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# Career experts' conceptions of systems development in lifelong guidance

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## Abstract

This article reports the findings from a phenomenographic study of career experts' conceptions of systems development in lifelong guidance settings. The results show that conceptions of systems development in lifelong guidance varied from minimal, aspirational, strategic to systemic. By exploring the logical relationship between qualitatively different conceptions, it provides policymakers and other stakeholders with a way of holistically viewing the varying levels of lifelong guidance systems development. The matrix presented in this article may serve as a catalyst for reflection on crucial elements, such as legislation, leadership and cooperation, that have the potential to improve systems development in lifelong guidance.

**Keywords** Lifelong guidance · Systems development · Phenomenography

## Résumé

**Conceptions de l'orientation tout au long de la vie par les spécialistes de la carrière.** Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude phénoménographique des conceptions des spécialistes de la carrière sur le développement des systèmes dans les contextes d'orientation tout au long de la vie. Les résultats montrent que les conceptions du développement des systèmes d'orientation tout au long de la vie variaient de minimales, ambitieuses, stratégiques à systémiques. En explorant la relation logique entre des conceptions qualitativement différentes, il offre aux décideurs politiques et aux autres parties prenantes une façon de voir globalement les différents niveaux de développement des systèmes d'orientation tout au long de la vie. La matrice présentée dans cet article peut servir de catalyseur pour la réflexion sur des éléments cruciaux,

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tels que la législation, le leadership et la coopération, qui ont le potentiel d'améliorer le développement des systèmes d'orientation tout au long de la vie.

## Zusammenfassung

**Konzepte der Systementwicklung in der lebenslangen Beratung.** In diesem Beitrag werden die Ergebnisse einer phänomenologischen Untersuchung der Vorstellungen von Karriereexperten zur Systementwicklung in der lebenslangen Beratung vorgestellt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Konzepte der Systementwicklung in der lebenslangen Beratung von minimal, aspirational, strategisch bis systemisch variierten. Durch die Untersuchung der logischen Beziehung zwischen qualitativ unterschiedlichen Konzeptionen bietet es politischen Entscheidungsträgern und anderen Akteuren eine Möglichkeit, die unterschiedlichen Ebenen der Entwicklung lebenslanger Leitsysteme ganzheitlich zu betrachten. Die in diesem Artikel vorgestellte Matrix kann als Katalysator für die Reflexion über wichtige Elemente wie Gesetzgebung, Führung und Zusammenarbeit dienen, die das Potenzial haben, die Systementwicklung in der lebenslangen Anleitung zu verbessern.

## Resumen

**Concepciones de los expertos en el desarrollo de sistemas de orientación permanente.** En este artículo se presentan los resultados de un estudio fenomenográfico de las concepciones de los expertos profesionales sobre el desarrollo de sistemas en entornos de orientación permanente. Los resultados muestran que las concepciones del desarrollo de sistemas en la orientación a lo largo de la vida variaron de mínimas, aspiracionales, estratégicas a sistémicas. Al explorar la relación lógica entre concepciones cualitativamente diferentes, proporciona a los responsables de la formulación de políticas y a otros interesados una forma de ver de forma holística los distintos niveles de desarrollo de los sistemas de orientación a lo largo de la vida. La matriz presentada en este artículo puede servir como catalizador para la reflexión sobre elementos cruciales, como la legislación, el liderazgo y la cooperación, que tienen el potencial de mejorar el desarrollo de sistemas en la orientación a lo largo de la vida.

## Introduction

Over recent decades, the development of lifelong guidance systems has attracted increasing attention from policy-makers and other stakeholders, driven in part by a career guidance and public policy review undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2004a). This in turn prompted a series of parallel reviews of how career services are organised, managed and delivered (e.g. Sultana, 2003, 2004; Sultana & Watts, 2007, 2008; Sweet, 2006; Watts & Fretwell, 2004). Together, these reviews highlighted the importance of addressing guidance provision as an holistic system rather than as a motley collection of unconnected services, and provided a basis for two handbooks for policymakers. The first of these was published jointly by the OECD and the European Commission (OECD,

2004b); the second for low- and middle-income countries was published by the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2006).

