

Career information, guidance and counselling services: Policy perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Throughout OECD countries a number of important policy directions are placing increasing demands upon career information and guidance services: a growing emphasis upon lifelong learning for all and active employment and welfare policies are among the more important. Yet alongside these pressures for wider community access to career assistance services, recent OECD work reveals weaknesses in the organisation and delivery of career information, guidance and counselling. A key challenge facing governments is to greatly widen access to these services in an affordable way and yet to maintain their quality. The paper describes a new OECD activity on policies for career information, guidance and counselling services that will examine this challenge.

Introduction

In late 2000 the OECD's Education Committee and its Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee each endorsed a new activity on policies for career information, guidance and counselling services. This is a fairly new development for the OECD. In the mid 1990s the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation conducted case studies of national approaches to career guidance for youth, and pointed out that recognition of the importance of career guidance was only just beginning to move from the professional literature into the reality of policy (OECD/CERI, 1996). A number of the reviews of the Public Employment Service (PES) conducted during the 1990s -- for example the Danish and Finnish reviews (OECD, 1996) -- have contained brief descriptive material on guidance services. The Thematic Review of the First Years of Tertiary Education (OECD, 1998) noted that job placement and career counselling are often neither well understood nor well incorporated into tertiary institutions' course planning and teaching. A recent study (OECD, 1999) has commented briefly upon the roles of personal advisers within welfare-to-work programmes and upon the tools that are required for them to do their jobs effectively. However in general the policy issues involved in the organisation, management and delivery of information, guidance and counselling services have not been treated comprehensively in OECD work.

Why then are they now being taken more seriously by these two peak OECD Committees, on which all of the 30 Member governments of the OECD are represented? In one sense the decision to look at policies for career information and guidance services had its origins in the Thematic Review of the Transition from Initial Education to Working Life whose final report was published in mid 2000 (OECD, 2000). This review concluded that well organised information and guidance is an essential feature of effective transition systems. However it also noted that, despite many individual examples of good practice, information and guidance systems are frequently not well organised in many countries, and have often not been given a sufficient priority by those responsible for youth transition policies. Similar observations have emerged from a current OECD thematic review of adult learning. One purpose of the proposed new activity on information, guidance and counselling services is to follow up these observations.

The new activity has, however, wider purposes. The OECD's current (1996-2001) mandate from Education Ministers requires it to explore ways in which lifelong learning for all can be made a reality. In its detailed elaboration, the notion of lifelong learning for all involves more flexible pathways through initial education, easier re-entry mechanisms for adult learners, stronger links between initial education and training and the further education and training of adults, more flexible mechanisms for the recognition of knowledge and skills acquired outside of the classroom, and a more student-centred approach to learning that gives the individual greater control over the content, mode and location of learning. In turn, all of these require, if they are to become a reality for larger numbers of learners, more effective "learning signposts" in the form of information guidance and counselling services. This brings questions of the organisation and delivery of information, guidance and counselling services to the heart of a key public policy concern.

At the same time, many countries have been adopting more active approaches to policies for the unemployed and for welfare recipients: the concept of mutual obligation is becoming more widespread, with the receipt of government income support often being contingent upon the individual developing an individual action plan, in association with a counsellor or adviser, to re-engage in active job search, education or training.

Taken together these developments in education policy, in labour market policy and in welfare policy imply a greatly increased role for information, guidance and counselling services. This poses a significant question for governments. How can they greatly increase public access to such services, yet at the same time make sure that quality is maintained and that services are affordable? In posing the question in this way, attention is focused upon some central issues in the organisation, management and delivery of these services, and upon questions about priorities, access, quality and affordability. In short, how can the ways in which career guidance services are shaped help to meet some key public policy objectives?

Twenty years ago, if faced with questions such as this, governments would have had few options. Like other personal services such as hairdressing, career guidance had traditionally been delivered largely in a one-to-one, face-to-face mode that provided limited scope for productivity gains. Twenty years ago governments, confronted with challenges such as those outlined above, would have been faced with a choice of either expanding access to services at substantially increased cost to the public purse, or of keeping costs manageable by setting tight criteria for access. Another option would have been to ration access by price, with major implications for equity and fairness. However over the last two decades, and in particular over the last decade, new techniques and new technologies have provided substantial scope for productivity gains in the delivery of career information and guidance services. These include relatively low-cost methods such as the Holland Self Directed Search, either paper-and-pencil or computer based, and the types of triage or screening instruments that have been developed in public employment services to better match service delivery to client needs. They include a wide array of computer-based techniques, either CD-ROM or Internet-based, that can assist career exploration and decision making. They include sophisticated computerised data bases to organise and allow access to information on education and training, career opportunities and job vacancies. And they include systems that organise self-exploration and information search in common frameworks. Developments in communications technology, including call centre technology, have opened up new possibilities for telephone information, advice and counselling services. Another way to increase the productivity of careers assistance services is to systematically

