

Catapulted to the Front: Career Guidance in European Union and International Policy Perspectives

Career guidance provision has been catapulted into the political foreground by virtue of its recognised value as a key component of lifelong learning strategies which in turn are corner stones of development in a knowledge based economy and society. Such recognition has been accorded by the European Council of Ministers, and by international organisations such as OECD, the World Bank, the European Commission and its agencies CEDEFOP and ETF. This article traces its rise to the forefront in Europe and places career guidance in the context of broader international concerns on the links between career guidance and the achievement of public policy objectives.

1. Introduction

There have been two main driving forces behind European Union (EU) policy developments in the field of guidance in the past four years. The first is mainly an economic and social perspective: the vision of the European heads of government in Lisbon in the year 2000 to make Europe the most competitive knowledge based economy and society in the world by 2010, marked by social inclusion. The second has been the renewed interest shown by the Organisation for Economic and Social Development (OECD) in the role of career guidance to support lifelong learning, itself an essential ingredient of a successful knowledge based economy and society. These two driving forces have become more integrated over time.

The challenge of the vision of the European heads of government affects many policy areas, in particular the fields of education, training and employment. The challenge is one of reform. In 2004 five EU benchmarks for education and training were agreed by Ministers for Education to be achieved by the year 2010. These included improving school completion rates; increasing participation in upper secondary school; and increasing participation in adult learning. The provision of career guidance has a significant contribution to make to the achievement of those common objectives. Recently the European Commission published a Communication on Adult Learning entitled "It is never too late to learn". The importance of high quality career guidance and information was referred to in two of its five key messages, namely raising the barriers to participation and ensuring the quality of learning.

But EU cooperation in education, training and employment policy areas has its own challenge(s): the competence for these policy areas is national – individual Member States are responsible for their own policies and systems. Such fields however are

also a common interest and concern across European countries to give meaning and expression to the concept of European citizenship and to create a European area of education, training and work. So, how in such circumstances can Member States develop EU level policies? The solution is to use the Open Method of Coordination where Member States cooperate with each other on a voluntary basis based on the principles of mutual trust and transparency.

Cooperation in EU policy development occurs at three levels:

- *Level 1:* Agreements entered into by Ministers. These come in different forms: Council Resolutions, Council Conclusions, Communiqués. These Resolutions/agreements are usually adopted twice a year by the Council of Ministers, in general based on a theme proposed by the country that holds the Presidency of the EU i.e. every six months. These agreements give political direction and status.
- *Level 2:* Joint work programmes: these involve representatives of ministries and other key actors (social partners, civil society) working together on particular themes, engaging in mutual learning activities, and developing EU indicators, benchmarks and common reference tools. The current EU work programme in the field of education and training is known as “Education and Training 2010”.
- *Level 3:* The third level of cooperation is that of pilot projects, studies, exchanges and placements, study visits. These are usually funded by the EU programmes and initiatives, and most often involve practitioners and students.

In theory, Level 1 sets the policy directions and Level 2 activities make such directions operational. Level 3 is intended to inform the two other levels or test their implications but this is not always possible as the speed of project development is much slower and is spread over a longer time frame. But there have been several occasions where Level 3 activity has led to Level 1 agreement such as the adoption of principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning derived from Level 3 project learning and studies.

In this article I am going to treat Level 1 and Level 2 activity with respect to policy development for career guidance.

2. Level 1: Council of Ministers (Education/Youth) Resolution on Strengthening Policies, Systems and Practices for Guidance throughout Life (2004)

All Council Resolutions begin by giving background and context. The Guidance Resolution (as it will be referred to in the remainder of this text) opens with a definition of guidance, describes the functions guidance provision fulfils for individuals and institutions, the public policy goals that it contributes to, and previous resolutions and directives in education, training and employment in which guidance is referenced. The second section gives the rationale for the Resolution, noting, inter-alia, the findings of the policy reviews for career guidance undertaken in Europe by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), by the European Centre for the Development

of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) and the European Training Foundation (ETF) on behalf of the European Commission (EC), and by the World Bank. It particularly notes that the ways in which existing guidance services are conceptualised and provided do not meet the demands of the knowledge-based economy and society, and need reform. The third section of the Resolution stresses the changes required to address such reform needs. The fourth section prioritises actions by Member States and the EC within their respective competencies with an invitation to undertake/implement such actions. I am going to briefly refer to each of these sections.

The first challenge for the Ministers was to agree a definition of guidance. This was not as easy as it seems because in some languages in Europe there is no equivalent word. What they came up with was a definition that encompasses both lifelong and lifewide learning:

“In the context of lifelong learning, guidance refers to a range of activities that enables citizens of any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which these capacities and competences are learned and/or used.”¹ (Council of the European Union 2004).

