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Cunningham, Eileen, Christie, Fiona , Deakin, Ria and Jones, Katy  (2024) Embedding the concept of Decent Work in career development learning. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 53 (1). pp. 36-50. ISSN 1472-6564

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.5305>

**Publisher:** NICEC

**Version:** Published Version

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# Embedding the concept of Decent Work in career development learning

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**To cite this article:**

Cunningham, E., Christie, F., Deakin, R., & Jones, K. (2024). Embedding the concept of Decent Work in career development learning. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 53(1), 36-50. <https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.5305>

## Abstract

In this article we raise questions about the dilemmas and practicalities of developing 'critical consciousness' in career practice. We outline theory and policy that has been instrumental in the evolution of a Decent Work informed approach to career learning. Inspired and informed by our own research about graduate transitions and young people in precarious work, we conclude by highlighting resources we have developed in partnership with the 'Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter' team for embedding Decent Work in career development learning.

**Keywords:** Decent work; career; UK; Higher Education

## Introduction

Employability is a major focus in higher education in many countries (Dalrymple et al., 2021) and the role of universities in the development of human capital has driven public policy for decades. In the UK, where we as authors are based, this has led most recently to 'Graduate Outcomes' becoming a success measure for universities as required by the Higher Education and Research Act (2017). However, critical employability research (e.g., Clarke, 2018) has highlighted the limitations of what universities and their students can achieve to foster employability in the face of labour market uncertainties and inequalities; there are enduring concerns about the risk of individualising structural challenges in policy and practices.

University students in England face several pressures in addition to the primary focus of studying to pass their degree. They are effectively responsible for financially supporting themselves through university as funding for tuition fees and maintenance has diminished over the past decade. At the same time, they are responsible for making themselves attractive to future employers (enhancing their 'employability').

It is easy to make the mistake of referring to student careers as a future concern, yet the reality is that an increasing number of students already work and may have done for several years, often in relatively poor quality, low skilled jobs. This presents a challenge and an opportunity for career professionals working in higher education to engage in critical discussions about quality of employment and how the working students of today can become the decent leaders of tomorrow.

We as authors share an interest in applied research that is useful for practice with the first and second authors being former careers advisers. Individually and collectively, we undertake research and impact-focused work through the Decent Work and Productivity research centre at our university. The work we describe in this article is informed by various research projects undertaken with students and recent graduates (Christie & Swingewood, 2022; Cunningham et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2023). Between us, we teach every student in our department a careers module for a whole semester at every year level and in addition offer an optional module dedicated to Decent Work. This affords us opportunities and time to embed career development learning which may not exist in all settings, however, the ideas and resources we present here may be transferable and adaptable for other university settings and client groups.

The article is structured as follows: The first section discusses the meaning of good and decent work; the second section explores the relationship between good and decent work and career development scholarship and practice. The third section reviews existing debates about student work. Fourthly, we move on to outline the potential value of legal and psycho-social literacies as concepts for career and employability learning, before finally introducing an open access resource about Good Work that we have created with the Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter team for students and university career professionals.

## Decent Work and the Good Work Movement

Decent work, partnered with economic growth, is Goal 8 of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (ILO, 2019). The UN Goal seeks to influence national governments and employers to embrace the principles of decent work into their own contexts. There are four pillars associated with the goal: 1) employment creation/ access to work; 2) rights at work; 3) social protection; and 4) social dialogue. Principles of dignity, equality, fair income, safe working conditions and worker voice underpin these pillars.

In the UK, the term 'good work' or 'fair work' is more commonly used, with influential reports (Irvine et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2017) helping to define good work as well as recognise the erosion of working conditions in some parts of the economy. Other policy-oriented work from the European Union uses the language of job quality (Eurofound, 2021) to highlight issues related to decent work. Notably, while national employment legislation in

the UK stalled between 2010-2024 (the newly elected UK government promises to reverse this trend) devolved regions and nations have attempted to stimulate good work over and above any UK-wide employment regulation.