Throughout the European Union (EU), these reviews stimulated the development of lifelong guidance practice and policy development, marked by the establishment of the European Commission on Lifelong Guidance Expert Group (e.g. Watts, 2014; Watts et al., 2010) and the adoption of a European Council Resolution (2004) on strengthening policies, systems and practices in the field of guidance throughout life. One goal of that Resolution (European Council, 2004) was to encourage the development of linked strategic provisions to ensure effective coordination and cooperation between and among service providers at national, regional and local levels. Although Europe was the reference field, the EU member states were encouraged to exchange experiences and promote international co-operation in systems and policy development more broadly (Cedefop, 2005). A second Resolution (Council of the European Union, 2008) called for further strengthening of European cooperation on lifelong guidance provision, leading to the formation of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) (e.g. ELGPN, 2010, 2012a; Watts, 2014). Through systematic policy sharing and learning, the ELGPN produced a comprehensive range of reference tools and publications to guide systems and policy developments at national and EU levels (ELGPN, 2015).

In Europe, *lifelong guidance* is an umbrella concept for the provision of guidance and counselling. Lifelong guidance refers to activities that enable citizens of any age, and at any life stage, to identify their capacities, competences and interests; to make meaningful educational, training and occupational decisions; and to manage their individual life path in learning, work and other settings in which these capacities and competences are learned and/or used (European Council, 2004, 2008). Within the career guidance field there is a strong consensus that a coherent lifelong guidance system offers the most effective way to organise career guidance services. In recent times, the word 'system' is commonly used to describe an assemblage of organisations in a given policy field and the interconnections between them (as in 'health system' or 'education system') (Steward & Ayres, 2001). It has been argued that application of systems thinking could help in demonstrating how systems, such as a lifelong guidance system, are structured and how they operate (e.g. Collin, 1990). Furthermore, it has been emphasised that transforming sectoral career guidance services to improve access and address social equity in accordance with constant changes in the society require stronger systems thinking in developing proactive lifelong guidance services in all sectors (ELGPN, 2015). On the one hand, systems thinking rises above the separate components to see the whole system, and, on the other hand, systems thinking views each separate component as a part of the whole system (Shaked & Schechter, 2017).

Lifelong guidance systems exist within learning, working and welfare cultures, which prevailing institutions and stakeholders uphold. Lifelong guidance system encompasses schools, colleges, universities, training agencies, employment services, workplaces and community settings, including public sector, private sector and voluntary provisions (ELGPN, 2012b). This implies that lifelong guidance needs to be defined and examined in three dimensions: as a policy, as an activity of individual organisations or networked services (sometimes in collaborative contracts between

the public administration and the private and voluntary sectors), and as an individual process with clients or groups (Vuorinen & Kettunen, 2022). Understanding of this wider systemic nature of career services and the impact for both individuals and society contributes to the effective and efficient use public investments in lifelong guidance (Kettunen & Sampson, 2019).

To be effective, lifelong guidance systems generally require (a) coordinated services and stakeholders with stable and appropriate funding to provide seamless lifelong support; (b) ability and right to access career development support for all who require it; and (c) quality assurance of professionalised services, including qualified practitioners, quality tools, timely and granular labour market information, clear standards and continual improvement processes informed by evidence of service effectiveness based on monitoring, evaluation and user feedback; and (d) use of appropriate technologies to ensure access, innovative service provision and fulfilment of diverse client needs (e.g. Kadletz et al., 2021; Watts & Sultana, 2004; WCGG, 2021).

Despite the considerable investment of effort and resources, it remains that most EU countries have not yet succeeded in establishing coherent and holistic lifelong guidance system that meet all the information, advisory and guidance needs of EU citizens. Based on international evidence (e.g. Cedefop, 2011; Sultana, 2008), the main limitations include a lack of coordination between various sectors and agencies, the diversity of providers and practices, issues of resource allocation and professional expertise and the lack of an evidence-based framework for assessing the quality of services provided. A recent review (Barnes et al., 2020) noted that variations and these limitations in national lifelong systems remain. Moreno da Fonseca (2015) argued that this is due to path dependence in the application of lifelong guidance services and activities in different government sectors. Lifelong guidance systems continue to be characterised both by ambiguity and indeterminateness (Bimrose et al., 2006), despite efforts to systematise.

