

**THE OECD CAREER GUIDANCE POLICY
REVIEW:
A PROGRESS REPORT**



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*Paper prepared for the World Congress of the International Association for Educational and Vocational
Guidance*

Warsaw, 29-31 May 2002



PREAMBLE

What I plan to do in this presentation is to outline the nature of the OECD Career Guidance Policy Review, to identify some of the issues that have arisen in the countries we have visited so far, and to place the review in the context of some other international initiatives concerned with the interface between career guidance and public policy.

THE OECD REVIEW

The fact that the OECD review is taking place at all is of some significance. OECD has paid some attention to career guidance issues in the past, but mainly as part of examining policy issues relating to initial transitions from school to work (OECD/CERI, 1996; OECD, 2000). This is the first occasion on which it has launched a full formal policy review devoted specifically to guidance issues, and the first occasion on which it has looked at such issues on a lifelong basis. The proposal to carry out the review was endorsed both by OECD's Education Committee and by its Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee, and reflects the current policy interest in career guidance from both of these perspectives.

As with most other OECD activities, the purpose of the review is partly benchmarking, enabling countries to see how well they are doing in relation to other comparable countries, and partly sharing good practice – enabling countries to promote their successes and to learn from practices elsewhere. Fourteen countries are taking part in the review. Eleven are from Europe (Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, UK); the others are Australia, Canada and Korea.

The methodology of the review involves a number of stages. First, the participating countries were actively involved in the development of a questionnaire designed to cover the issues in which they were interested. They were then responsible for completing this questionnaire for their own provision. This is being followed by a country visit, of which seven have been completed so far. In most OECD reviews, such visits are conducted by a team of 4-5 people and take a fortnight or so; in view of the specialist nature of the career guidance review, and the expressed desire of countries for a quicker and cheaper approach, a slimmed-down version is being applied on this occasion, with two-person teams (Richard Sweet or myself from OECD, plus an external expert from another country), and most visits being confined to one week. The review team's report is written up in the form of a Country Note, which draws from the questionnaire and other documentary evidence as well as from the visit itself, and includes suggestions on possible ways forward for the country concerned.

Once most of this work has been completed, an analytical meeting will be held at which the participating countries will be invited to identify the key issues which have emerged, and what can be learned from the similarities and differences between their systems and practices. This will lay the basis for the Comparative

Report, which will be submitted in draft to the two relevant OECD committees in spring 2003 and then published in summer 2003. Finally, a dissemination conference will be held at which the key findings of the review will be discussed by relevant policy-makers not only from the participating countries but also from other OECD member countries.

In addition to the questionnaire responses, the Country Notes and the Comparative Report, we have commissioned eight papers, in collaboration with the European Commission. Four have already been completed: on quality issues; on the skills, training and qualifications of guidance workers; on integrating services at local level; and on the role of ICT in integrated guidance systems. The other four cover: the role of the market in guidance delivery; evaluating outcomes; improving career information; and whether information is a sufficient basis for effective career decision-making. All of these documents are being made available, as they are completed, on our review website (www.oecd.org/els/education/reviews).

Finally, we are also working on a rationale statement, which will outline the role of career guidance in relation to lifelong learning and to active labour-market and welfare-to-work strategies. We hope to link this to some current OECD work on human capital development. This recognises that in OECD countries about 40% of individual variation in earnings can be explained through conventional measures like years of education, literacy and work experience, combined with the background factors of gender, language background and parents' education. It suggests that at least some of the remaining 60% might be accounted for by motivation and other personal characteristics, including the notion of human 'meta-capital' – i.e. people's ability to manage the development and utilisation of their own human capital. These are important arguments, which potentially place career guidance centre-stage.

EMERGING ISSUES

Five Country Notes have been drafted so far: on Australia, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands and Norway. From these, a number of issues can already be identified. Seven issues in particular seem worth discussing here. I emphasise that all these conclusions are tentative and may subsequently be recast in the light of what we learn from the other countries participating in the review.

The first is the risk of career education and guidance in schools being subsumed and marginalised within broader concepts. This has emerged in two different respects. In Australia, there is a risk that the efforts being made to strengthen the vocational elements within the curriculum and to support young people's transitions from school may paradoxically lead to neglect of the career education and guidance which is crucial to the success of these efforts. In Ireland and Norway, both of which have school counsellors with a holistic role, there is a risk that the pressing nature and apparent growth of pupils' personal and social problems may seriously restrict the time and attention which the counsellors are able to devote to career guidance matters. In Norway, indeed, the government has accordingly decided to set up a three-year project to separate the two roles by attaching them to different individuals, partly to protect the resourcing of career guidance work, and partly to address its distinctive competence requirements, including keeping in touch with changes in the education system and the labour market.

Second, with policies in several countries favouring devolution of management responsibilities to individual schools, there is an issue about how some form of student guidance entitlement can be assured within such policies. Schools left to their own devices tend to vary considerably in the importance they

attach to career education and guidance. Some managers see it as being very important for the institution and its students; some do not. The latter is particularly likely to be the case where external pressures on institutional priorities fall heavily on output measures based on examination performance, rather than on process measures or longer-term outcome measures. In this situation, the school system tends to be viewed as a closed box, and guidance linked to individual progression outside this box as being of peripheral importance. A possible strategy here might be to frame an entitlement around outcomes rather than processes, but to insist that the ways in which the school decides to deliver this entitlement must be made transparent to pupils and their parents.

