



# A FRESH LOOK AT GUIDANCE PRACTITIONER PROFESSIONALISM

## Defining the role and recognising competences is crucial to policy development in lifelong guidance

Lockdowns and social distancing have accelerated the digitalisation of labour markets, triggering changes in work patterns and skills demand as European companies and public bodies have embraced new technologies and look for new talent <sup>(1)</sup>. As reflected in several EU countries' resilience and recovery plans, upskilling, reskilling and career guidance are ever more important, empowering people to manage their learning and working careers.

Some EU Member States have been working towards comprehensive ICT-driven lifelong guidance and career development systems, integrating advanced skills intelligence resources. They interlink public employment services, enterprises and education and training providers with users looking for work or learning opportunities, and reach out to those needing social and financial support.

### BOX 1. BUILDING KNOWLEDGE ON PROFESSIONAL GUIDANCE

Cedefop has monitored quality assurance in guidance systems for over 20 years. Recently, it has embarked on updating its work on professionalism in career guidance, which goes back to 2009 when it published a [study on professional standards and the design of a framework](#).

Today, Cedefop's online [Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices](#), launched in 2020, provides cross-country information on guidance systems, policies and practices. It also offers thematic sections on quality assurance, practitioner qualifications and training, user access, interservice coordination and stakeholder cooperation, ICT use, guidance for specific groups and settings, and social inclusion indicators.

Cedefop has set up [CareersNet](#), a network of independent specialists with recognised expertise in lifelong guidance and career development, across the EU and beyond. The network monitors and documents implementation of policies towards the goals laid down by the 2008 [Council Resolutions on lifelong guidance](#) and the 2015 [European Guidelines for policies and systems development for lifelong guidance](#).

Against this fast-shifting backdrop, EU and national policy-makers have renewed their attention to guidance practitioner changing roles, competences, skill needs and continuous professional development. This briefing note offers new insights into how countries are modernising their career guidance systems and services. Practitioner professionalism, including digital competences, is an integral part of this endeavour <sup>(2)</sup>.

## WHICH SKILLS FOR GUIDANCE STAFF?

Guidance provision and governance in the EU differ greatly across countries and regions, and so do guidance practitioners' job profiles and qualifications. Many have a tertiary degree in behavioural, educational and/or social sciences, including economics, often combined with specialised career guidance training prior to or during employment. The diversity of routes of access to the profession reflects the many different settings in which guidance is delivered and the multiple tasks and competences required from practitioners.

Yet the dynamic developments in the wake of the pandemic highlight European countries' need to re-define and, to a degree, mainstream guidance practitioners' occupational profiles and to offer them reskilling and upskilling options.

<sup>(1)</sup> See Cedefop's recent [briefing note on changing jobs and skills](#).

<sup>(2)</sup> The information and examples of best practices included in this briefing note are based on contributions of Cedefop's national [CareersNet](#) partners, published by Cedefop in a working paper collection on [Digital transitions in lifelong guidance](#).

Depending on the service setting, country context, and target groups, a current guidance practitioner's competence portfolio will typically include:

- comprehensive and up-to-date knowledge of the field of work. This includes knowledge of career theories and a good level of digital skills to navigate databases with relevant information, including emerging occupations and occupations undergoing digital transformation;
- mastering the latest guidance techniques, including in remote settings and via blended approaches with human intervention, collaborative methodologies and joint career planning in group sessions;
- advanced and client-oriented written and oral communication skills, including knowledge of social media 'netiquette', to respond to individuals' professional and personal needs in different guidance settings;
- knowledge of screening and assessment methods, to identify client needs and to refer them to services to validate prior learning against valid standards;
- ability to work strategically within a set of cooperating community services, including outreach services <sup>(3)</sup>;
- a high level of psychological, social and emotional skills, such as to discern when individuals have special needs or face other barriers to learning and career progress, and the capacity to adhere to ethical practices according to professional standards.

## EUROPEAN POLICY BACKGROUND



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As early as 2008, a Council Resolution invited all EU Member States to integrate lifelong guidance better into their lifelong learning strategies by ensuring universal access and a common, quality-based culture among the various services responsible at local, regional and national levels.

The 2020 European Skills Agenda reminds governments of the need to ensure that all individuals can access high-quality support services such as career guidance, while the **European Pillar of Social Rights** enshrines people's right to work and to lifelong learning and the **2020 Council Recommendation on a bridge to jobs, reinforcing the youth guarantee**, refers to guidance and skills assessment. The importance of open and inclusive guidance systems is fully acknowledged.