Across the nations of the UK, the concept of decent work has been borne out in the Good and Fair Work Movement (Jones & Kumar, 2022). This has emerged via regional employment charters, relevant professional associations, i.e., the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD), as well as through the work of trade unions. For example, the CIPD's annual Good Work Index (Wheatley, 2022) identifies seven core characteristics of good work: 1) pay and benefits; 2) employment contracts; 3) work-life balance; 4) job design and the nature of work; 5) relationships at work; 6) employee voice; and 7) health and wellbeing. Across all definitions utilised in measures, issues emerge relating to objective vs subjective notions of good work (Jones et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2018). Thorny issues remain about how individuals evaluate the quality of their work.

## The role of Decent Work in career development scholarship and practice

Decent work is a topic which attracts interest from diverse disciplines (Christie et al., 2021), including human resource management, economics, sociology, social policy, psychology, international development and political economy. It is also of growing interest to career development scholars and practitioners, especially for those who foreground a commitment to social justice (Blustein et al., 2023; Christie et al., 2020; Hooley et al., 2021; Kenny, 2024). Notably Duffy et al. (2016), position Decent Work as central to their psychology of working theory, viewing it as something that can satisfy core human needs. An awareness of decent work is helpful to career development professionals. It has the potential to surface difficult issues about both decent and indecent work in a way that helps to navigate tensions between optimism and realism in practice with students. Such questions align to debates about the scope for critical consciousness-raising in career development scholarship and practice.

Hooley et al (2021) argue for building critical consciousness in their five signposts for a social justice informed approach to career guidance; alongside naming oppression, questioning what is normal, encouraging people to work together, and working at a range of levels. Blustein and his co-authors in the psychology of working theory (Duffy et al, 2016) propose that critical consciousness can moderate the negative effects of marginalisation. They build on authors from education such as Freire (1996) and Watts (2002), and argue that it comprises of critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. Although scholars have long argued for the benefits of critical consciousness, there have been limited strategies about how to enact such ideas in practice with clients. Sometimes even professionals who are aware of inequalities and injustices in the labour market can struggle to find ways to highlight such challenges to clients due to a fear of diminishing optimism, or a sense that managers may not be convinced of the value of such a critical approach (Buzdugan, 2020). This has implications for both work with clients but also wider Careers Service policies (e.g., with employers and vacancy-handling). It is important to stress that a 'critical' approach does not imply blame or criticism which could lead to defensiveness and hostility, rather it acknowledges the messy complexity of contemporary workplaces.

Research indicates (Christie & Swingewood, 2022; Cunningham et al., 2022) that many people are well aware of labour market injustices so this is not something that career development professionals should shy away from either. Some recent graduates told us in our research (Cunningham et al., 2022) that they felt they had been misled during their time at university, believing a meritocratic narrative that if they worked hard then success would naturally follow. This shaped their experiences, expectations and decisions post-graduation and they implored us to tell students what it is like after graduation, about the difficulties they faced in finding a good job and how long it took. That research highlighted that it could take at least a year to settle into a 'successful' job and yet a positive discovery of the studies was that many did secure quality 'graduate level' jobs. Similarly, in research during the pandemic, we also observed considerable movement and change in young people's circumstances over time. We also found that young people were able to recognise labour market injustices and welcomed the opportunity to discuss in/decent work, although were often vague about their employment rights (Christie & Swingewood, 2022). These research findings motivated us to find a way to balance a realistic picture of the challenges and pitfalls with a genuine hope and optimism for the future. This paper seeks to describe some of the ways in which we have tried to do this.

## Student experiences of in/decent work

The issue of student employment in the UK has recently become the focus of government, media and research attention (Neves & Stephenson, 2023; Wright et al, 2024). Diminishing financial support and the increasing costs of independent living have driven students to accept the reality of working alongside their studies (Allen et al. 2024) Students occupy an interesting position in the labour market as they may be precarious workers, often in zero-hour contracts in service industries such as retail and hospitality and yet this is generally accepted as a temporary state of affairs and even a rite of passage.