involve others who are not necessarily career professionals and to make use of their expertise and knowledge. Examples include programmes to bring employers and parents into schools to talk about jobs and careers that they are familiar with, community mentoring programmes, careers fairs that involve many employers, industry associations and educational institutions, and the type of systematic use of alumni that is found in the careers services of Japanese colleges and universities. All of these developments and approaches require career development professionals to learn new skills and to work in new ways.

While these new options and new techniques might be seen by some as a way simply of reducing the cost to government of providing career information and guidance, a much more positive view is to see them as a way of greatly opening up access to career information and guidance without incurring a substantial increase in unit costs. By themselves they are not a solution to the questions that were posed above about how career information and guidance can assist to implement broad public policy objectives such as the implementation of lifelong learning for all. But they must be an important part of the solution when put into the context of questions about access, quality, financing methods and the like. The challenge is to draw a comprehensive picture of the organisation, delivery and staffing of career information, guidance and counselling services that includes them as one element in overall strategies to achieve goals such as lifelong learning and active labour market and welfare policies.

Specific issues

Within the broad approach that has been outlined above, there are a number of specific issues and questions that will be examined in the new OECD activity on policies for career information and guidance that started late in 2000. These include the following:

Delivery models: What is an appropriate balance between different information and guidance models and delivery systems (for example classroom-based career education; one-to-one counselling; group counselling; telephone advisory services; computer-based advice and information; community-based

services) for young people and for adults? How can the boundaries between information services, advisory services, and guidance and counselling services be defined, managed, staffed and resourced?

Costs and benefits: How can the level of need for information, guidance and counselling services be established? Is the public interest best served by concentrating resources upon those most in need, or upon comprehensive services containing special provision for special needs? What potential is there for screening tools such as those used within many public employment services to establish client needs and allocate service levels? Within individual countries, what are the costs and benefits of different delivery models? How do the costs and benefits vary according to the nature of the client group and the types of services provided? How can cost-effectiveness be maximised in selecting an optimal mix of delivery models?

Roles of the parties: What are the appropriate roles of education authorities, labour market authorities, employers, trade unions, community agencies and the private sector in the provision of information and guidance and counselling services? What examples exist of planned complementarity in these roles? How can services be located most appropriately to meet the needs of different client groups?

Staffing: What qualifications and training are appropriate for information guidance and counselling personnel? What is an appropriate mix and range of staff qualifications and training within a comprehensive national information, guidance and counselling framework? How do new policy demands within education, employment and welfare services alter the skills and qualifications required?

Financing: What financing models are appropriate for information, guidance and counselling services? What are the respective roles of governments, employers and individuals, and how do these vary according to the nature of clients and their needs?

Quality: How can quality be defined, measured and assessed: for information services (both print and electronic), as well as for advice, guidance and counselling services? What role can public authorities play

in setting and monitoring standards and quality? What is the role of the guidance and counselling profession?

Knowledge base: What light can existing national research shed upon these issues? What research and evaluation base is needed to support both quality standards and judgements on costs and benefits? What measures are needed to assess the effectiveness of information, guidance and counselling services?

The activity will, then, take a very broad approach to policy issues. It is not making the assumption that the simple answer to the need to expand access to quality career services in an affordable way is to expand distance guidance, Internet-delivered career guidance and information services, telephone guidance services and the like. It is seeing these as just one element in a comprehensive approach to the provision of guidance services, and the mapping out of what a comprehensive approach to guidance might look like if in particular it is to meet lifelong learning objectives.

Methodology

So far 12 OECD countries have indicated that they wish to take part in the activity. They are: Australia; Austria; the Czech Republic, Denmark; Finland; Germany; Ireland; Korea, the Netherlands; Norway; Spain; and the United Kingdom.

A national questionnaire

The first step will be to gather information from the participating countries. This is being done through a detailed national questionnaire. In addition to asking for a brief overview of the organisation of career information, guidance and counselling services, it will ask questions in 11 areas. These are:

Key goals; influences; issues and initiatives: This asks about broad goals for information, guidance and counselling services, about the influences that are shaping these services, about the key issues in their organisation, management and delivery, and about important recent initiatives.

Policy instruments for steering services: This asks about the key policy instruments that are used to steer information, guidance and counselling services, about how policy goals are translated into service delivery, and about the co-ordination of services.

