CAREER GUIDANCE AND PUBLIC POLICY: BRIDGING THE GAP

HIGHLIGHTS

2004
Introduction

As education and employment policies seek to widen choices and to create systems that can respond to varying needs across the lifespan, career guidance becomes increasingly important for public policy. And public policy is important for career guidance: it sets the frameworks for it, and provides most of its funds. However there is a gap between the two. Few career guidance practitioners show a great engagement in policy questions. And few policy-makers have a detailed grasp of how career guidance is organised and delivered. This publication draws upon the experiences of 14 OECD countries1 to explore ways in which this gap can be bridged.

Why does career guidance matter for public policy?

Policy-makers in OECD countries have many long-standing expectations for career guidance services: to improve the efficiency of education systems and the labour market; and to contribute to social equity. Lifelong learning and active labour market policies pose newer challenges for career guidance: for access to be greatly widened; for services to be delivered in far more flexible ways; and yet for these to be done in ways that limit the costs to the public purse. These newer challenges have major implications for how career guidance services are organised and provided. At present, services are available largely to limited numbers of groups, at fixed points in life, and are focused upon immediate decisions. The future challenges are: to make a shift so that services focus upon developing career-management skills, as well as upon information provision and immediate decision-making; and to make services universally accessible throughout the lifespan: in ways, in locations and at times that reflect more diverse client needs.

There are good conceptual and theoretical arguments in support of the ability of career guidance to help in the implementation of these types of policy objectives. For example career guidance might help to better articulate community demand for learning, contribute to higher educational access and completion, and improve the match between labour market supply and demand. Although the empirical evidence in support of this is limited, it is generally positive. This evidence is, however, stronger for its impact upon short-term learning outcomes than upon medium-term behavioural outcomes, and in turn this evidence is stronger than evidence on longer-term impacts. The longer-term evidence is quite weak, and obtaining it will require more and better longitudinal research.

How can career guidance be delivered more effectively?

In schools

An approach that sees career guidance only as a personal service, provided by schools themselves, has many limitations. It is costly, and this limits access. It can be too divorced from the labour market and too focused only upon short-term educational decision-making. Where it is combined with personal and study guidance, it is universally given a low priority. Where school funds are tied to student numbers and there is competition between institutions, there can be pressure upon guidance staff to retain students, whether or not this is in their best interests. Some countries, such as Germany, address some of these issues through the use of specialised external services that come into the school to provide personal career guidance.

1. Australia, Austria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Korea, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and the United Kingdom.
In addition to addressing these issues, policies for career guidance in schools need to shift away from an approach that focuses only upon immediate educational and occupational choices, and towards a broader approach that also tries to develop career self-management skills: for example the ability to make effective career decisions, and to implement them. This requires an approach that is embedded in the curriculum, and which incorporates learning from experience. Such a strategy requires a whole-of-school approach, and has substantial implications for resource allocation, teacher training and development, and school planning.

For young people at risk

Career guidance also has an important role in addressing the needs of students at risk and early school leavers. Many successful examples exist, notably in Scandinavian countries, in which career guidance is embedded in early intervention programmes which incorporate mutual obligation and personal action planning.

Tertiary education

The changing face of tertiary education – expanded participation; increased diversity, choice and competition – poses major challenges for career guidance that few countries seem well equipped to handle. In tertiary education services are generally limited both in scale and in focus, and inconsistent in quality. Comprehensive tertiary careers services are well developed in countries such as Ireland and the United Kingdom, and are growing in other countries, but are generally lacking. The avenues open to governments to improve this situation include the use of performance contracts, as in Finland.

Career guidance for adults

In public employment services, which traditionally have been one of the major sources of career guidance for adults, the focus is generally upon short-term employment options rather than longer-term career development. There can be a conflict between the need to restrain expenditure on unemployment benefits and the need to ensure rapid returns to work on the one hand, and the longer-term career development interests of individuals on the other. Within public employment services career guidance generally concentrates upon the unemployed. Services for the employed are much more limited: using self-service methods and with limited opportunities for personal help. And the training and qualifications of those who provide career guidance in public employment services are often at a low level. In Canada career guidance services for adults are commonly contracted out to community groups. This can bring services closer to client needs, but result in services that are fragmented.