This definition places the citizen/learner at the centre of the guidance process. Its key actions include identification, decision-making, and managing life paths. The latter emphasis is important: it represents a shift from a once off decision-making support model based on crisis/critical point counselling to teaching the citizens/learners the competence to manage their learning, work and other lifepaths, and transitions therein. Such a shift has been characterised as a move from a psychological dominated approach to a pedagogical approach. There will always be a need for crisis/critical point counselling but not everyone has such a need; preventive measures such career management competence building can do much to offset the demand for critical point counselling. It requires a reconceptualisation of how guidance services are organised and delivered.

The Ministers subsequently outlined the added value of guidance provision to individuals, to learning institutions, and to society as a whole. Guidance provision is presented not just as a private or individual citizen good and benefit; it is also a public and societal good and benefit. The Resolution describes a range of European Union public policy goals that guidance contributes to:

- economic development,
- labour market efficiency,
- occupational and geographical mobility,

1 Examples of such activities include information and advice giving, counselling, competence assessment, mentoring, advocacy, teaching decision-making and career management skills. In order to avoid ambiguity, since a variety of terms are used in Member States to describe services engaged in these activities, including educational, vocational or career guidance, guidance and counselling, occupational guidance/counselling services, etc., the term ‘guidance’ is used throughout this text to identify any or all of these forms of provision and Member States should interpret the term as referring to the appropriate provision in their own countries.

enhancing the efficiency of investment in education and vocational training, lifelong learning, human capital and workforce development.

This was a very strong political statement about the contribution of guidance to the development of societies and economies. Many guidance practitioners, given the person centred nature of their training, see their work as only benefitting citizens as individuals. But guidance provision as a public service, paid for by tax payers, takes place in a political, social and economic context – local, regional, national, global, and contributes to public policy objectives in these fields.

The Ministers then refer to existing policy statements and documents in the fields of education, training and employment, endorsed at European Union level, in which the significance of guidance is attributed. These include the “European Employment Guidelines” (2003 a), the Commission Communication “Investing Efficiently in Education and Training” (2003 b), the “Action Plan for Skills and Mobility” (2002 a), the “Directive on Equal Treatment for Men and Women” (2002 b), and the “Council Resolution on Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training” (2002 c).

The rationale for the Resolution is next presented; this is where links with the OECD study of policies for career guidance, referred to in the Introduction above, are made. When the OECD commenced its study, it invited the European Commission to participate in its review steering group. The Commission was clearly impressed by the OECD work as it sought and obtained permission from the OECD to use a somewhat similar methodology to obtain comparable data from EU Member States not involved in the OECD study, and from accession countries (2003) and European Economic Area (EEA) countries. Such additional reviews were undertaken by CEDEFOP and ETF, the European Commission agencies. While conclusions from such reviews were particular to each country, there were also conclusions that were common to almost all countries. Such conclusions were captured in the Council Resolution as follows: “in many countries, policies, systems and practices for guidance in Europe do not match the demands of knowledge-based economies and societies and call for a reform of policies and a rethinking of practices in this area” (Council of the European Union 2004).

The Ministers then set out priority actions to be undertaken by the Member States and by the European Commission within their respective competencies in order to have policies and systems for guidance for lifelong learning for a knowledge based economy and society. Those priorities are:

- Re-conceptualise guidance provision to include building citizens competences to manage their learning and work,
- Develop quality assurance mechanisms for guidance provision, particularly from a citizen/user perspective,
- Reform initial and continuing training for guidance practitioners,

- Involve stakeholders (e.g. ministries, social partners, NGOs, practitioners, civil society) in policy and systems development,
- Ensure co-operation and co-ordination between services at national, regional and local levels,
- Support international institutional cooperation in the field,
- Ensure gender equity is a feature of all policies and practices for guidance,
- Ensure maximum return in terms of impact on policies, systems and practices at EU and national levels from the results of collaborative activities in guidance undertaken with the support of EU programmes for education and training and with ESF support,
- Review national guidance provision in the context of the findings of the EC, OECD and World Bank findings,
- Improve the information base for policy making through international collaboration,
- Build on and adapt existing European structures for co-operation to support the implementation of the priorities,
- Review progress in the implementation of the Resolution as part of the reviews of the Education and Training 2010 work programme.

The priorities above form the political direction and context for the development of lifelong guidance policies and systems in the Member States in the framework of the Education and Training 2010 programme.

A first review conference in progress in implementing the Resolution was held in Jyväskylä, Finland, November 6 to 7 2006, under the auspices of the Finnish Presidency of the EU. The review findings were as follows:

- Some examples were to be found of all-age guidance services, particularly Scotland and Wales, UK, and of national coordination strategies,
- Some examples of expansion of services, of targeting, of the use of community access points,
- Few attempts were made of marketing the value of learning and of guidance services;
- Clear deficits exist in the development of citizen centred quality assurance systems for guidance,
- Little systematic curricular space given to the teaching of career management skills in education and training programmes,
- Some progress in the establishment of national coordination/steering groups/forums.

