they have now also become very popular with employment and skills commissioners and employers. They have also been welcomed by the skills sector. Jane Hickie, CEO of the Association for Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) said: “getting 4000 new workers trained and into quality HGV careers is a good target. We believe (Bootcamps) are a great mechanism for training and reskilling the workforce.”<sup>4</sup>. These models blend a good mix of employer input (and work placements for SWAPs), employability support and technical training. However, whether they can transcend the narrow routeways into specific employer and sector demand that they are designed for, is another question. To meet wider demand within our complex and fast evolving labour market, at scale, will require more than just a targeted smattering of these programmes.

Matthew Fell, Chief Policy Director of the CBI said this: “*nearly all of us will need to gain new skills between now and 2030.*” He recommends that “*an expanded role for Jobcentre Plus (JCP) should be a step towards them becoming genuine ‘jobs and skills hubs.’*” I think that this idea has huge potential. Matthew also points out that “*putting employers at the heart of new qualifications will build on the success of local partnerships. It will ensure courses remain in*

**“Several important sectors in our economy are experiencing difficulties in recruiting skilled workers, including health and social care, teaching and digital, which we all rely on.”**

*lockstep with industry needs and give learners confidence they are gaining skills that lead to jobs. New technologies mean that nine-in-ten employees will need to learn new skills by 2030. Government commitment to boosting access to modular learning will support more adults into training. This should be backed up by turning the Apprenticeship Levy into a flexible skills levy”<sup>5</sup>. This is also a huge idea, with great scope for building wider employer responsiveness and provider agility into the system.*

While meeting a DWP Minister, the MD of my previous employer passionately explained our frustrations around disconnected employability and skills services. The Minister emphatically agreed and expressed determination to look into what she might do about it. Unfortunately, she wasn't in that post for very much longer. Nonetheless, there are signs that cross-departmental strategy groups are actively grappling with the challenge.

Matthew Fell's 'jobs and skills hubs' idea may be one that they eventually take up, going beyond what some LEPs and Combined Authorities aim to achieve with limited success. Enhancing JCP carries the right kind of strategic boldness to create the conditions necessary for systemic integration of employability and skills services. Beyond the recent onboarding and training of thousands of new employability professionals, we will need progressive, enhanced approaches to making employer-informed training more accessible, bite-sized and flexible, across a wide range of programmes and employer routeways.

## The personal level

The maxim of one my clients is every person matters, informing their employability (JCP) and skills (Adult Education Budget) training services. Wherever the funding comes from, they take the same professional and caring approach. Yet, they continually fight to survive in a commissioning environment that are constantly disrupting their capacity to do what they do best. If there were fewer boundaries between employability and skills funding sources, and outcomes were better aligned, then more collaboration would be feasible across more scenarios, transcending traditional silos of employability, health and skills. For example, they could explore individual-led purchasing, where a Personal Budget follows the individual to services and the employers of their choice. This is a powerful funding and operating mechanism for tailoring, sequencing and optimising services (even simultaneously). To apply it we need more employment and skills co-investment and co-commissioning opportunities, where eligibilities are open and services interoperable.

## Conclusion

Collaboration isn't an end in itself. But it can be an effective way to expand more personalised services.

Tony Wilson of the Institute for Employment Studies recently said: “overall, the current recruitment crises are large-scale, widespread and risk becoming chronic... With the Plan for Jobs having helped to avert an unemployment catastrophe, we now need a new and different plan, that will work with employers and wider public services to far better support older people, disabled people, those with health conditions, parents and students to prepare



## “New technologies mean that nine-in-ten employees will need to learn new skills by 2030.”

for and get (back) into work.”<sup>6</sup>. I agree. This new and different plan should unshackle commissioners, providers and employers, so that they can better collaborate on every level.

We could build on the successful ‘work and health’ mode of operation between DWP and the Department of Health and Social Care and establish shared employability and skills pilots between the DWP and Department for Education.

We could also create cross-sector investment pools, align contract lengths (recognising that skills contracts are often shorter than employability contracts) and commission services by main cities, seaside towns, rural areas and former industrial towns rather than wider geographies.