Efforts to improve such systems are necessarily long-term and evolve in response to surrounding political, economic and social conditions (Coffman, 2007). System-level change is difficult and depends on a good understanding of national needs and untapped potentials; it also requires early engagement of key stakeholders in pursuit of shared priorities and an agreed vision (Kadletz et al., 2021). Adjusting lifelong guidance structures and policies to users' needs also requires understanding the origins of institutional inertia (Moreno da Fonseca, 2015). Meaningful measurement and feedback mechanisms function as the cornerstones of successful systems change (OECD, 2017).

The present study explores how international career development experts perceive the development of lifelong guidance systems by identifying and describing qualitatively different conceptions, guided by the following research questions: What are career experts' conceptions of systems development in lifelong guidance?; and What are the critical aspects that differentiate the qualitatively varying ways of systems development in lifelong guidance? The ultimate aim of describing the variation in conceptions is to expand our existing understanding of the critical aspects that may play an important role in improving systems development in lifelong guidance.

## Methods

The phenomenographic approach adopted here (Åkerlind, 2005b; Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton & Pong, 2005) is a data-driven analytic approach that captures participants' experiences, understandings and/or conceptions of the target phenomenon at a collective level (Marton & Booth, 1997). As well as identifying the different understandings, a phenomenographic study seeks to identify the aspects that critically differentiate the categories from each other, hence revealing their qualitative differences. While recognising that individuals may have more than one conception of a particular phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997), phenomenography is grounded on the premise that there is a limited number of ways of experiencing a particular phenomenon and that these ways are logically related to each other. In the context of lifelong guidance, previous phenomenographic studies have explored career professionals' conceptions of innovation in career development (Kettunen, 2022), social media (Kettunen et al., 2013), ethical practice in social networking (Kettunen & Makela, 2019); the challenges of implementing ICT in career services (Kettunen & Sampson, 2019); leadership and management in guidance and counselling networks (Nykänen, 2011) and the role of ICT in national guidance policies (Kettunen et al., 2016).

The primary outcome of phenomenographic analysis is a structured set of logically related categories that describe qualitative differences in people's ways of experiencing or understanding the phenomenon in question (Marton, 1986). According to Marton and Booth (1997), such categories of description should meet three quality criteria. 1) Each category should describe a distinct way of conceiving the phenomenon. 2) The logical relationships between categories should be hierarchically represented. 3) The categories describing variations across the sample should be parsimonious and limited in number. The procedure used to ensure the quality of descriptions is described in the data analysis section.

## Participants and the study context

The study participants were career experts (N=30) from 18 countries (comprising 13 EU member states, Australia, Iceland, Switzerland, the UK and the USA). The interviewees represented national policymakers, public employment services, education agencies, research institutions, private employment services and professional associations, communities, networks and social partners, thus giving a broad coverage of the guidance community. In keeping with phenomenographic techniques (Åkerlind et al., 2005; Green, 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997), diverse participants were deliberately recruited to maximise variation in understandings of the target phenomenon; in this case, systems development in lifelong guidance. To ensure relevant and information-rich data, purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to select and identify participants from a cross section of contexts and countries with a range of expertise and experience. Previous phenomenographic

studies indicate that a sample of 10–15 subjects is usually sufficient to ensure maximum variation (Åkerlind, 2008; Trigwell, 2000) and a manageable volume of data. In practice, most studies employ a sample size of 20–30 participants (Bowden, 2005). The interviews were part of the study commissioned by the European Commission DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, which was published in 2020 (for more detail, see Barnes et al., 2020).