An impressive number of new EU policies, priorities and initiatives mark the 2020s as the '**digital decade**', dedicated to making the European labour force fit for the digital age. These include: the **Updated digital education action plan**, the **Digital Services Act**, the **Digital skills and job coalition** <sup>(4)</sup>, the **Digital Europe initiative** and the **Digital skills and jobs platform**, which offers online self-help guidance tools and resources for those looking for digital career opportunities. The new **Europass multi-purpose platform** also fits this emerging landscape. Finally, the **European Pact For Skills** and the related Charter invite public, private and civil society actors to collaborate and support all these interrelated initiatives.

The **greening of the economy** also impacts on guidance practitioner training. Some public employment services (PES) have already included the transition to greener labour markets in their strategies, organising awareness-raising activities to prepare their staff for expected job changes and increases in job creation and destruction <sup>(5)</sup>.

<sup>(4)</sup> This tackles digital skills of four groups in the labour force, including actions on career advice and guidance.

<sup>(5)</sup> See the **2021 study of the European Public Employment Services network on Greening the labour market**.

<sup>(3)</sup> See the Cedefop **2019 briefing note on digital innovation supporting careers**.

## GUIDANCE PRACTITIONER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Although professionalising career guidance through initial education and training of practitioners remains a priority, continuous professional development, in-service or work-place training as well as peer learning among colleagues, are equally important. Service providers, such as PES employment counsellors, need to update their knowledge and skills regularly to ensure high-quality, customised and data-driven guidance services. Yet, the increasing calls to invest more in guidance practitioners' skills still contrast in many countries with a lack of evidence of their systematic continuous professional development.

There are signs of change, however. International data in 2019 indicated an increase in national and local activity to improve the quality of guidance services, with a focus on practitioner training and qualification. To foster their professionalism, many countries have defined occupational standards and training requirements, aligning these to various reference systems, such as the European qualifications framework (EQF).

## SETTING QUALIFICATION STANDARDS

Standards for guidance practitioner qualifications can be set in different ways, one of them being legislation. A total of 17 European countries have passed relevant laws, yet these often remain vague. Only a few, such as Finland, Iceland and Ireland, have clearly defined practitioner qualification levels and professional development in their laws <sup>(6)</sup>.

Denmark, Greece and France define qualifications and training standards through executive orders or guidelines. Ireland has developed a normative framework setting out the criteria initial guidance counselling training providers must fulfil <sup>(7)</sup> when preparing graduates for guidance work, both with the young and adults under the remit of the national **Department of Education**.

Some countries have strengthened the professional status of guidance practitioners by embedding definitions of quality standards in their regional or local training strategies. In Austria, the quality of relevant training is assured through certification of the providers. In Belgium, guidance centres under the *Cité des Métiers* must guarantee a professionalisation policy and annual professional development plan for every employee.

In other countries, professional associations are

<sup>(6)</sup> See European Commission study on **Lifelong guidance policy and practice**, Barnes et al, 2020.

<sup>(7)</sup> Guidance counselling is a term used in Ireland to distinguish it from other types of counselling.

involved in drawing up mandatory or voluntary quality standards for guidance and for the training of guidance practitioners. In Hungary, professionalism of staff is included in wider national quality standards for guidance. Germany's voluntary **quality concept for guidance** comprises a competence profile and a framework for quality development in public and private sector bodies.

Other ways to recognise guidance practitioners' work-related competences include their validation against standards underpinning the occupational qualifications system, as in Estonia, or through digital badges in Italy.

Cedefop's **Competence framework for guidance practitioners** and the Commission's **European reference competence profile for PES and EURES counsellors** have set milestones supporting the application of European competence standards.

### BOX 2. GUIDANCE, AN ENABLER OF INDIVIDUAL LEARNING ACCOUNTS

In 2021, the European Commission stepped up work towards a Recommendation on **Individual learning accounts (ILA)**, envisioned as one of the key priorities of the new European Skills Agenda. Career guidance and validation may well be essential enablers of the ILA initiative, especially to reach adults who would benefit most from reskilling and upskilling. Without competent guidance practitioners, effective adult take-up of such opportunities will not be possible. To support the Commission, Cedefop will develop a policy-focused framework on ILAs and explore the potential of integrated policies and systems.

## OVERCOMING FRAGMENTATION FOR SEAMLESS DELIVERY OF SERVICES

Similar to the fragmented landscape of guidance practitioner professional development <sup>(8)</sup>, the delivery of career guidance is also spread across many services and settings. On the positive side, this means provision is flexible, context-sensitive and adaptable to target group and community needs. On the negative side, however, this division can hamper integrated policy arrangements and seamless cross-service provision, as well as upscaling of successful regional policies. This is compounded when providers of different services lack strategic competence and resources to coordinate their service offers.

