



The National Career Service of India: An Appraisal of a Dream that Could Come True

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Abstract

Public Employment Services (PESs) have been key to the effective functioning of the labour market in many countries. Countries have revamped or are in the process of revamping their PESs in order to make them more responsive to the changing times. Following this trend, the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, has recently launched the National Career Service (NCS) which will replace the National Employment Service (NES). NCS has been conceived as a *comprehensive, multi-pronged, transformational project* which aims to increase placement of registered job seekers. The primary vehicle of NCS is the availability of an ICT-based national platform for interface among different stakeholders. This scheme aims to transform employment exchanges in the country (i.e., Indian PESs) into career centres. Based on official documents available in the public domain, media coverage, and interactions held with employment officers, in the paper the evolution of employment exchanges is traced, their current status is summarised, key aspects of the National Career Service project are outlined, observations are made with an emphasis on issues related to capacity building and funding, and key gaps are pointed out. The paper offers insights for enhancing effectiveness of the National Career Service.

Key words: career portal, career guidance, employment exchanges, National Career Service, public employment service

The Context of Public Employment Services

As per the definition put forth by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2009) a Public Employment Service (PES) is “a specific government entity with a variety of functions that support the promotion of employment, depending on national employment policy and its legislated remit” (p. 2). PESs “plan and execute many of the active, and sometimes passive, labour market policies used to help workers enter the labour market, to facilitate labour market adjustments, and to cushion the impact of economic transitions” (ILO, 2009, p. 1).

Four main functions have been associated with the PES: job-broking, providing labour market information, administering labour market adjustment programmes (which include job search assistance programmes, training and education programmes, and direct job creation programmes), and administering unemployment benefits (Phan, Hansen, & Price, 2001). Immediately after its establishment in 1919, the ILO in its inaugural labour conference in Washington, DC, through the Unemployment Convention (No. 2), made the recommendation that member states start PES (Perret-Nguyen, 2001). Over the years, these services have

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remained an important key to the effective functioning of labour market in many countries. While the place of career guidance within PES has been “somewhat problematic” (Sultana & Watts, 2006, p. 30), of all the possible institutional models for providing career services, public employment services (PES) remain the key in most countries (e.g., Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004; Sultana & Watts, 2006; World Association of Public Employment Services, 2011). The powerful forces unleashed by the processes of globalisation are changing the labour market and career development in the contemporary world (e.g., Chatzichristou & Arulmani, 2014; Kumar & Arulmani, 2014). The changes effected by these processes, seem to have forced PESs also to gear themselves to changed realities. In a survey of PESs conducted by World Association of Public Employment Services (WAPES, 2011) it was found that most countries had witnessed significant changes in the previous three years and were expecting more changes in the coming two years in the realm of provision and/or management of placement and counselling services for jobseekers and employers. Countries have revamped or are in the process of revamping their PES. In these circumstances, India (incidentally not yet a member of WAPES) cannot afford to maintain a status quo. In India, PESs, which have been known as employment exchanges functioning under the National Employment Service (NES) are being replaced by the National Career Service (NCS), and employment exchanges are being transformed into career centres. This is a timely and historic transformation which is destined to have far-reaching consequences not only for the young people and the economy of the country but also for the community of career practitioners who are expected to play a role of pivotal significance. Based on official documents available in the public domain, media coverage, and interactions held with employment officers, in this paper the evolution of employment exchanges is traced, their current status is summarised, key aspects of the National

Career Service project are outlined, observations are made with an emphasis on issues related to capacity building and funding, and key gaps are pointed out. Pointers are also offered to enhance the effectiveness of this service.