## Data collection

The data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Although phenomenographic data can be acquired by other means, the interview is the most commonly used method (e.g. Åkerlind, 2005a, 2005b; Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018, 2022; Marton & Booth, 1997). Individual interviews were conducted face to face, by video or telephone call. All participants were supplied with information about the study and a consent form. After informed consent was secured, each interview lasted between 45 and 75 min. Open-ended questions allowed interviewees to articulate their current understanding and experience as fully and flexibly as possible; these were piloted with two pre-interviewees to ensure they would yield the information required to meet the research objectives (e.g. Bowden, 2005; Green, 2005).

The questions directed the interviewee's attention to the target phenomenon and sought to explore their experiences, understandings and conceptions of how life-long guidance systems develop, the elements of effective systems and how systems might evolve in the future. Neutral follow-up questions were asked to clarify the interviewee's views. Interviews were recorded if permission was granted. In each case, the interviewer produced an extended summary with verbatim quotes, which was anonymised for analysis. The purpose and value of revisiting the data here is to unpack some deeper insights into participants' conceptions of the development of lifelong guidance systems and bringing into view the critical aspects which may have important implications for the future.

## Data analysis

The phenomenographic analysis (Åkerlind, 2005b; Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2017; Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton & Pong, 2005) followed the guidelines and examples provided by Åkerlind (2005a, 2005b), Bowden (2000a, 2000b) and Bowden and Green (2005) and involved three phases. In the first phase, conceptions of systems development in lifelong guidance were identified and described in general terms by repeatedly re-reading the interview summaries to elucidate the underlying ideas and intentions. To identify key relationships and distinct characteristics, subsequent readings focused on similarities and differences in the meanings expressed. By reflecting on these similarities and differences, a draft set of descriptive categories of collective meaning was gradually elaborated, defined and named. In line with phenomenographic principles, categories of description were not predetermined, but were constituted on the basis of the collected data. In other words, categories were generated from empirical evidence rather than based on existing literature or theory.

The second phase of the analysis sought to delineate the logical relationships among the various categories. Themes that ran through and across the data were identified, and these were used to structure the relationships within and between categories (Åkerlind, 2005a), in order to distinguish more and less complex views of the systems development in lifelong guidance (Åkerlind, 2005a; Marton & Booth, 1997) and to highlight its different aspects. Throughout this phase, the initial categories of description were further elaborated and defined in terms of their characteristic features, with ongoing reference to the data.

To ensure robustness, the data were initially analysed by the first author before seeking a second opinion from four research colleagues experienced in qualitative careers research, meeting with them several times. The group discussions and revision of categories and their structures in this way served to confirm the validity of data, making it less likely that analysis would end prematurely (Bowden, 2000b). The process of re-reading and re-drafting continued until saturation, that is, until it failed to produce any significant changes in the categories of description (Bowden & Green, 2010). The authors have considerable experience of phenomenography and system development in lifelong guidance.

The final phase of the analysis focussed on ensuring that the categories of description conformed to Marton and Booth's (1997) quality criteria (as described earlier), ensuring that each category described a distinct way of experiencing the phenomenon, that the logical relationships between categories were hierarchically represented, and that the categories were parsimonious and limited in number.

## Results

Analysis of the data revealed four distinct categories of description that captured career experts' conceptions of systems development in lifelong guidance (Table 1). Systems development in lifelong guidance was conceived as: 1) minimal, 2) aspirational, 3) strategic, and 4) systemic. The differences between categories appeared along the following six dimensions of variation that included: *legislation, strategic leadership, cooperation, delivery, professionalisation, and evidence of the impact*.

**Table 1** Career experts' conceptions of systems development in lifelong guidance

Dimensions of variation	Categories			
	Minimal	Aspirational	Strategic	Systemic
Legislation	Non-existent	Nominal	Embedded in other policies	Explicit
Strategic leadership	Missing	Scattered	Devolved	Shared
Cooperation	Lacking	Emerging	Multilateral	Multisectoral
Delivery	Limited	Fragmented	vertically horizontally	coordinated Coordinated
Professionalisation	Resistant	Aspirational	Partial	Regulated
Evidence of impact	not evaluated	Desired	Ad hoc	Systematic



Table 1 Career experts' conceptions of systems development in lifelong guidance.

Each category is described in further detail below, supported by examples that illustrate key aspects of the categories. It is important to note that this categorisation refers to collective (rather than individual or country specific) conceptions of systems development in lifelong guidance.