Career guidance services, in many countries, are also available in adult education. Here, a major problem is the close links between individual institutions and career guidance: the need for impartial information and advice is a significant issue. Regionally-based services, such as the adult guidance partnerships in England and the all-age regional careers companies in Wales and Scotland, can be an approach to this issue, as can telephone and web-based services. Systematic feedback from career guidance services can help to improve the match between the supply of adult learning and the demand for it.

Government policy can help to stimulate career guidance provided within enterprises: for example through training levies that include career guidance as allowable expenditure as in Quebec, or through quality-mark schemes such as can be observed in the Netherlands. Innovative arrangements in co-operation with trade unions can be observed in Denmark, Norway and the United Kingdom, and these seem well suited to targeting at least some of the needs of low-qualified workers in the work place.
Significant gaps exist in adults’ access to career guidance, and there are indications that demand exceeds the supply of services. In particular, services are more limited for those who are employed, those in small and medium-sized enterprises, and those not in the labour market or not entitled to social security assistance. Much policy attention has been devoted in OECD countries to reforming the retirement age and ways to finance retirement. Yet little attention has been given to policies and programmes that link financial planning to career guidance in order to assist people to make more flexible transitions to retirement. Two options for addressing these gaps are: strengthening the capacity of public employment services to provide career guidance; and expanding regional partnerships.

**How can access be widened through innovative and diverse delivery?**

Innovative and more diverse delivery methods can be used to widen access to career guidance on a more cost-effective basis. These can include group guidance; self-help techniques; the use of community members to deliver parts of programmes; the creation of open-access resource centres; the wider use of support staff; and outreach methods. ICT has a potentially important role to play in widening access, and can be used for purposes that range from the provision of information to raising people’s self-awareness and improving their decision-making. Nevertheless there are limitations to the potential uses of ICT in career guidance. These include bandwidth limitations and lack of training and skills on the part of career guidance staff. Increasing use is also being made of help lines, although call centre technology is under-exploited in many countries. ICT needs to be seen as part of a wider suite of delivery methods, and integrated with rather than separated from face-to-face methods. All of the methods outlined in the chapter for delivering career guidance in a more cost-effective way have significant implications for career guidance staffing structures, and for staff qualifications and training arrangements. They also increase the need for screening tools to determine priorities for services and to better match the type of service provided to clients’ needs. Such tools exist, but are not widely used.

**How can career information be provided more effectively?**

Information about the self, about education and training opportunities and about occupations and their characteristics is central to the key theories that underpin career guidance. Information also plays a central role in how economists treat the efficiency of markets. Good quality career information is thus essential for good quality career guidance. Governments play a central role in funding the collection, organisation, linking, systematising and distribution of career information. At times, as in France, this is through specialised centralised agencies, but more typically it is done through separate ministries, either directly or under contract to private providers. There are also many non-government providers of career information: educational institutions; employers; the media; and the private sector.

If not well co-ordinated between different ministries (particularly education and labour), different sectors of education, and different levels of government, career information can become quite fragmented and non-transparent, making it difficult for people to access. This has implications for both geographical and social mobility. Fragmented career information fails to reflect the types of information that people need to make career decisions. Other common weaknesses in career information include: a failure to include information on labour market supply and demand; delays in capturing changes in the content of occupations or in identifying new occupations; the absence of information on the destinations and labour market outcomes of those completing courses of education and training; a greater emphasis upon educational information than upon occupational and labour market information; and weak links between these two key information domains.
ICT has the potential to overcome many of these problems, particularly lack of integration and poor links between different types of information. However many ICT-based career information systems fail to take advantage of this potential, and simply replicate paper-based systems. Governments have a strong interest in the quality as well as the availability of career information. In the United States standards have been developed to help to maintain and improve career information quality, and these have been a model for the development of similar standards in other countries. To be of real value, career information needs to be not only produced, but also to be disseminated well, and converted into action: policy-makers need to think about how career information can be made meaningful and placed into context.