Employment Exchanges in India

Evolution

Before we look at the NCS, it would be useful to look at the brief history of employment exchanges in India. Employment exchanges were opened in different parts of the country after the establishment of the Directorate General of Resettlement and Employment (D.G.R. &E.) in 1945 primarily for assisting demobilised service personnel and discharged war workers. After independence, exchanges were mandated to resettle people displaced due to the partition (Directorate General of Employment and Training, n.d.). In 1956, consequent upon the recommendations of the Shiva Rao Committee, employment exchanges were handed over to state governments with a more diversified set of roles including occupational research, vocational guidance, and employment market information. DGRE was rechristened as the Directorate General of Employment and Training (DGET) in 1960 with the additional mandate of supervising training facilities other than managing employment services. Based on the recommendations of the Mathew Committee (1978), the National Employment Service became the joint concern of the central and state governments. The services rendered by these exchanges include registration and placement, vocational guidance and career counselling, collection of employment market information, and similar activities. A number of commissions, committees, and legislations have attempted to make employment exchanges responsive to changing times by enlarging, redefining, and empowering their roles (DGET, n.d.).

Current Status and Key Concerns

At the end of December 2012, with a total of 44.79 million job seekers on the live register, there were 956 employment exchanges (current number is 978) including 75 University Employment Information and Guidance Bureaus, 40 Special Employment Exchanges for the Physically Handicapped, 38 Special Cells dealing with the Physically Handicapped, and 14 Professional and Executive Employment Exchanges (P&E). During the year 2012, a total 6.8 lakh vacancies were notified and about 4.28 lakh job seekers were placed through the employment exchanges (DGET, 2013) (1 lakh = 100,000). During 2012, at the all-India level, of those who submitted applications, around 14.3% were placed. Average placement was recorded as 448 persons per exchange. Gujarat and Maharashtra showed the highest placements with 6,000 and 2,208 placements per exchange respectively while the lowest numbers of placements were recorded by Assam with 13 placements per exchange followed by Bihar with 56 placements per exchange. If we look at the number of job seekers on the live register classified by broad occupational groups at the end of 2011, 77.8% of the job seekers were found to be in the category of workers not classified by any occupation which highlights their "fresher and inexperienced" status.

A number of concerns have always been raised regarding the suboptimal performances of these exchanges from time to time. For example, pointing out that employment exchanges in 21 states have not been able to provide more than 100 jobs per exchange per year, an ASSOCHAM Eco Pulse (AEP) study claimed that employment exchanges in India have become redundant (Sharma, 2009). The study also revealed that the cost per job placement in Delhi was INR 80,000/- in 2006. Considerable soul-searching appears to have occurred within the department. This is also evident from a presentation made to the project management consultants for the NCS (DGET, 2014, May 20) which lists out the

following challenges: information asymmetry, low level of IT usage, long gestation periods for placements, need for capacity building of personnel, inadequate infrastructure and resources, complicated and cumbersome processes, physical travel to employment exchanges, jurisdictional issues on vacancies, and skills availability. The poor performance of the employment exchange system seems to have also led to skepticism amongst the users of the service as reflected in low registrations.

From National Employment Service (NES) to National Career Service (NCS)

Spurred perhaps by the concerns summed up in the previous paragraph and apparently, in order to address rising information asymmetry (job seekers not getting right jobs and the job providers not getting the right candidates), the Ministry of Labour and Employment decided to work on an information technology (IT) intensive model to reinvigorate employment exchanges (DGET, 2015, February³; National Institute for Smart Governance, n.d.). Based on the recommendations made by the working group constituted to formulate strategies to operationalise the idea (DGET, 2014a), a mission mode project (MMP) was formulated with an aim to convert employment exchanges into career centres and transform the National Employment Service (NES) into the National Career Service (NCS). The term *mission mode* implies that projects have clearly defined objectives, scope, implementation timelines and milestones, as well as measurable outcomes and service levels (National Institute for Smart Governance [NISG], n.d.). Therefore, addressing the joint session of parliament on June 9th 2014, the President of India announced: "...My government will transform Employment Exchanges into career centres, connecting our youth with job opportunities in a transparent and effective manner through the use of technology as well as through counselling and training...".