As Universal Credit is the central welfare benefit, perhaps even a flexible Universal (Personal) Budget could become a much more widely applied model, enabling individuals and families to draw on the right employability, skills, health and specialist services for them. This would significantly expand the quality and range of employment routeways available to jobseekers, help them to boost their labour market mobility and empower personal progression in work.

### Notes:

1. Page 10, Building Sustainability in Employability Services, IEP and NOUS, 21 October 2021.
2. Page 8, Building Sustainability in Employability Services, IEP and NOUS, 21 October 2021.
3. Summary Introduction, IFS Report, Job opportunities during the pandemic, 21 September 2021 <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15628>
4. Jane Hickie, quoted in ‘Skills Bootcamps to tackle HGV driver shortage’, FE Week, September 25 2021 [https://feweek.co.uk/skills-bootcamps-to-tackle-hgv-drivershortage/?mc\\_cid=87aa29e6f0&mc\\_eid=e42d8c84de](https://feweek.co.uk/skills-bootcamps-to-tackle-hgv-drivershortage/?mc_cid=87aa29e6f0&mc_eid=e42d8c84de)
5. CBI Comments on Skills for Jobs White Paper, January 21, 2021 <https://www.cbi.org.uk/media-centre/articles/cbi-comments-on-skills-for-jobs-white-paper/>
6. Institute for Employment Studies (IES) Labour Market Statistics, IES Briefing Note, Tuesday 12 October 2021

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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#### Mark Cosens FIEP | Founder | Cosens Consult

Mark is a Fellow of the IEP and the RSA and has worked in the employability sector since 2006. He attended the first meeting of the ‘Power’ (Professionalisation of Welfare-to-Work Expert Reference) group, from which the IEP was born. He founded Cosens Consult in 2018, specialising mainly in bid/tender writing.



# Letters to the Editor

**Dear Editor,**

It's been a roller coaster of a year for employability services. Brexit and COVID-19 dramatically affected the employment landscape. From initial huge job losses to the furlough scheme to a job bounce back. It has also been the case that many of the most vulnerable people in our community have continued to get disproportionately affected. Think young people, women and people from BAME backgrounds. At the same time, Restart provided a huge injection of funds into the sector but as quickly as it came there is a risk that it may also quickly disappear.

Throughout this rollercoaster period, the IEP and Nous has led sector leaders through a set of facilitated business scenarios to better respond to future events. The great thing about scenario planning is that it allows you to imagine the future from different perspectives. From an IEP perspective, key employability workforce skills that emerged from these scenarios included sector collaboration, lobbying and influencing, strategic planning and digital skills.

As the IEP and Nous worked with the sector on these scenarios, a key assumption from sector leaders was that employability services are funded by the government. But what if this assumption no longer held true? Suddenly the options for the sector change. At one level, many of the providers in the sector would pivot their great skill in government contracting to other government services. In fact, many providers have already done this. At another level though it could help the sector to reimagine its role in society, to unshackle itself from government contracting obligations and to seek income (or fees) for employability services from other sources such as employers or large-scale philanthropy.

It is a big call to shift the funding base of the sector. Maybe it's too big. Maybe the boom bust nature of employability services is its natural disposition. Maybe the pivoting of many providers to be government service contractors rather than purely employability service providers is the natural direction of travel. Either way, the work by the IEP and Nous during 2021 has provided a platform to have this conversation as a sector.

In turning the 2022, we hope that the IEP and sector leaders will continue to productively challenge themselves about the future of the sector. We look forward to facilitating this discussion in the sector.

**Zac Ashkanasy FIEP | Principal | Nous Group**

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**Dear Editor,**

Diversity Matters – and as we draw to the end of 2021, it feels as if we are finally making some progress on this. At AoC our 250 or so members are all committed to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and it has been a key focus for many HR teams for a long time. However, despite best intentions perhaps its true to say that EDI hasn't really make the impact required and although 30% of students at college are black or from an ethnic minority background, only 7% leaders share that background. And for broader diversity, including disability and other protected characteristics, the data isn't any more positive. We have a long way to go to meet our collective aspirations.

