QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Background context

One of the key ways the State exercises its role as strategic manager of the public services is through legislative mechanisms. Nevertheless, legislation, especially when it is articulated in broad, general terms, needs to be complemented by other mechanisms to ensure adequate service provision. One such mechanism that is frequently used in many countries concerns the setting of quality standards. These can serve several goals related to quality assurance and quality improvement. They can be used, for instance, to set minimum thresholds for service providers which must be met if an entity is to secure public funds.

In the United Kingdom, quality standards for career guidance delivery were initially developed by the Guidance Council(1), an independent body established in 1993 that represents career guidance organisations and are now managed by the Employment National Training Organisation (ENTO)(2). The “matrix” quality standard for information, advice and guidance services (IAG)(3), as it is now known, is a national quality standard for organisations delivering information, advice & guidance services for learning and work. Since 31st March 2004, all the information, advice and guidance providers, including careers and educational guidance organisations, wishing to receive government funds(4) are assessed against the “matrix” quality standards and must be accredited by the UK’s Guidance Accreditation Board (GAB)(5).

Specific initiative

The “matrix” quality standard for information, advice and guidance services(6) is essentially a set of practical guidelines covering all aspects of service delivery from a client's perspective. It is drawn from 'best practice' experienced in all sectors including community and voluntary organisations. Its purpose is to identify the essential features of successful delivery of any information, advice and guidance service, regardless of context or sector and to provide key indicators by which organisations can measure their current activities. As well being used for accreditation purposes, the “matrix” standards can be used also for quality improvement. Organisations that want to use them to improve the quality of their services can use consultants from a register maintained by the

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(1) For further information on the Guidance Council see its web site http://www.guidancecouncil.com/.
(2) For further information see http://www.ento.co.uk/.
(3) In February 2002 the National Quality Standards for Learning and Work were revised and renamed the “matrix” quality standard for information, advice and guidance services. The matrix Standard is generic and relevant to a range of sectors and settings in both the public and private sectors. The “matrix” standard is now managed by the Employment National Training Organisation.
(4) The funds come from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), through the Learning & Skills Council.
(5) The GAB was established in autumn 1999 with pump-priming funding from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). For further information see http://www.gab.org.uk/.
Employment National Training Organisation. The “matrix” standards will, therefore, help organisations to "raise their game" where necessary and help them to keep high standards as well as continuously improve their service, in order to meet the challenges of the future.

The “matrix” standard has universal application and relevance to the private, public, community and voluntary sectors. It consists of 10 elements which define best practice in assisting users of the service and in the efficient management of people and resources.

Five of the Elements are about delivery of the service and measure how people are helped to:

- be aware of and engage with the service;
- understand the nature of the service;
- agree how they will use the service;
- gain access and use information;
- explore options and make choices.

The other five Elements are about managing the service and measure how the organisation:

- plans and maintains its service;
- obtains and uses premises and equipment;
- develops and maintains the competence of its staff;
- makes effective use of feedback on the service provided;
- ensures continuous quality improvement.

The end result is that organisations are provided with a quality route map for the 10 key areas of service delivery through demonstrating some 54-performance measures.

For more information

OECD REVIEW OF CAREER GUIDANCE POLICIES, United Kingdom - summary paper

(See Chapter 9 “How can policy influence the practice of career guidance?”)

CAREER GUIDANCE: A handbook for policy makers, OECD & The European Commission 2004. (See Section 14 “Ensuring the quality of career guidance”)