The rise of flexible working, for example, zero-hour contracts, alongside the increased individual responsibility for higher education costs may seem convenient as students can, in theory, fit their work around their studies. However, this flexibility is likely to be oriented to employer needs so students may find they are trying to fit their studies around their job or risk losing it. Although many universities have made provisions such as condensed timetables to support students' work, there are still consequences of poor class attendance and compromised grades.

Rydzik and Kissoon (2022), in their study of student-workers in the UK hospitality sector, suggest that poor quality work socialises young people to accept and internalise norms of the neoliberal workplace, for example, to accept subservience, emotion suppression and even sexual harassment. They also highlight inequalities which are widespread in the hospitality sector, such as roles segregated along race and gender lines. Their study highlights how student-workers feel they have little power to challenge unfair work practices, instead exercising their agency by changing jobs frequently. The article also highlights the need for employability learning to include working rights and to encourage students to be reflective and ethical, '*equipping them with a vocabulary to deconstruct neoliberalised practices*' (p.12). The authors call for universities and student unions to work with local employers to raise standards for student employment and have developed a charter to facilitate this (University of Lincoln, 2023).

Working is often considered to help students enhance their employability through building a track record of experience and transferable skills, (Dacre-Pool & Sewell, 2007; Knight & Yorke, 2003). Aside from economic capital, working can accrue valuable 'graduate capitals': human, social, cultural, identity and psychological (Tomlinson, 2017). Arguably, even having a poor-quality job could motivate people to work harder and to discover things they don't want in a career – a phenomenon Houston & Cunningham (2017) call 'career misery push'. In their research into the working lives of young women, Allen et al. (2024) found that students felt they learn a lot from dealing with rude customers, for example, in hospitality jobs. Callendar (2008, p.374) however, suggests that this kind of student employment is likely to further disadvantage the poorest and least qualified students. Part-time, term-time working carries an opportunity cost, making students less available for other opportunities such as volunteering, extra-curricular activities, socialising or even basic self-care. This 'juggling' of work, study and life can take its toll on mental health (Antoniadou et al., 2023).

It is a mistake to refer to students' careers as something that has not started yet and is for the future. A wider definition of career includes their current and previous work and learning experiences. Jackson (2016) refers to the important development of pre-professional identity for university students. This is gained through a range of experiences, especially those that are related to work. For the current cohort of students, this early career has already been disrupted by a global pandemic followed by a cost-of-living crisis, both of which have adversely affected the kind of jobs that young people may tend to experience (e.g., hospitality and retail). Such 'low-skilled' roles are increasingly disappearing too with the growth of technology (e.g., self-checkouts and ordering food at tables on using an app) further engraining a sense of the insecure and competitive nature of work, as students may feel they have to accept 'any job' to top-up loans. Meanwhile, student-workers are also future leaders, employers, business owners and policymakers of the future. Supporting students (and other clients) in recognising what constitutes good and poor-quality work and what to do about it can raise standards for students now and for the benefit of their future employees.

So, how can we do this, as career professionals?

## Critical consciousness in career education and counselling: The development of Legal and Psycho-Social Literacies

The tools and strategies career professionals use in their work require expertise and judgement to achieve the best outcome for students and clients. There are deeply engrained attitudes and beliefs in practice about the nature of the relationship. Principles of impartiality and person-centred guidance may pose some awkward ethical dilemmas. For example, should we promote unpaid internships (Buzdugan, 2020)? Do we openly discuss cash-in-hand jobs or sex-work, which may be a concern for some students? If a student discloses that they are facing racism or sexism in their bar job, how do we react? If a student comes straight to university from a nightshift and falls asleep, do we accept they need to earn money to support their studies or berate them for lack of commitment?

Career education and guidance is sometimes criticised for being overly focused on individual agency and detached from structural inequalities and the realities of individual circumstances. Good career development learning will explore the systemic relationships

and tensions between these influences (e.g. McMahon & Patton, 1995). This calls for professionals to develop their own and their clients' literacy in legal and psycho-social domains so they can appropriately advise and support students in navigating the complexities of the contemporary workplace.