However, all is not lost and in the last couple of years we have worked with many colleges and their talented staff working to bring the importance of diversity centre stage, and to demonstrate how diversity of thought, diversity of leadership and creating a culture of belonging is essential for a successful and healthy business.

For many of us working in employability, skills and education, it's a values driven career choice

and we are motivated by having a positive impact on people's lives. So, as well as doing our very best for our students and clients, it's important to focus on the organisation we lead, or work within, to really assess if we are doing our utmost to create equality of opportunity and a culture of belonging for our teams. At AoC we work closely with our members to review and advise on talent acquisition and development as well as looking at the whole recruitment cycle from advertising to annual reviews. Once you start to look it's amazing how many small changes can create a big impact. And as we all know, culture eats strategy for breakfast so if we are going to really achieve change, we have to look at the way we build and perpetuate our culture, and talent management is at the heart of this.

We work closely with leadership teams, boards and their non-exec teams and aspiring leaders and managers. As a strategic partner with IEP, we are committed to working together to create opportunities for sharing ideas and best practice across our sectors. We look forward to co-hosting a programme of webinars with IEP in 2022 as a first step.

I look forward to seeing you there and achieving even more together in 2022

**Hilary Clifford | Director of AoC Services | Association of Colleges**

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**Dear Editor,**

**Building Back Better....**

It is with a lot of pride that I send the Institute of Employability Professionals congratulations on its 10th birthday. The aspiration I shared ten years ago with many others for an entity that supported, developed and promoted people working on employability and skills programmes has come of age, as has the sector itself. As I look back over my career there has been a great deal of change and much progress. When I was ERSA Chair back

in the 2000's some eyebrows were raised when I talked about our 'sector'. It didn't then particularly feel as if there was much that was homogeneous about our activity, but few would feel uncomfortable with that description now. We talked then too of 'Welfare to Work'. 'Employability' much better describes the depth and breadth of support our members now deliver. That's the pat on the back. Well done!

In other respects, however, we are on something of a hamster wheel. Programmes come and go and if we are brutally honest with ourselves it often remains difficult to quantify the impact or prove the innovation. 'Kickstart'? 'Restart'? We have been here before, haven't we? So, I am laying down a challenge to the Employability Sector. It is in two parts. Here goes...

Firstly. This has been a difficult two years for everyone on both sides of the supply and demand counter. Exceptional times call for extraordinary responses. We emerged from World War Two with the Welfare State and the National Health Service. What might materialize from our experiences of the Pandemic? How has our practice changed - our use of technology, remote working, accessibility? What has been the impact on our customers? On our teams? Inadvertently, in apparent adversity, have we found flexibilities that have made our programmes more inclusive? Or jobs more accessible? Have our definitions of what 'work' is changed with our experiences of home working, mass volunteering, the 'Great Resignation'? In short, is there a once in a generation opportunity to do things differently?

Secondly - an allied challenge. To progress in any meaningful way the Employability Sector must own the 'Levelling Up' agenda and take responsibility for its relevance to the people we serve - left behind, marginalised and excluded communities, families and individuals. YOU are the experts. YOU have worked through the most seismic post war period and understand

best the needs of job seekers and the most effective delivery methods. The responsibility for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, lies within the DLUHC 'Super Department' also responsible for the Levelling Up agenda. How the UKSPF is allocated and who it benefits is a moot point and it is up to you to lobby, actively and effectively, for an imaginative, well-financed programme that is accessible to all, inclusive for everyone and full of evidenced, innovatory, best practice – an open door with a 'Welcome' mat for those that most need support.

Rethinking how we work as teams, how beneficiaries access our programmes, where our activities are based and what those activities look and feel like will take courage (and possibly a leap of faith) on our part and that of our commissioners. In 1997 Tony Blair charged Frank Field with the reform of the Welfare State, to 'think the unthinkable'. Field was quickly dismissed when he did so. But now we must do just that and we, the supply side experts, must demonstrate our ability to think imaginatively and creatively. If we fail to do so I fear we will become an irrelevance because in the old adage – 'If we always do what we always did, we will always get what we always got.' Failure is simply not an option if we are to get off that hamster wheel!