National Career Service: Objectives and Structure

Conceived as a “a comprehensive, multi-pronged, transformational project” (DGET, 2014b, p. 2), NCS-MMP aims to increase placement of the registered job seekers by providing a platform for interface between stakeholders for responsive, transparent, and efficient employment services in order to meet the skill needs of a dynamic economy (DGET, 2014, May 20). Launched with the tagline of *Right Opportunity, Right Time* by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, the key objectives of NCS include: easy accessibility of services for all the stakeholders, provision of assessment of capabilities and relevant vocational guidance services, provision of accurate and quality Employment Market Information, and collection and dissemination of information on employment and training (Ministry of Labour and Employment, n.d.). With the help of counselling and employment service professionals, it ultimately aims at assisting job seekers by enhancing employability and career decision-making abilities, and assisting employers to find the right talent.

The NCS structure includes: a web portal, a network of more than 900 career centres spread over the country, a multilingual call centre (Tuesday to Sunday on 1800-425-1514), and a network of career counsellors (covered in greater detail in later sections). It also links various institutions which include: industry associations, businesses, skill training providers, examination bodies, and state governments. The target group for this includes: unemployed candidates seeking jobs, students seeking career guidance and counselling, blue-collar workers seeking placements and guidance, people with disabilities (PwDs), ex-servicemen and veterans/senior citizens. The programme also includes employers seeking suitable candidates (See Appendix A for an overview of the NCS architecture). Available through multiple delivery points (e.g., e-PRI, Common Service Centres, e-Kiosks), the

employment-related services also aim at providing value-added services like updates/notifications through SMS, e-mail, Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS), Help Desk/Multilingual Call Centres.

NCS Portal

The primary vehicle of the NCS is the availability of an ICT-based national platform for interface between stakeholders. This single window National Career Service Portal was dedicated to the nation at the 46th session of Indian Labour Conference by the Indian Prime Minister on July 20th, 2015. The portal aims at facilitating the availability of a wide range of online career counselling supports such as: skill assessment, aptitude testing, and information about courses, internships and apprenticeship schemes. As per the launch brochure, data for over 20 million job seekers registered with state employment exchanges are on the NCS portal. They can activate their accounts using Aadhaar (unique identity number issued to Indians). Over 9 lakh establishments registered through the Labour Identification Number (LIN) are on the NCS portal and they can post their vacancies. The portal makes available career content on over 3,000 occupations across 53 sectors. Information on courses of over 11,000 Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and 12,000 Vocational Training Providers (VTPs) is available. Over 14 lakh students from ITIs and 11 lakh from VTPs are linked to the NCS who have been invited to join the NCS through SMS to activate their accounts. All 978 employment exchanges have been given user IDs and passwords for activating their accounts. Many states have already integrated their databases with the portal and others are likely to do so soon.

Career Centres

As evident from the remarks made by the President quoted earlier, employment exchanges are to be converted into career centres under the NCS. In case people cannot access

information, guidance, and assistance through the portal, they can visit the career centre and avail all the services by registering themselves free of cost. A career centre is likely to engage with the assessment of skills requirements at local, regional, national, and international levels; provide career counselling both to youth visiting the centres and by outreach to educational institutions with a focus on disadvantaged youth; connect job-seekers and employers using the portal, job fairs, and other means; and facilitate training for college pass-outs through specially empanelled training providers. It is also likely to provide occupational information; information on self-employment and entrepreneurship; and notification about counselling, job fairs, and skill development opportunities.

In all, 100 model career centres (MCC) are to be established including career centres for people with disability with a grant support of INR 50 lakh (5 million INR) each from the central government funds. After a year, states are expected to run these MCCs and convert other employment exchanges in the state in line with the MCC. In the first phase, establishment of 37 model career centres have been approved for the year 2015. The concept note for transforming employment exchanges into model career centres (DGET, 2014b) provides details of services on offer, roles and responsibilities of central and state governments, review and monitoring mechanisms, staffing plan, layout and infrastructure, and implementation strategy.