Third, there seem in several countries to be weaknesses in guidance services within the more academic parts both of the school system and of the higher education system. Such guidance services as there are here tend to be concerned narrowly with the educational choices involved, with little attention to their vocational implications or with helping students to explore the world of work. The result is that many of the most able young people in the countries concerned have little if any help in supporting their career development through some of the most formative years of their lives. Yet course choices can significantly narrow career options, and most students enter them on the assumption that they will lead to vocational rewards. One useful policy measure here might be to insist on students having access, before entering their courses, to data on the immediate and longer-term destinations of those completing such courses.

Fourth, it is clear in most countries that the career guidance services available to adults are still limited and fragmented. In general, guidance systems are still very front-loaded. This raises issues about the relative roles of market-based and of publicly-funded provision. The private sector in most countries is disconnected from the publicly-funded services, with separate professional structures: there is a strong case for bringing these structures closer together. The private sector is particularly extensive in Australia and the Netherlands, pump-primed largely by employers and also by the state which in both of these countries has contracted out a substantial part of its public employment services including some guidance-related services. If guidance is a public as well as a private good, the roles of government in relation to a mixed model of provision would seem to be threefold: to stimulate the market; to ensure that it is quality-assured; and to address market failure. An area where current provision seems particularly inadequate is in relation to the third age: many countries are expressing growing concerns about their ageing populations and difficulties in funding adequate pension provision, and the consequent need to encourage people to stay longer in the labour force, but have not yet addressed the potential role of guidance services in this respect. There is also much scope for using helplines and web-based services to extend access to guidance, and for integrating such services more creatively with face-to-face services.

Fifth, there is a widespread need to integrate public employment services more closely into lifelong learning strategies in general and strategies for lifelong access to guidance in particular. Huge public resources are concentrated in these services. They tend at present to be targeted narrowly at particular groups (notably the unemployed) and short-term goals (immediate employment and removal from the benefit system). But they could be transformed into services for all, helping people to sustain their employability and respond flexibly to change. This could also enable their work with the targeted groups to be preventive rather than purely remedial and to avoid the stigma which can undermine the effectiveness of such work.

Sixth, there is a need for stronger professional structures in the career guidance field. In many countries, the current structures are weak in comparison with those in related professions. Guidance strategies can of course involve delivery through others – teachers and mentors of various kinds, for example. But greater clarity is needed about the role of guidance professionals within such diversified delivery systems. There is also a need for competence frameworks which can embrace but also differentiate a variety of guidance roles – and incidentally provide a career development structure for guidance staff themselves. Beyond this, stronger infrastructures are required to build up the evidence base for both policy and practice, and to do so

on a cumulative basis so that experience is not wasted and mistakes repeated. This should include evidence on outcomes.

Finally, a need is evident in many countries for stronger mechanisms to provide co-ordination and leadership in articulating strategies for lifelong access to guidance. Such mechanisms are required within government, where responsibility for guidance services is often fragmented across a number of ministries and branches. They are also needed more broadly at national level, to bring together the various guidance professional bodies and relevant stakeholder groups. In addition, they are needed at regional and/or local level, closer to the point of delivery. Denmark offers a strong model in these respects, with its Danish Council for Educational and Vocational Guidance (RUE) and its Regional Guidance Committees linked to the structure of Regional Labour Market Councils. In some other countries, on the other hand, seminars set up for our review seemed to provide an unusual opportunity for the relevant groups to come together, and led to suggestions that some more sustainable infrastructure was needed to extend these discussions and explore areas of joint action.

RELATED INITIATIVES

The OECD review is linked to a number of other current international initiatives. The European Commission is currently setting up a European Guidance Forum to provide an opportunity for the key policy-makers in each member-state (plus the aspirant member-states) to share their experience and to consider what initiatives might be appropriate at European level. As part of the preparations for this forum, the Commission has asked CEDEFOP to use our OECD questionnaire in order to collect relevant data on countries which are not taking part in our review. It also seems likely that the World Bank will shortly initiate a parallel review in a number of middle-income countries, again using our questionnaire as the basis for its data collection.

In addition, following two very successful international symposia on career development and public policy held in Canada in 1999 (Hiebert & Bezanson, 2000) and 2001, there are some tentative plans to set up a new International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy. This will aim to bring together policy-makers and guidance professional leaders on a regular basis, and to carry out collaborative international research projects in area of mutual concern. The plans are still at an early stage; while it seems possible that the Canadian government will provide some initial core support, complementary support from a couple of other countries is likely to be needed to convert the plans into action.

If these plans come off, it seems that the results of current efforts will be, across OECD, the European Commission and the World Bank, the most extensive harmonised international database we have ever had on guidance policy and practice, plus two major sustainable infrastructures – the European Guidance Forum and the International Centre – for maintaining the dialogue between career development and public policy. Strengthening this dialogue is crucial if lifelong access to career guidance, in support of lifelong career development for all, is to become a reality.

REFERENCES

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