## Description of the categories

### Category 1: Systems development in lifelong guidance is minimal

In this first category, systems development in lifelong guidance is conceived as minimal. Lifelong guidance legislation and rules for regulating and managing service provision, qualifications and national accountability of services are not prioritised or may be *non-existent*. Strategic leadership for the development of lifelong guidance is *missing* and cooperation between different ministries and/or agencies is *lacking*.

We don't have any policy or any law that works on lifelong guidance.

There is no overarching strategy or policy.

Career guidance is avoided as a policy term.

Coordination ... to be honest, I do not see that.

A lack of cooperation between key ministries made development of a system difficult.

In this category, the divisions between ministries resulted in a lack of leadership and coordination, so no one had responsibility to look across the lifecourse and determine the guidance support required and how it should be delivered. Guidance delivery is *limited*, targeting only particular groups or specific transition points of individuals. For some, delivery of guidance occurred at a local level but not consistently, resulting in inequities of access to support. Overall, service delivery is seen to lack clarity. Efforts to upgrade the profession's status are seen to encounter *resistance*, with perceived deprofessionalisation tendencies. There is no agreement across guidance contexts on the minimum qualifications, standards for the professional practitioner or professional development requirements, and the impacts of lifelong guidance are not *evaluated*.

The description of the service is not unclear.

In the new legislation, career guidance is not referred to as a profession.

Following deregulation of the profession, guidance counsellors are very much on their own and lack support.

The impact has not been evaluated.

This category represents the narrowest conception emerging from data analysis. Where a system of lifelong guidance development is conceived as minimal, these are often fragile and open to changing government priorities and strategy. Services can be disparate and temporary, significantly not meeting the needs of individuals across the lifecourse.

## **Category 2: Systems development in lifelong guidance is aspirational**

In this second category, systems development in lifelong guidance is conceived as aspirational. Lifelong guidance legislation is seen as *nominal*. Strategic leadership needed to develop lifelong guidance systems is *scattered* across multiple levels, and cooperation between sectors is *emerging* but remains relatively shallow.

I don't think lifelong guidance is systematically well embedded in relevant national and regional policies or legislation.

... policies may be introduced, but they are not integrated or regulated.

This [cooperation] remains problematic, perhaps because of the vested interests of different stakeholder groups.

There is communication between sectors but not necessarily joint actions by public service providers.

In this category, delivery of guidance services is *fragmented* and operated largely under a wide range of unconnected sectoral priorities by a range of institutions.

There are many relevant initiatives and attempts to move towards delivery of lifelong guidance, but these are invariably fragmented and not organised, nothing is institutionalised.

Right now, we have a patchwork system because we have different centres that are organised at different levels.

Participants expressed *aspirations* to improve the sector's status, with particular emphasis on qualifications, standards and professionalisation of a diverse workforce. While acknowledging *desire* for evidence of the impact of lifelong guidance, they noted the difficulty of gathering that evidence due to the complexity of a fragmented.

There needs to be national recognition of career guidance as a profession. This would guarantee minimum competences in a decentralised system, which otherwise depend on local interests.

I'd say there is a need for monitoring.

The category extends the previous one. An aspirational system of lifelong guidance is often in development with some policies and strategies in place that are guiding cooperation and coordination albeit in early stages. A desire can be seen to develop and improve the system in terms of delivery, professionalisation and evidence impact, but there is a need for leadership and integration of policies and strategies.

## **Category 3: systems development in lifelong guidance is strategic**

In this third category, systems development in lifelong guidance was conceived as strategic. Here, lifelong guidance legislation exists but is mostly *embedded in other policies*. Strategic leadership for the development of lifelong guidance was seen as *devolved* to several separate ministries.

Instead of separate laws for different service providers, there should be one body of legislation that governs the main service providers.

Under [the leadership of] several individual ministries, the core, idea of life-long guidance may be lost.

There was a sense of *multilateral* cooperation, where two or more entities engage in joint activities to achieve at least one shared goal. It was suggested that a system could not operate without cooperation.