General Observations

1. Transformation of employment exchanges into career centers is a timely initiative not only to enable the Indian PESs to match the needs of the times but also to thrive on the immense opportunities and possibilities on offer. It has the potential to address the chronic ailments of India's public employment service which have been listed earlier in the paper. The scheme has the potential to give visibility and vigour to employment exchanges by enhancing the intermediation roles which these exchanges are mandated to perform.
2. Provision of career guidance has always been one of the many activities which were to be undertaken under National Employment Service. But typically, other functions of an employment officer used to take precedence over the function of career counselling. On the other hand, the National Career Service positions itself primarily as a mission to provide career guidance and counselling services to job seekers. Concluding a review of public employment services over 80 years of their existence, Phan et al. (2001) highlighted the role of PESs in ensuring lifelong learning and vocational guidance with information technology and trained counsellors as core prerequisites. The NCS also aims at leveraging information technology and capacity building of human resources such that quality services can be provided.
3. For the first time, through the NCS there is provision for the structural changes, funding, support, staffing, and capacity building needed for delivering career-related services effectively. It provides a clear blueprint detailing the needed infrastructure, institutional arrangements, coordination mechanism, staffing pattern, specification of spatial design and infrastructure of the career centre, and algorithms for delivering career services.
4. As with any initiative of this scale, this project also makes a number of assumptions. The expected outcomes can only be achieved if these assumptions are true. For instance, both central and state governments have to shoulder a series of responsibilities. It is feared that some states are likely to not reciprocate the energy and enthusiasm currently being demonstrated by the central government owing to political reasons. Many state governments also lack

- adequate finances and requisite human resources which may impede the progress of the project.
5. Client-centered layout of career centres is another key highlight of NCS. In the earlier set-up of employment exchanges, infrastructure designs were modelled after bureaucratic set-ups with almost no consideration for the visitors. A visit to the exchange was considered a compulsory ordeal that everyone wanted to avoid given a choice. But in the new set-up, the comfort and convenience of the visitors are core considerations while constructing/remodelling the facility.
 6. A multi-stakeholder approach is a core strength of the NCS project. For the first time in the history of employment assistance in India, it brings together businesses, industry associations, job seekers, training providers, educational institutions, and government institutions, both at central and state levels, as well as counsellors and parents on the same platform. However, ensuring effective convergence is a key challenge.
 7. Most importantly, a career centre is not just about tools, technology and people. It is not just enough to articulate the specifics of tools, technology and people; it is equally important to create working linkages among the three in order to ensure the effective functioning of the career centre. At the same time, a number of domains and related criteria for the effective functioning of career centres have been identified by researchers (e.g., Almeida, Marques, & Arulmani, 2014). This body of literature has the potential to be leveraged for enhancing the effectiveness of career centres.
- (DGET, 2015, Feb. 3). Capacity building includes designing modules of capacity building and training of personnel on NCS and identifying regional training institutes to link up with the Central Institute for Research & Training in Employment Services (CIRTES) for imparting training. For Northern India, the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT), New Delhi, and for South India the Administrative Staff College of India (ASCI), Hyderabad, have been identified. These institutions are well reputed as training providers, but their credentials for career counsellor training are not known.
2. Each centre is supposed to have three trained career counsellors for delivering career services. It means 300 counsellors are immediately needed for the MCCs and once the state governments decide to convert other employment exchanges into career centres, an additional 2,500 trained counselling professionals would be needed. Beyond career centres, the web portal also aims to develop a network of career counsellors in different parts of the country in order to assist millions of guidance seekers and job aspirants. Identifying well-trained individuals would be a key challenge in the context where courses for preparing careers professionals are few and far between (Kumar, 2013). Quality is likely to be compromised under the pressure of urgency to fill vacancies and without quality personnel it will not be possible to deliver quality service.
 3. While there may be a separate budgetary allocation for capacity building in this project, as per the information available on the DGET website, INR 46 crores (approximately 22 million USD) has been earmarked for a group of activities including Information, Education, and Communication (IEC), advocacy, capacity building and the development of strategies for enhancing notification of vacancies. Amidst these many activities, there is a danger that in case

Specific Observations

Capacity Building

1. Capacity building is one of the nine sets of activities proposed in order to achieve the objectives of this project

of competing priorities, other activities such as IEC and vacancy notification may assume more significance.