For users, fragmented service provision is not only confusing, but can create barriers to access. Competition between services, be it for clients or financial

<sup>(8)</sup> See **Cedefop and ETF joint paper on VET in the next decade**.

resources, can hinder cooperation, to the detriment of users. Education, training and employment policies need to take on board the horizontal and transversal nature of lifelong guidance, rooted in multi-professional partnerships and collaboration across sectors and services. If well integrated with other relevant policies and services, guidance can better respond to user and labour market needs and even fill specific sectoral gaps <sup>(9)</sup>.

Moreover, better synergies allow national, regional and local actors to develop a common vision and strategy for the successful integration of existing and emerging technologies in guidance services, while ensuring that user needs drive the choice of available modalities.

## ENHANCING PRACTITIONER DIGITAL SKILLS

No discussion about professionalism in a critical service sector like career guidance can ignore the impact of new information and communication technologies (ICT). They not only impact on many occupations and sectors in the labour market, but directly affect guidance practitioners' day-to-day work by unlocking an array of new resources and communication means <sup>(10)</sup>.

While still unfolding in career guidance, the digital transformation has already profoundly altered the nature of guidance practitioner work. What training do they need to (further) integrate digital technology in their daily work? And what about service delivery quality, equal access, privacy, impartiality and potential ethical dilemmas?

Today, guidance practitioners must be able to use new online tools to communicate with their clients; at the same time, they must be able to find, retrieve, assess and manage labour market data (statistics, big data) and continually incorporate this knowledge in their work. Without this capacity, they risk losing out on a central aspect of their client services, the special relationship they have always had with the labour market.

While big data, artificial intelligence and innovative tools, such as chatbots, allow for dynamic, portable and flexible approaches to career support and self-directed learning, the provision of well-informed, holistic career guidance will always go beyond the machine and require skilful human intervention. This is why blended approaches have increased. Practition-

<sup>(9)</sup> See also Cedefop's [2020 briefing note Empowering people to cope with change](#).

<sup>(10)</sup> Cedefop has compiled an [ICT Handbook of practices for use in guidance and career development](#) helping policy-makers to unlock the potential of ICT, as well as a range of [online resources and tools for practitioners and managers](#).

ers should be better prepared to embrace the positive changes digital tools offer in combination with human interaction, according to user needs, and even participate in their development. More evidence is needed to draw conclusions about the impact of these developments and the best way to align the technologies with the aims of career guidance.

However, in many countries, digital competences are not yet commonplace among guidance practitioners, with reluctant attitudes towards digital tools among practitioners who see their tasks replaced by self-service tools and, increasingly, also by artificial intelligence. Overcoming this will require a massive training effort, new alliances between services and, above all, a forward-looking mindset among all stakeholders and services.

### BOX 3. AN ICT TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR GUIDANCE PRACTITIONERS

The [Finnish Institute for Educational Research, Malmö University](#), the Danish e-guidance facility [eVejledning](#) and the [University of Iceland](#) jointly designed and delivered ICT training for guidance practitioners, aimed at enhancing practitioner professional profile, enabling them to respond more effectively to client needs in a digital environment. This focused on enabling guidance staff to deliver information via social media channels and addressed the following competences:

- proficient use of online content;
- versatile and thoughtful written communication;
- starting and sustaining constructive online dialogue;
- creating a visible and trusted online presence.

## TOWARDS A SHARED, STRATEGIC VISION OF MODERN GUIDANCE SERVICES

No service provider, professional group or organisation can respond alone to the rapidly changing needs of increasingly diverse target groups. This is why more and more countries have integrated lifelong guidance into their lifelong learning strategies, strengthening synergies both in policy development and service delivery. The [2017 Estonian EU Presidency Conclusions on lifelong guidance](#) note that widening access to coherent services requires policy coordination, partnerships, sharing of labour market intelligence, and integration and professionalisation of services.

The [Competencies framework for guidance practitioners](#) created by the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance, updated in 2018, promotes, on top of the competence areas defined by Cedefop in 2009, strategic thinking in career services by encouraging collaboration and knowledge sharing

between community partners and services. It invites guidance practitioners to get actively involved in local stakeholder networks, to be in a position to assess local guidance needs and provision and to make the best of available resources.

Such transdisciplinary collaboration among services helps all community stakeholders – career guidance and social services staff, education and training providers, policy-makers, system developers and private bodies – to design, align, deliver and evaluate their services in a coordinated way. In turn, close co-operation between all stakeholders can inform a joint vision of a coherent, seamless set of community services, including innovative ICT-based career services, and foster its continuous improvement. Such a strong systemic approach to service cooperation, making full use of digital technologies, will unleash the potential of proactive, equitable lifelong guidance services.

As digital technologies open up new horizons and European countries look increasingly for common approaches and solutions, guidance practitioner competence development can also be aided by mobility and international exchange. ‘Think global – act local’ is certainly an important aspect of strategic thinking in career guidance.