Literacy is a popular term in the field of education (for example, carbon literacy, digital literacy, information literacy) but what does it mean, how is it different from knowledge or a skill and how does it apply to career development? Literacy in a more general context might mean learning a language, fluently conversing in it and being to judge what to say, when and how. This will be dependent upon many subtle cues such as the social context, timing and interpersonal dynamics. It might also mean attuning to and adjusting the message in real-time. As such, 'literacy' can be a useful concept for career professionals in sensitively augmenting their expertise with an orientation towards good work. Care must be taken though, not to talk about literacies as if they are neutral commodities (Jones, 2018; Staunton, 2018), rather it is essential to recognise contextual inequalities regarding how individuals are able to acquire such skills and learn to mobilise them in their everyday lives.

In a recent article for employability professionals (Christie et al., 2023), we introduced the concepts of legal and psycho-social literacies. We view these as aligning with the development of critical consciousness in career development (Hooley et al., 2021; Duffy et al., 2016). The term *legal literacy* describes not only an awareness of employment rights but also knowledge of how these rights can be exercised. Career development learning provides a valuable opportunity to raise awareness of working rights and how to recognise when they may be transgressed. For example, even basic employment rights like receiving payslips and paid holiday are often not upheld in the UK. Beyond this awareness, students need to understand what they can do if their rights are being undermined and where to go for support.

*Psycho-social literacy* means being able, as a career professional, to recognise and encourage clients to explore what good work means to them and how to find or negotiate it. Research has long established the psycho-social significance of work and there is consensus that factors above and beyond the basic terms and conditions of a job (such as pay and hours worked) can significantly impact how people subjectively experience their work. For example, having a good line manager, social support and a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities can make a significant difference to satisfaction, wellbeing and ultimately productivity. While some aspects may be explicitly discussed or written down, there are many more subtle things such as behavioural norms and expectations or how people treat each other which Rousseau (1995) describes as the 'psychological contract'. Students, particularly those who are neurodiverse or without prior work experience, may find this particularly puzzling and stressful.

On a practical level such literacies can be developed by making students familiar with typical scenarios and issues can help them to mentally prepare strategies. Scenarios can highlight both good and bad practices. Many employers treat their student workforce well and have a lasting and transformative impact on those fortunate to work with them. Student employment is not only precarious jobs in retail and hospitality but also includes placements, internships and even volunteering. Many placement students later progress into graduate roles with the same company emphasising the mutual benefits of quality

working relationships. Highlighting positive working practices and considering how and why they work can provide inspiration and practical ideas to enhance employment and is key to navigating the optimism/realism challenge associated with a more critical approach to career and employability learning.

## Embedding the concept of Decent Work in career development learning: A practical example

We are fortunate to work closely with Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) under the authority of mayor, Andy Burnham. GMCA have been proactive and forward-thinking in establishing the 'Good Employment Charter' which encourages organisations to commit to raise standards relating to seven criteria: secure work, flexible work, pay, engagement and voice; recruitment, people management, and health and wellbeing (Halford, 2023).

Over the past few years, Manchester Metropolitan University researchers have worked in an award-winning partnership with GMCA with research-led initiatives such as the Good Employment Charter evaluation and a good practice toolkit (Crozier, 2022). GMCA's Charter team had already published resources for schools and colleges about good employment before working with us to develop a similar resource for universities in the region. In partnership with GMCA and in consultation with students in our faculty, we created a resource to help students recognise good (and poor) employment (Halford et al, 2024). The resource defines aspects of good work and poses questions they can ask of their job or employer or in their career research (see Box 1) relating to each of the Charter criteria.

### Box 1: Example questions on recruitment

The employer has excellent recruitment practices, involving prospective employees in an inclusive, fair recruitment process that is accessible, enables both equality and equity, eliminates unconscious bias, and supports the building of a diverse workforce.

#### Questions you might ask the employer:

- If I am selected for interview, is it your policy to share interview questions beforehand so that I can best prepare myself?
- Can I claim expenses for attending an interview with you? (if I need to travel)
- Before arriving for interview, will I be informed of who to ask for at reception?
- If I am successful, what does onboarding look like?
- Will you inform me of recruitment timescales so that I might know when to expect to hear the outcome?
- Following the recruitment process, will you provide me with feedback about whether I am successful or not?