In summary some work has started in some countries in implementing the Resolution; there is however a long way to go; and the pace of reform is slow. A key recommendation from the conference was to establish a European Guidance Network in 2007 which would assist and support national reforms.

As mentioned in the introduction, the European Commission recently launched a Communication on Adult Learning (European Commission 2006) calling on Member States to promote adult learning. In 2007 an Action Plan on Adult Learning will be produced through the cooperation of Member States and the Commission to support adult education with high quality guidance, information and assessment systems, and excellent learning content and delivery mechanisms.

3. Level 2: Education and Training 2010 Programme

The reform of education and training policies, systems and practices across Europe within the context of EU cooperation is a huge task to undertake in any coherent manner, given (i) the differences in how education is organised in each Member State, (ii) the historic divisions between different forms of education and training in each state, and (iii) the differential investments made by Member States in different parts of each system. Thus there are different strands of reform activity within Education and Training 2010 for VET, for higher education, and for primary and secondary education. Working groups consisting of country ministry representatives and other key actors (social partners, civil society) have developed a range of common EU reference points for education and training for example:

- Common European framework for key competences for lifelong learning,
- Common principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning,
- A European Qualifications Framework,
- Common European Quality Assurance Framework for VET.

The purposes of such instruments are:

- To enable institutions, regions, and countries to improve their policies and systems, using the instruments as review tools,
- To give meaning to the concept of European citizenship by facilitating the development of comparable services for EU citizens, using the reference points as quasi-standards,
- To give meaning to the development of a European area of education and training.

In recognition and acknowledgement that guidance transcends all strands and levels of education, the European Commission established a mechanism, known as the European Commission's Expert Group on Lifelong Guidance, to facilitate policy development for guidance across the education and training fields. The Expert Group, consisting of policy makers from education and employment, European representatives of social partners, parents, youth, consumers organisations, World Association of Public Employment Services, OECD, IAEVG, and some guidance experts, has produced to date three common EU reference tools for guidance:

- Common aims and principles for lifelong guidance provision,
- Common reference points for quality assurance systems for guidance,
- Common features of lifelong guidance systems.

A significant feature of each of those instruments is the centrality of the citizen or user of the service.

The purposes of the reference tools are similar to the other instruments mentioned above. A user-friendly guide to the use of these instruments has been published by CEDEFOP (CEDEFOP 2005). It can be downloaded from the Internet. Of the three tools developed so far, the Common aims and principles has the strongest political status, having been endorsed by the ministries of the 25 Member States in 2004. The Common reference points for quality assurance systems is a development of a section of the Common aims and principles for lifelong guidance provision.

To sum up, the directions for future development of policies, systems and practices for lifelong guidance provision in the European Union are contained in both the Council Resolution and in these common EU reference tools for guidance.

4. European Union and International Cooperation

I wish to conclude by referring to links between policy developments in guidance in Europe and the rest of the world. While it is true that there is a very strong policy development focus for lifelong guidance in the European Union, it has to be said that countries such as Australia and Canada in particular have also been addressing the gap, evidenced in many countries, between career guidance practice and public policy. Canada initiated and held the first two international symposia on bridging that gap in 1999 and 2001 and these events provided the context for the subsequent career guidance policy reviews undertaken by the OECD, the European Commission, and the World Bank. Australia hosted the third international symposium in April of this year, attended by 22 countries and 6 international institutions, that focused on the links between workforce development and career development practice. The United Kingdom will host the fourth such symposium in Scotland October 2007 whose theme will be Growth, Groups and Geographies: maximising the impact of career guidance for sustainable growth and social equity.

The second development has been the degree of international institutional cooperation particularly between the OECD and the European Commission. The European Commission initiated the development of a handbook for policy makers to address strategic leadership development needs particularly though not exclusively of ministry officials in education and employment. "Career guidance: a handbook for policy makers" was jointly published by the European Commission and the OECD in 2004; it has now been translated into 12 languages worldwide. The European Training Foundation and CEDEFOP, agencies of the European Commission, have played and continue to play key roles in exploring, promoting and disseminating policy development work in the field of lifelong guidance.

The third and last development that I wish to refer to is the establishment of a mechanism to maintain the links between the policy reviews, the policy developments, and the international symposia. The International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy was founded in 2004 with the support of the OECD, European Commission and the World Bank, and has the country support of Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the support of delivery agencies (Careers Scotland HIE) – and practitioner organisations (the National Career Development Association, USA). Based currently in Strasbourg, France, the International Centre (www.iccdpp.org) has a key role in linking initiatives in the guidance policy field worldwide, in making such resources accessible to a wider international audience, in supporting the development and follow-up of international symposia and regional events e.g. Finnish EU Presidency conference, and in supporting the initiatives of other international institutions e.g. the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the European Commission, in the field of guidance.

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