How should career guidance be resourced?

Staffing career guidance

In nearly all countries information on the size and composition of the career guidance workforce is difficult to obtain. However Canadian and Danish estimates suggest that the number of career guidance practitioners may represent an upper bound of 0.8% of the total labour force.

When assessed against some standard criteria for a profession – such as being able to control labour supply and the existence of clear and lengthy qualification routes – it is clear that in most countries career guidance is not a profession, but an occupation or a role. The training that is provided for career guidance practitioners is rarely both specialised and at tertiary level. Specialised tertiary-level qualifications exist in a few instances – for example Germany’s Federal Employment Service and the United Kingdom. More commonly career guidance forms part of more general guidance and counselling training, is limited to short tertiary courses, is in-service, or recruitment is based upon qualifications in fields such as psychology which are related, but too general and insufficient. As a result of limited or insufficient training arrangements, many career guidance practitioners receive no thorough grounding in the basic theories of career guidance, little systematic exposure to its social and economic contexts and purposes, and no systematic applied training in the several methodologies that form the knowledge base of its practice.

While in nearly all countries career guidance practitioners have limited capacity to influence occupational supply, there are examples in countries such as Austria, Canada and the Netherlands of registers of career guidance practitioners being established in order to help to maintain and raise standards of practice. Many countries have a range of associations to represent career guidance practitioners. Often, as in Ireland and Korea, these are poorly linked, making it difficult for policy-makers to relate effectively to the career guidance field.

Occupational structures for the delivery of career guidance need to be strengthened. A priority for policy-makers in most OECD countries should be to create separate, and appropriate, occupational and organisational structures through which career guidance can be delivered, together with associated qualification and training requirements.

The level, content and structure of training courses are central to the capacity of governments to use the types of cost-effective and flexible delivery methods that are needed to widen access to career guidance. Hence the training and qualifications of career guidance practitioners become issues for policy-makers. In many countries, deficiencies are evident in the quality and level of the training that is available, and generally its content shows a number of gaps. Governments need to play a stronger role in shaping the nature of career guidance training and qualifications to remove these barriers to the implementation of key public policy goals.
Comprehensive and modular competency frameworks for the career guidance workforce are a first step in addressing such training deficiencies. Competency frameworks such as the Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners can help to bring greater consistency and flexibility to training arrangements. They also have advantages in terms of the management of the career guidance workforce.

**Funding career guidance**

Information on how much is spent on career guidance is weak in nearly all countries. This arises for a number of reasons, including the low priority that policy-makers have given to collecting such information.

However not all of the problems involved in estimating expenditure are insurmountable. Denmark and Finland, for example, are able to provide estimates of resource use in particular sectors based upon estimates of staff time devoted to guidance. And three countries – Australia, Austria and England – were able to provide sufficient data to enable at least an initial estimate to be made of total government expenditure on career guidance. These range from an annual expenditure of €8.48 per person aged 15-64 in Austria to €23.54 in England. While not directly comparable, the estimates broadly reflect the relative level and intensity of career guidance services in these countries.

How governments fund career guidance has implications for the nature and quality of services. Devolved funding, for example, requires decisions to be made about the residual responsibilities of national governments, and about strategic co-ordination. And it requires policy-makers to consider how to avoid wide variation in the level and quality of services. Staffing formulas can achieve a de facto earmarking of funds within devolved funding systems and in systems where block grants are used. Performance contracts and legislative-based entitlements can be other ways to address the issue.

Some career guidance services are contracted out in a number of countries. This can result in cheaper services and in services that are more closely attuned to the needs of particular groups. Whilst some contracting out can be managed by central governments and associated with tight quality requirements, within devolved funding systems it can be associated with wide variation in quality.