It would be naive to think that just one organisation could implement such an approach, I believe in a network approach ... with an overall coordinator.

In this category lifelong guidance services delivery is *vertically coordinated*; that is different government departments monitor the implementation of career services in their own sector and delegate responsibility for defined actions to subordinate levels. Despite attempts to define standards for practice, lifelong guidance was seen as *partially* professionalised, with no legislative mandate.

Professionalisation is a work in progress.

Evidence of the impact of lifelong guidance is collected on an ad hoc basis but remains limited in the absence of any strategic aims, analysis, comparability, or feedback of these data for systems development.

In [some] contexts there is no evidence base, and although feedback from the unemployed is often positive, there is no systematic evaluation...it can be ad hoc.

The methods used are commonplace—asking for feedback or anonymous reports on the service.

The weakness is that each system of measuring or monitoring system is unique to one organisation ... there is no comparability.

This conception is wider than in previous categories. A strategic system in terms of development has policies and leadership in place, which can be decentralised and multilateral. There is, therefore, the risk that stakeholders have different or competing priorities. However, services are coordinated which enables evidence on impact to be gathered even if on an ad hoc basis.

#### **Category 4: systems development in lifelong guidance is systemic**

In this forth category, systems development in lifelong guidance is conceived as systemic. Here, lifelong guidance systems development is grounded in explicit legislation. Strategic leadership for the development of lifelong guidance is shared with an emphasis on multisectoral cooperation, encompassing government, civil society, and the private sector. Working together, these partners were seen to leverage their combined and varied knowledge, expertise, reach and resources in pursuit of

shared goals. This is seen to be of benefit to all those involved in a lifelong guidance system.

The national legislation provides a basis for system development. In principle, the legislation acknowledges the features of a systemic approach to guidance. Policymakers are aware of the national challenges and can identify key problems.

Lifelong guidance is now better implemented in national and regional policies. There is a national coordinating group, which was established a few years ago because career guidance is governed by different ministries. This [the group] includes people from all three ministries, and PES, the Centre for Adults, VET, school principals etc.

The national guidance system is strengthened by allowing stakeholders and providers to support each other through mutual learning’.

In this category, the delivery of guidance is firmly established and *horizontally coordinated*. Participants described the system as coherent, services that intersect across the education and training institutions, public and private employment services, and specialist providers. Services are available to all and are often multi-channelled or blended, offering face-to-face and online provision. Career practitioners’ qualifications are legally defined, and professionalisation is *official*, which ensures that service users can expect at least a minimum standard. To inform service delivery, management and policy-making, a range of qualitative and quantitative data are *systematically* collected to measure service impact and outcomes.

The national cooperation group coordinates lifelong guidance services and ensures their availability.

Cross-sectoral service delivery is required by legislation ... the new service includes one-stop centres based on cross-disciplinary approach.

The profession is regulated.

We do this all the time, to trying to measure the impact of our work... We have done some analysis, and we have outsourced some work in this area.

This category represents the most complex conception emerging from the analysis, as it encompasses all of the conceptions of the three preceding categories. A defining feature of a system of lifelong guidance development that is systemic is strong leadership and coordination between stakeholders and delivery organisations. The system can be ‘joined up’ and holistic in terms of providing support across the lifecourse through cross-sectoral service delivery. With a regulated profession and evidence of impact collected, services can be developed and improved. It can be suggested that this provides opportunity for innovation and creativity within a system of lifelong guidance development.

## Relationship between the categories

The categories of description were delimited from each other and organised hierarchically through dimensions of variation that emerged from the data. Because of the hierarchical nature of categories, some conceptions of lifelong guidance systems development can be characterised as wider than others (Åkerlind, 2005a).

Lifelong guidance *legislation* differed across the categories. In category 1, where system development in lifelong guidance was conceived as minimal, legislation was *non-existent*. In categories 2 and 3, where systems development in lifelong guidance was conceived as aspirational and strategic, respectively, legislation governing lifelong guidance was *nominal* (category 2) and *embedded in other policies* (category 3). A significant shift to *explicit* legislation which provided a basis for the system development was discerned in category 4. Within this category, explicit legislation creates a foundation for establishing the development of a lifelong guidance system.