The process of developing these resources has taken about a year and has involved consultation with stakeholders at different stages. We first approached GMCA with the idea after seeing the schools and colleges resources then liaised with the head of the Charter team to adapt them to the higher education context, integrating our professional expertise, insights from our research and anecdotal evidence from students and graduates about issues they faced. The content was approved by the Charter team and endorsed by the mayor, Andy Burnham, with a foreword. During its creation, we sought feedback about it from students in diverse ways and discussed it with Careers Service colleagues. Most recently, we also delivered a workshop at the NICEC conference with career professionals. Although it has been well-received so far this project is still 'work-in progress' and we would very much welcome feedback on the resources from practitioners from any settings.

Guidance and discussion are recommended in introducing the resource to students and considering how best to use it. The guide is not suggesting that students simply ask prospective employers a long list of questions about good work, especially not at interview. The definitions of good work criteria and questions in the guide prompt students to do more research about companies and jobs, for example, through review websites (e.g., Glassdoor or RateMyPlacement), through detailed reading of job descriptions, contracts or in discussion once a job has been offered.

There is a section designed for students who may not have a conventional employer, for example, those working freelance, self-employed or in the gig economy. Of course, students may be aware that their working conditions are not perfect and yet they may either be happy to accept this as a means to an end or else feel powerless to challenge this. Additionally, although there may be some agreement on what constitutes good work, there are likely to be some individual considerations and differences. For example, in some industries (e.g. creative, media) the only route in may be through exploitative, precarious or even unpaid positions. Students may accept a trade-off and be willing to accept such conditions as a short-term compromise (Cunningham et al, 2022). Again, this is where career professionals can help students make informed and contextualised career decisions.

Building on this resource, we developed a toolkit to help career professionals and employability educators to introduce concepts around good work in an up-to-date and relatable way. Our toolkit includes a quiz about working rights and links to a 'How Good is your job' questionnaire. In addition, we created several realistic scenarios (e.g. Box 2). which are based on stories our students have told us they experienced. Each scenario can either present multi-choice answers to choose from or form the basis of a lively and skilfully chaired discussion about the rights (and wrongs) of the situation. Crucially, students can consider actions they could take and possible consequences.

## Box 2: Recruitment challenge scenario example (options and suggested answers)

1. You travelled to another city for an interview for a graduate job. You are unsuccessful and when you ask about interview expenses, you are told that only successful applicants can claim expenses. What do you do?

a. Shrug your shoulders and put it down to experience.

**Not really OK.** *Although this seems pragmatic, it's always good to reflect upon experience and reduce the risk of it happening again, especially as this experience has annoyed you.*

b. Review the information you had received before the interview to double-check this was included. If it was in the small print and you hadn't noticed, make a decision that you will always check this kind of detail for any future applications (and potentially not attend interviews if no expenses available).

**Definitely OK.** *This is a sensible response and how an employer deals with such matters is a good indicator of how good an employer is and whether you would want to work for them.*

c. Take to GlassDoor and write a damning review of the employer's bad practice.

**OK but not ideal.** *This may make you feel better in the short-term and review sites are useful. Post a review but make sure you write it in a way that is useful to others. This option may not address what you have learnt from the experience.*

d. Go to the Careers Service and ask them if this is normal practice in the Graduate recruitment market and if there are ways to avoid such a thing happening to you again.

**Definitely OK.** *It's really good to get advice from the Careers Service. They also work with employers so might be able to influence better practice in this area if you let them know about the details of what has happened.*

One of the challenges with the resource will be keeping the information up to date as things can quickly change, especially in the wake of a new government promising to focus on workers' rights. The resource signposts to specialist sources of advice such as the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS, n.d.). Career professionals do not need to be employment law experts but knowing where to access such advice is helpful. We have designed the resources so they can be freely available and easily adapted. We would envisage they could be used in educational settings either as materials for a standalone careers or employability session, e.g. by a personal tutor. Our university careers team have suggested that some of the topics could

be incorporated into web-based information and regular training sessions (e.g. interview skills) and guidance interviews (e.g. considering various opportunities through a lens of decent work; openly discussing rights and working conditions).