Market models are another way in which career guidance can be funded. Relatively strong private markets exist in the publication of career information and in career guidance associated with outplacement services. Some countries, such as the Netherlands, also appear to have limited markets for personal career guidance, paid for by individuals. Information on these markets is sparse. Personal career guidance is difficult to handle through private markets for a number of reasons. Both supply and demand are difficult to specify and define; it is highly variable in its nature; it is often subsumed under other services; and many of those who need it most are least able to afford it. The significant societal benefits that can flow from well organised career guidance constitute a case for government support for such services. However a wider use of market models could allow government funds to be better targeted on those who can least afford to pay and whose needs are the greatest.

Governments have a role in stimulating markets in order to build overall capacity. They have a role in regulating career guidance markets and in helping to set quality standards. And they have a role in compensating for market failure. There are a number of steps that governments can take that could help to stimulate private markets for career guidance. These include: the wider use of contracting out as a funding mechanism; better specifying the supply of and demand for career guidance in order to make it more transparent; the adoption of more innovative approaches to the financing of career guidance such as linking it to individual learning accounts; and addressing quality standards in order to raise consumer confidence.
How can strategic leadership be improved?

Governments have an important role in providing strategic leadership, but need to do so in association with other stakeholders: education and training providers; employers; trade unions; community agencies, students, parents, consumers, and career guidance practitioners. Strong co-operation between education and employment portfolios is particularly important: for example to ensure that educational and occupational information are integrated; and to ensure that a strong labour market perspective is included in schools’ career guidance programmes. Whilst mechanisms for leadership and co-ordination are generally weak, some positive initiatives can be seen: for example in Luxembourg, Norway and the United Kingdom.

Better evidence and data

Evidence and data are important tools for policy making. While career guidance has a strong research tradition, much of this has concentrated upon theories and techniques, and has had little relevance for policy. Its focus upon both outcomes and costs, for example, has been weak. In addition to better evidence on outcomes and costs, policy-makers in most countries need to obtain improved data on career guidance inputs and processes. Much of this could be obtained by better administrative data. Examples include better information on the characteristics of clients, on the types of services received by different types of clients, and on client satisfaction rates. In the face of some strong evidence gaps (for example on the scale and nature of private markets for career guidance) governments need to improve their national research infrastructure for career guidance. This can be done through a number of concrete steps, including financial support for research institutes that specialise in the link between career guidance and public policy, and the development of academic expertise through the regular commissioning of policy-relevant research.

Legislation

Legislation is extensively used as a tool to steer career guidance services in countries such as Finland, Spain and the United Kingdom, but is not used at all in others, such as Australia. Where it is used it tends to be rather general in nature. While it provides certain minimum guarantees, it often appears to be quite a weak policy steering tool. Its wider use to define client entitlements could, however, strengthen its value.

Quality standards

Quality standards can be developed for both the processes used to deliver career guidance services, and for the outcomes to be expected of them. They are particularly important in decentralised systems, but also have a key place in centralised systems where governments are the dominant providers. Sometimes the quality standards used to steer career guidance are general industrial standards such as ISO 9000, or part of broader quality standards applying to the sectors (of education, or of employment services) that career guidance services are part of. However examples exist of quality standards that have been developed specifically for career guidance services. In most cases these are voluntary, but they can also be linked to the provision of funds. Generally the link between quality standards and the provision of funds is weak. Career guidance quality standards seem more likely to be effective if they are developed in co-operation with key stakeholders, and are used for continual quality improvement. Quality standards can also be linked to the types of outcomes expected of career guidance services. When phrased in developmental terms, such as the Canadian Blueprint for Lifework Designs, these seem to be particularly attractive in a lifelong learning and active employability context.
Governments can also seek to strengthen the ways in which career guidance services are steered by strengthening the voice of consumers. Steps include client need and satisfaction surveys, and community consultations.