4. A few rounds of training for NCS employment officers have already taken place and they have undergone intensive training. Spread over five days, the training programme included a wide range of topics such as: role transformation; promotion of career centres; career centre management; market prospecting; conducting job fairs; interacting with industry, training providers, schools, colleges, and parents; CV building; testing, communication, and presentation skills; job skills mapping; and entrepreneurship development. The material given to participants include: a voluminous participant handbook (808 pages), soft copies of all the power point presentations used during training, additional study material (232 pages), and a marketing kit with standard operating procedures and examples of outreach activities. Participants acknowledge that great efforts have gone into the preparation of the material and quality resource persons were invited for facilitating the training. However, based on post-training feedback received from some of the participants and a review of training material shared by the participants, the following issues warrant attention:

The training was described as “too much” since it was tightly packed which is evident from the list of topics covered. It was also described as “hi-fi”, of good standard, but beyond the ability of participants to comprehend, assimilate, and internalise. It is important to note that only few employment officers are appointed directly while most of the others become employment officers through promotion. These individuals may not possess the qualifications, skills, and aptitude needed to deliver services which this training attempted to remedy. From a career guidance perspective, Day 4 of the training programme appears to be most crucial. It intended to cover career

assessment and presentation skills, both oral and written. The participants were taught to assess multiple intelligences, interests, work importance, and abilities. The test assessing multiple intelligences was developed by Walter McKenzie and is available at:

<http://surfaquarium.com/MI/inventory.htm>.

Other instruments seem to have been extracted from the US Department of Labour/Employment and Training Administration (USDOL/ETA) system. It is important to note that while these tests are well known for their robust psychometric properties, the reliability, validity, and cultural suitability of these tests for the Indian population is not known. While user manuals have been appended to the training manual, the trainees' comprehension of test administration details is not known. Language has emerged as a significant issue. The language of items in almost all these assessment devices has been reported as being ‘too difficult’ to be comprehensible even for an average English graduate in this country. An example would be: *Puns, anagrams and spoonerisms are fun*. Against this background the relevance of the tests and methods for those who are not fluent in English (which is likely to be the case for a large section of the potential users of the service), is probably low. It has also been noted that many of the items in these tests are not relevant to the Indian context. For example, one of the items in the Interest Profiler reads: *Perform jazz or tap dance*. Further, it has been overlooked that the personnel who have been given access to these tests are uninitiated to the logic and skills of psychometric assessment. They have been given, at best, a day's training. This flouts the basic expectations of training for skills transfer. As a matter of fact, scholars have warned that the improper administration of tests can become counterproductive and even dangerous for the clients (e.g., Arulmani, 2015; Hansen, 2005). Moving now to the career and occupational information side of the career guidance process, the occupational list that has been “developed” is in effect a reflection of the realities of the labour market of USA and a number of careers

are not relevant to the Indian context. For example, occupations such as *welfare eligibility workers and interviewers, slot supervisors, and Brownfield redevelopment specialist and site managers* would not make any sense to an Indian career chooser. While participants have been advised to use National Classification of Occupations (NCO) equivalents developed in 2004, no training has been given on how to do it.