Perceptions of *strategic leadership* changed across categories. The most distinctive difference in category 1, in relation to the other categories, is that strategic leadership for the development of lifelong guidance was perceived as *missing*. The relationship between the other categories is illustrated by strategic leadership as recognised as operating within the system in some form. In category 2 (systems development as aspirational), strategic leadership was characterised as *scattered* and in category 3 (systems development as strategic) *devolved* under several separate ministries. In category 4, a shift to strategic *shared* leadership was discerned.

*Cooperation* also varied across the categories. In category 1, where system development in lifelong guidance was conceived as minimal, a *lack* of cooperation was perceived. A shift from lacking to *emerging* cooperation was discerned in category 2, where system development was conceived as aspirational. In the most complex categories, cooperation expanded to *multilateral* (category 3) and to *multisectoral* (category 4). These categories emphasise the possible benefits of such a cooperative system as one that is transparent and coordinated.

In relation to the *delivery* of guidance services, the categories ranged from limited to horizontally coordinated. In the least complex categories, the service delivery was perceived as *limited*, targeting particular groups or specific transition points (category 1) and *fragmented* (category 2), with unconnected sectoral priorities. Within these categories, uneven and differentiated access to guidance is very possible. Category 3 marked a turning point, with a distinct change to *vertically coordinated* service delivery. In category 4, a further significant shift was observed as delivery of guidance services is perceived as firmly established and *horizontally coordinated*. Within this category, a coherent delivery system can be seen to be developed, which, for the individual, provides seamless support. Some experts conceptualised this approach to delivery as multi-channelled, personalised and addressing social and economic needs of an individual.

Regarding *professionalisation*, the most distinct difference was in category 1, where *resistance* to professionalisation was perceived while in other categories efforts were to increase professionalism. A shift from resistant to *aspirational* was discerned in category 2 where there was a desire for change and support to develop

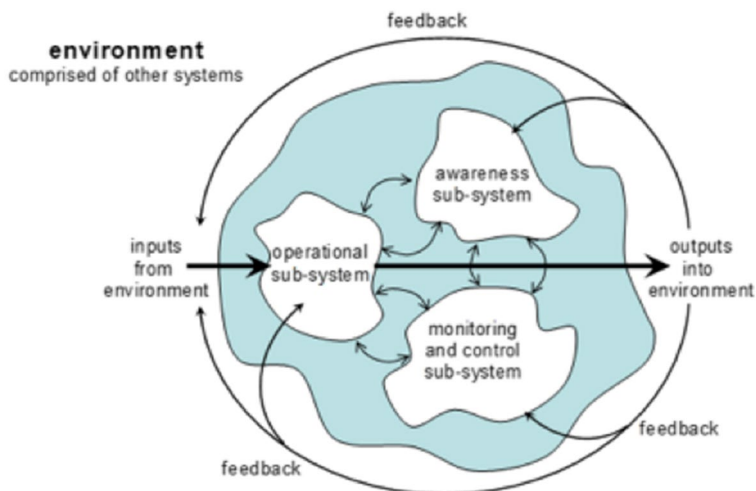
the profession. Category 3 marked a turning point, with a shift from aspirational to *partial* professionalisation where some regulation in terms of a minimum qualification level and competency standards were defined. In the most complex category 4, professionalisation was *regulated* and qualifications of practitioners were legally defined.

*Evidence of the impact* also varied significantly across categories. In category 1, where system development in lifelong guidance was conceived as minimal, the impact of lifelong guidance was *not evaluated*. In category 2, there was an acknowledged *desire* for evidence of the impact. A turning point was again seen in category 3, marked by a shift from lack of evidence to ad hoc data collection where some attempts to gather data were made. In category 4, a further important shift was observed, relating to the *systematic collection* of a range of qualitative and quantitative data. New approaches and measures were being adopted as organisations had a better understanding of the lifecourse and were able to adapt services. There was an idea that systematic collection of evidence on the impact of guidance services and delivery approaches is beneficial as it provides an opportunity to learn.