**Building policy frameworks for lifelong guidance**

In designing lifelong guidance systems, policy makers face a number of key challenges and choices in deciding broad priorities for resource allocation, policy-makers should give the first priority to systems that promote career decision-making and career self-management skills, and to systems that produce high quality impartial career information. Policies should not be based upon the assumption that everybody needs intensive personal advice and guidance, but should seek to match levels of personal help, from brief to intensive, to personal needs and circumstances.

A key step must be the identification of gaps in services. There are a number of common choices that need to be addressed by policy-makers in all countries. These include deciding when the process should start and how long through the lifespan it should extend. In a lifelong learning context the arguments in favour of it starting during primary school seem strong. At the other end of the lifespan, the arguments are also strong for ensuring that it can help people to plan more flexible transitions between full-time work and retirement.

Policy-makers also need to decide how responsibility for services for young people should be shared. For those who are in school, the strongest arguments are in favour of a shared responsibility between schools and external agencies. In this way the advantages of a developmental approach, a strong labour market focus, and advice that is independent of the interests of particular institutions can be combined. In planning entry to tertiary education, governments should ensure that information on tertiary courses is impartial and adopts a consumer perspective. Governments should also try to ensure that tertiary careers services are comprehensive: including enrolment advice, career development and employability programmes, links with future employers, and job placement. For young people who have dropped out of school early and who are neither in the labour market nor in education the most effective career guidance services are community-based, and part of wider early intervention programmes based around personal action planning.

Where services are provided by external agencies, policy-makers need to decide if these are to be all-age, as in Germany and Wales for example, or age-specific. While age-specific services might appear to have some advantages, many of these can also be provided through all-age services. All-age services have a number of organisational and resource-use advantages. In providing a diverse range of services throughout the lifespan within the one organisational framework, they are potentially more cost-effective, and can avoid resource duplication.

Policy-makers are also faced with a choice between including career guidance as just one element in broader guidance and advisory services, or providing it through specialised career guidance services. The universal experience of the review has been that when included within broadly-focused guidance services career guidance tends to be squeezed by the more immediate and day-to-day personal and study problems of the minority of students with particular problems. Under such circumstances the career guidance and career development needs of the majority tend to be a secondary priority. The importance of providing career guidance through specialised career guidance services is also emphasised by the need for policy-makers to improve the transparency of career guidance in order to make it more accessible.

In seeking to expand adult career guidance services policy-makers can draw upon a number of innovative approaches. These include: a wider role for public employment services; more extended local partnerships; a closer link between financial planning for retirement and career guidance; more innovative and cost-
effective delivery methods; the wider adoption of market-models; and the adoption of more innovative methods to finance career guidance. Some models for providing career guidance to adults already exist. However none of the existing models – whether within education systems, through public employment services, employers, the private market, or the community – is able on its own to meet all needs. A comprehensive approach needs to draw upon several of them, as well as upon more innovative methods, strengthening the case for better strategic co-ordination.

In conclusion

The creation and management of lifelong guidance systems requires policy-makers to address six major issues, whether in considering career guidance services for young people, for adults, or for both. In most OECD countries these issues have, to date, received minimal attention. They are:

- Ensuring that resource allocation decisions give the first priority to systems that develop career self-management skills and career information, and that delivery systems match levels of personal help, from brief to extensive, to personal needs and circumstances, rather than assuming that everybody needs intensive personal career guidance.

- Ensuring greater diversity in the types of services that are available and in the ways that they are delivered, including greater diversity in staffing structures, wider use of self-help techniques, and a more integrated approach to the use of ICT.

- Working more closely with career guidance practitioners to shape the nature of initial and further education and training qualifications in support of the development of career self-management skills, better career information, and more diverse service delivery.

- Improving the information base for public policy making, including gathering improved data on the financial and human resources devoted to career guidance, on client need and demand, on the characteristics of clients, on client satisfaction, and on the outcomes and cost-effectiveness of career guidance.

- Developing better quality assurance mechanisms and linking these to the funding of services.

- Developing stronger structures for strategic leadership.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Ordering  Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap is available from:

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