The resources will be used in tutorials within our university as well as being shared with other Greater Manchester universities. The aim is to support both students and career professionals and employability educators in recognising characteristics of good work and building a critical consciousness around poor quality work. Sometimes students may feel responsible for problems they face at work and think they just have to accept them. Open discussions may help them to feel less isolated and empowered to challenge the status quo. This work is informed and underpinned by career development scholarship that is social justice oriented and advocates critical consciousness (Hooley et al, 2021; Duffy et al, 2016). The five signposts to social justice (Hooley et al, 2021) have been influential to our approach. Issues of good employment are collective issues, not individual, and through our partnership with GMCA and universities we are able to work at a range of levels to drive changes.

The next stage of the process may be to work with local employers (e.g. Charter members and supporters) who employ students to enhance the quality of their work and ask their views of the resource created for students. Efforts to increase good work also contribute to policy aspirations to retain more graduates in our growing region (Brophy, 2024). The growing movement of organisations dedicated to creating a better future is indeed heartening. This trend is not unique to our region and is borne out in other regional and national Employment Charters. More ethical approaches to business are also evident in the growing B Corp (B Lab UK, 2024) movement. B Corps are businesses that have been certified by B Lab to meet high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency, and accountability

## Conclusions

It is not always easy to deliver messages about challenges and unfairness in the labour market to students who have invested so heavily in their career. However, 'building a critical consciousness' (Hooley et al., 2021) can reassure students they are not alone and that they do not shoulder sole responsibility for establishing a successful and rewarding working life. Being transparent and sensitive in discussing workplace issues can equip our students to find good work now and to create good work for others in their future roles.

It is unfair and ineffective to expect students to shoulder the responsibility for challenging poor working conditions on their own. The following recommendations may be useful for major stakeholders - students, career professionals, Student Unions, universities and employers.

### Students

- Openly communicating with tutors and career professionals about work-related issues is important as they share the ultimate goals of positive educational and occupational outcomes and can offer advice, signposting and help develop strategies.
- Working together to challenge unfair practices (e.g. report them, support each other, collective action e.g. through student and trade unions) is more effective than standing up to them alone.

## Career professionals

- Career development work is not always about being impartial, sometimes it calls for judgement, labelling unacceptable practices and actively intervening.
- Career development is as much about helping students make sense of the present as it is planning the future. This does not necessarily mean we have to be experts in employment law, but we do need to know the questions to ask and where to signpost to.

## Student Unions

- Collectively campaign to raise the standard of student employment. Facilitate quality jobs which are open to students, for example, placements, paid internships and part-time roles on campus.

## Universities

- Embedding decent work into the curriculum particularly, teaching students about their employment rights, is a valuable element of employability and can help students to recognise unacceptable practices.
- Universities have a role to play in advocating to employers how both sides might benefit from student-friendly policies and providing opportunities for students to develop valuable skills and become future leaders.
- Create case studies showcasing good employers and opportunities for them to engage with students. Normalise sharing narratives of typical student-graduate transitions in promotional literature as well as the traditional 'success' stories.
- Universities have a responsibility to be good employers themselves both of students they employ as well as regular staff.

## Employers

- Employers can work with local universities and engage students in developing and sharing good practice.
- Strive towards good employment for all, not only as a legal obligation or to enhance productivity but to re-establish the dignity of sustainable work as a social good.

## Policymakers

- Financial support for students is in urgent need of reform. Adequate support would reduce the need for students to work long hours.
- The increased cost of living is a wider economic issue and yet one which hits students hard. Regulating private accommodation costs and offering free or subsidised transport could alleviate some of the financial pressure.
- Any review of working rights (e.g. banning zero-hour contracts) needs to consider the impact on the working student population.

Good employment can mutually benefit employers in retaining employees; universities in retaining students who achieve positive outcomes and students' quality of life. Career professionals are well-placed to advance this cause.

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