The roles of the stakeholders: This asks about the roles played by some key stakeholders other than government Ministries -- such as employer organisations and trade unions -- in information, guidance and counselling services.

Targeting and access: This asks about priorities for access to information, guidance and counselling services. It also asks about how services are provided for adults.

Staffing: This asks about the types of staff that provide information, guidance and counselling services, and about their qualifications, training and competencies.

Delivery settings: This asks about the delivery of services in different settings: schools; the public employment service; tertiary education; the private (for-profit) sector; and the community sector.

Delivery methods: This asks about changes in delivery methods, including the use of Internet-based services, and about ways in which delivery methods have been influenced by government policies.

Career information: This asks about the educational and occupational information that is used in information, guidance and counselling services: how it is produced and by who, how it is targeted to clients, and whether standards exist for it.

Financing: This asks about the ways in which information, guidance and counselling services are funded; the ways in which costs are shared; and the financial resources devoted to information, guidance and counselling services.

Assuring quality: This asks about the ways that the quality of information, guidance and counselling services is maintained and enhanced.

The evidence base: This asks about the ways in which the delivery of information, guidance and counselling services is supported by data and research evidence.

Country visits

It will probably take each country a minimum of three months to complete the national questionnaire. A common reaction has been that completing it will be a challenging task, testing existing information sources to the limit, and requiring many probing questions to be asked. Nevertheless we have made it clear to countries that we do not expect them to start new surveys or research projects to supply information where this is missing. When countries have completed the questionnaire, they will be visited by a small team of experts, one from the OECD Secretariat and one independent expert. They will meet with those who provide career information and guidance services, and hold discussions with policy makers and national experts. Following their visit they will prepare a short note for the country setting out their impressions and suggestions.

Other inputs

While the national questionnaires and the country visits will form the major inputs for the activity, there will also be an opportunity to commission consultants' papers on selected topics. These can be of two types: summaries of the literature; or cutting edge "think pieces" on particular issues. An additional input for the activity will be an international survey of upper secondary schools that is being conducted by the OECD's Indicators of Education Systems project during 2001. It contains questions on career counselling, work experience, relationships with employers and further education, and student tracking, as well as general questions on the nature of the schools and the programmes that they offer. Many of the countries taking part in that survey are also taking part in the activity on guidance policies.

Finally, a further valuable input for the activity has been the papers and proceedings of an international symposium on career development and public policy organised by the Canadian Career Development Foundation that was held in Vancouver at the beginning of March 2001. The symposium built upon the first event of this sort, held in Ottawa two years ago. It was attended by 16 countries (14 of these OECD members), the World Bank, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the European Commission (EC), and the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG). The five policy themes that were discussed at the symposium strongly related to those being explored in the OECD's activity. Each of the participating countries produced national papers organised around the five themes, and in most cases these were jointly written by policy makers and practitioners. The ILO and the EC also provided background documents. Synthesis papers were written for each theme to summarise the national papers. For each theme these were written both by a policy maker and a practitioner. Taken together these papers provide a rich source of material for the activity.

Outcomes

The inputs described above are only one aspect of the way in which the activity will be carried out. Just as important is the way in which the inputs are shared among member countries, and discussed and analysed in order to arrive at conclusions. A web site will be established for the activity, and it will include, with the agreement of the participating countries, the completed national questionnaires, the brief notes written after the country visits, consultants' papers and other material. We also hope that it will provide links to the documents produced for and as a result of the March 2001 Vancouver symposium. An analytical meeting to consider the activity's key inputs and discuss its conclusions will be held in September 2002 in Spain. Following that a summary report will be prepared, to appear as an OECD publication in mid 2003 after consideration by the OECD's Education and Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committees in the Spring of 2003. A policy dissemination conference will be held to coincide with the publication.

An important feature of the activity is the way in which the OECD is working in close partnership with the career guidance profession and other bodies. The IAEVG was involved in initial discussions to help define the scope of the activity in early 2000, it participated in a mid January 2001 planning meeting together with national representatives and selected experts, and the activity's analytical and policy dissemination conferences will be held in association with it. The OECD assisted in the organisation of the March 2001 international symposium hosted by the Canadian Career development Foundation, and the European Commission and the OECD will co-operate in the commissioning of consultants' papers for the activity.

In conclusion

The field of career guidance contains a rich literature on theory and practice. However links between research, practice and policy are weaker. One goal of the OECD activity is to bring these worlds more closely together. It is only through this type of partnership that better policy, and better practice that can better meet the needs of greater numbers of clients, will result.

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