I hope I have generated some interest in a wider conversation about these challenges and look forward to discussing them further in 2022. In the meantime, I am raising my glass to all members, staff and supporters of the IEP. Congratulations to us!

**Fran Parry FIEP**

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**Dear Editor**

Essential skills are a core underpinning of employability and lifelong learning, and their importance in supporting people to switch sectors as the world changes cannot be understated. Also known as 'core skills' or 'meta skills', essential skills help individuals to train and retrain, enabling them to upskill and switch sectors with ease and confidence.

These skills – which include resilience, communication, speaking and listening, problem-solving, collaboration and flexibility – help us to navigate, progress and transition throughout the complexities of both our professional and personal lives.

This list isn't exhaustive, and will continue to evolve over time, reflecting changes in employability and in our general lives. For example, very few of us were experts at working video call technology pre-pandemic. Over the past few years, digital skills have become more essential than ever before.

For this reason, improving our essential skills will always be a work in progress. We'll all have to transition through different career paths in our lives and when doing so, we'll need to be aware of which skills employers will expect us to have. For example, significant changes such as industry 4.0 and increasing automation will mean that we'll all need to continue to work on our adaptability, to be able to compete in what is very much a skills-led labour market.

The great news is that we're working on our essential skills all the time - sometimes, without even knowing it. Recently, I was a panellist on a webinar discussing essential skills, when I was asked how such skills can be showcased to employers where work experience hasn't been possible. It's important to remember that essential skills are everyday skills and as such, they can be exemplified in real-life ways, such as explaining how you supported family or friends through a crisis, or your community in a time of need.

There is also a wealth of brilliant tools online to help us identify, access and work on our essential skills. Resources such as NCFE's Skills Work employability diagnostic tool helps to measure an individual's core employability skills, identifying their strengths and weaknesses across essential

skills such as communication, motivation and persistence. With about half of the UK's workforce – which is around 17 million people – lacking the core digital skills needed for work and life, we also offer Essential Digital Skills qualifications (EDSQs), as well as Functional Skills and employability courses, to support those aiming to build their core skills.

Essential skills should be at the forefront of conversation when discussing requirements of employability and lifelong learning. In our sector, we all must show our commitment to embedding essential skills across all training and learning qualifications and curriculums – something that collaboration and partnership will be fundamental to achieving.

**Dan Howard FIEP | Operations Director for Learning for Work | NCFE**

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### Dear Editor

I wonder if anyone else shares my feeling that quality is an elusive thing in employability services?

We all know what quality is, don't we? Or do we? In recent months I've been lucky to be part of some quality-related discussions, and one thing stands out: quality is hard to define and tricky to measure. Implementing quality is the right thing to do – but where to start?

One view is that it's shown by:

- getting clients into work
- progressing on the journey to work
- continuous improvement (do I detect a tautology here? I do!)
- equality, confidentiality, safeguarding and safety
- staying profitable.

Another emphasises the actors doing the work:

- advisor skills & training

- partnership and co-operation in supply chains
- labour market and employers
- social groups, family and culture
- leaders and managers.

Still another raises discussion about for example

- individuals: managers, advisors, clients
- organisation: resources, responses to the environment, branding, supply chains
- the legal and social environment.

Not forgetting the delivery models:

- the market for services with its inputs and outputs
- economic rationality and 'better-off' calculations
- supporting journeys to work
- client assessment and bespoke help
- matching clients and right jobs
- consumer involvement.

And the many models of implementation so well captured by mesma's work for the IEP.

So, no, we still have a distance to go before quality can be better defined, agreed and developed. Which means more discussion and some quite subtle evidential, ethical and practical choices. We'll have to ask, not only 'what are we trying to do', and 'what works' but also 'how do all these things fit together?' And, as if that wasn't enough, 'how do we make it all happen?'

Sounds like work for the Happy New Year, one and all!

**David Imber FIEP | Principal | the good employability company**



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