In summary, it seems the training has been hastily put together perhaps under the pressure to deliver quickly. The importance of understanding the cultural context for any career intervention has been highlighted by many scholars (e.g., Arulmani, 2011; Leong, 2002; Leong & Pearce, 2011). It is important that instead of imported material and methods, indigenous ways of helping people are explored and used. It has been found that context-specific, culture-resonant models have worked better than universal, acultural designs (Arulmani, 2011; Arulmani & Abdulla, 2007). Establishing careers provision alone may not ensure its success. It is important to ensure that key messages are delivered in a culturally appropriate way.

Funding

The original outlay for the project was INR 1.487 billion when the government had decided to fund 50 Model Career Centres only. But with the new decision of supporting 100 MCCs, the budget outlay was revised to INR 2.922 billion (see details in Appendix B). As per this scheme, the central government is going to provide INR 50 lakhs for each of the centres for infrastructure and running cost for one year only. After this, state governments are expected to take over and run these MCCs and convert other employment exchanges as per the MCC. The concept note lists out a number of funding models “to ensure that career services are offered in an uninterrupted manner while maintaining quality of service” (DGET, 2014c, p. 11) which include: state government funding (direct/convergence with other schemes),

public private partnership (industry association sponsorship/company sponsorship/ private owned/partial ownership), corporate social responsibility (CSR) fund mobilisation for career centres, and jointly operated centre between government and private sectors. Given the record of sporadic and limited success of these models in other sectors, the efficacies of these models remain doubtful in the employment sector as well. Officials from the state government seem to be of the opinion that the MCC may not work, at least with the envisaged effectiveness, once the central funding stops. One of the officials commented: Aren't you aware that our state government is finding it difficult to manage salaries of its employees? Do you think it would be able to fund career projects? Sir, in most cases, once central funding stops, activities just stop. I am telling you based on my long experience (personal communication, September 18, 2015).

In fact, converting other employment exchanges into career centres based on the experience of running MCCs would need huge financial commitments which most state governments are likely to find daunting.

Concluding Thoughts

The NCS is being positioned as a meeting point of the three ambitious initiatives of Government of India, namely: *Make in India* which is expected to create employment, *Skill India* aiming at imparting skills to young people, and *Digital India* which aims at leveraging technology for empowering people. The successes of these missions are crucial for the success of NCS as well. As emphasised earlier, it is a huge exercise in ensuring convergence and creating synergies. This is a difficult task, but it is possible. However, it is said that a chain is as strong as its weakest link. In the case of NCS, there are quite a few weak links which need attention. Generally, in government run projects, civil works of construction and infrastructure development takes precedence over human resource. It is well established that

a good project needs good people and good people are created through rigorously planned, scientifically-designed, culturally-suitable capacity building initiatives. At the same time, much depends on the cooperation and commitment at provincial level where funds are limited and human resources, scarce. The central authorities have laid down the broad contours, and field offices need to identify and plug the gaps so that the NCS may deliver its mandate. Officials at the state level observe that the speed at which the central government is pushing for transformation is unprecedented and is being experienced as “unnerving” by field staff. Poorly put

together capacity building curricula, as described earlier, is a case in point. At the same time, in the context of government employees, a regulatory mindset may overshadow what ought to be a service-oriented and client-centered attitude (Sabharwal & Sharma, 2012). The capacity building curriculum must address this issue. Finally, for the community of career practitioners in India, the NCS seems to be the historic opportunity we have been waiting and preparing ourselves for: a dream that could come true! It is time to engage ourselves in the process of helping our young people in their career development leveraging the opportunities thrown open by the NCS.

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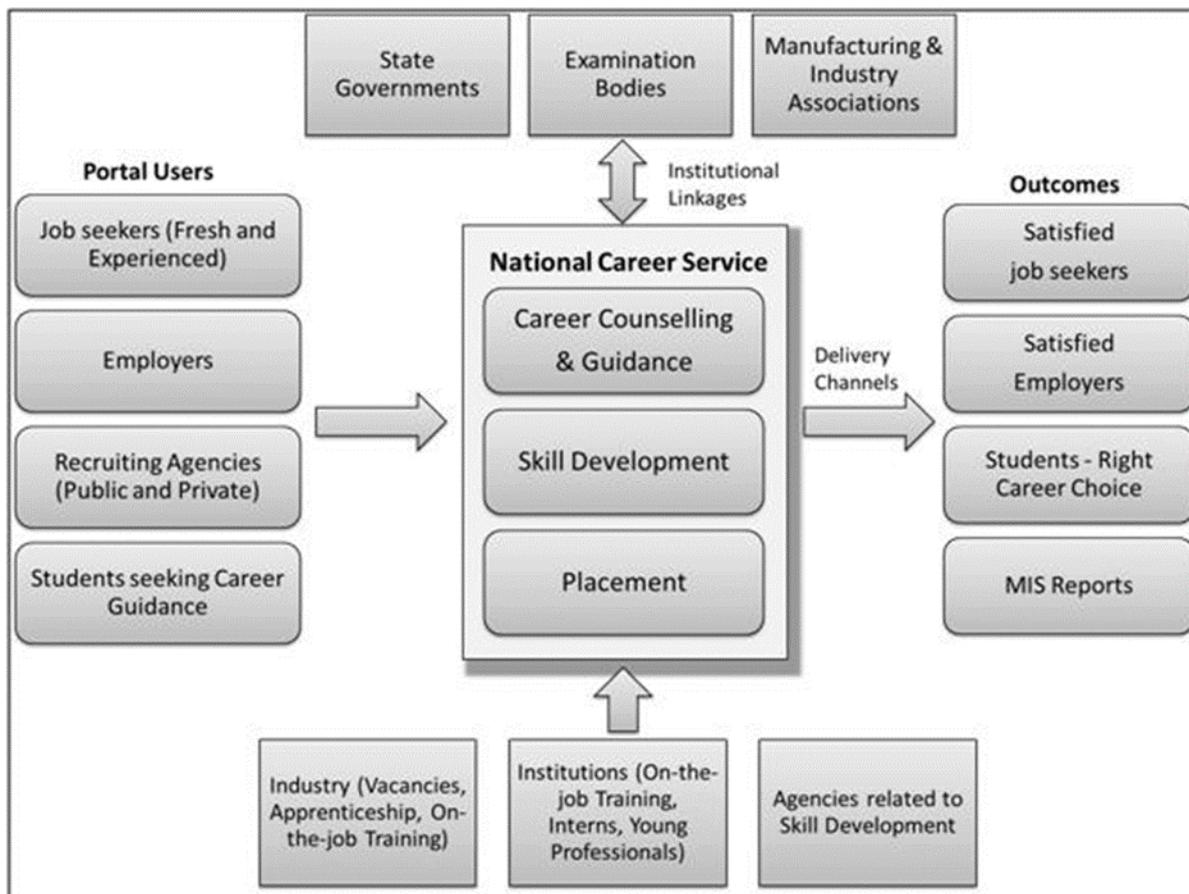
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Appendix A
NCS architecture



Source: <http://dget.nic.in/content/students/ncs-architecture.php>

Appendix B
Budget outlay for the NCS

Sr.No.	Particulars	Revised Allocation (In Rs crore) (1 crore = 10 million)
1	IT Hardware, Application Software Development, institutional strengthening – Central level; Application Software Maintenance; Help Desk/Call Centre operations; Project Management Consultancy	112.13
2	IEC, Advocacy, Capacity building, strategies for enhancing notification of vacancies,	46.00
3	Strengthening IT infrastructure in Employment Exchange and establishing the NCS Network - State level	40.00
4	Knowledge Repository for Career Counselling content	21.00
5	Establishing Model Career Centres	50.00
6	Scheme for YP, Interns etc.	23.07
	Total	292.20

Source: <http://www.dget.gov.in/content/innerpage/mission-mode-project-for-national-career-service.php>