## Discussion

Findings from this study confirm how, despite considerable efforts to systematise, lifelong guidance systems continue to be characterised by ambiguity and indeterminateness (Bimrose et al., 2006). Enabling systems development for lifelong guidance in a world that, at the time of writing, is learning to live with labour markets impacted by pandemics, war and supply chain disruption as well as continuing technological change, requires service providers and professionals to construct personal meaning in what is increasingly an even more indeterminate, ambiguous and unstable world. Unsurprisingly, career services, career professionals and their clients are consequently often uncertain about the nature of the support that should be provided, or that is required, because their needs are open-ended and uncertain in nature, as support often has to be responsive to volatile environments. Yet findings from this study do seem to suggest a discernible, positive development and enhancement to systems of lifelong guidance. The career experts' conceptions describe clear and concrete examples of improvement or enhancements to lifelong guidance systems. These were based on the experiences of their own country's lifelong guidance system or understanding of how other countries operate. Knowledge of the ELGPN (2015) also provided a basis for some experts to reflect on policy and practice and how their own national system had changed more recently.

In exploring the emergent categories and relationships, evidence from previous research has been confirmed (e.g. Sultana, 2003, 2004; Sultana & Watts, 2007, 2008; Sweet, 2006; Watts & Fretwell, 2004), that is, holistic systems of lifelong guidance continue to be considered important and desirable. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of career experts' current conceptions of how an holistic system of guidance can be organised, managed and delivered. Qualitative differences in the development of systems of lifelong guidance are highlighted. There is evidence that these systems continue to develop and improve, with some countries adapting and



**Figure 1** Model of an open system

enhancing their system, while others stall as governmental priorities and resourcing shift. The categorisation presented here can, therefore, serve as a road map to encourage innovation and creativity, which is not always evident.

Collin (1990) proposed the use of an open systems model (see Figure 1) for conceptualising the complex process of career development. In a model fashioned around this proposal, the operational sub-system transforms inputs to outputs; the awareness sub-system scans the environment for opportunities and threats; and the monitoring and control sub-system makes internal adjustments in response to feedback from the reception of the outputs in the environment. Inputs to the career development system could include, for example, previous experience and qualifications, availability of jobs, demographic factors, skills gaps, etc. Outputs might include skills development, job satisfaction, stress, etc., all affecting other systems in the environment to a greater or lesser degree. One practical application of this model could be to map shifting labour markets and their implications for the career development process by policy-makers and/or career development service managers (Bimrose et al., 2006).

Legislation, strategic leadership, governance of the services, cooperation, delivery of guidance, professionalisation and impact have been evidenced as crucial to improving systems development in lifelong guidance. Whilst based on the participant experts' particular contexts, findings from this study can be regarded as transferable to other national contexts. The categories are broad enough for stakeholders (including professional associations and practitioner unions) in a lifelong guidance system to reflect upon and develop as appropriate. This could be about reflecting on how governance of the services and stakeholder cooperation could be enhanced through explicit leadership or by strengthening the qualifications and standards of guidance practitioners. Professional associations have

an essential role to play in bringing together those working across different delivery contexts in the sector to guide practitioner qualifications and standards of the profession (Barnes et al., 2020). One other example relates to how there is the need for the impact of such services to be judged more on soft outcomes, like the client's choice of pathway or engagement with development activities, rather than achievement of a specified employment goal (Barnes & Wright, 2019). Overall the findings could be useful to delve into the phenomenon of developing a system of lifelong guidance and how the impact and outcomes of lifelong guidance could be registered on all levels of the system (Vuorinen & Kettunen, 2022).

This study, however, is not without limitations. Participation was voluntary, and the data collected at a single time period may not represent all of the crucial factors from the perspective of the entire lifelong guidance sector. The data were collected in 2020 and provide an overview of career experts' conceptions of systems development in lifelong guidance at that time. The need for further studies on the topic is therefore indicated.

## Conclusion

This study identified career experts' conceptions of systems development in lifelong guidance in four distinct categories of description ranging from minimal to systemic. Six dimensions of variation were identified: legislation, strategic leadership, cooperation, delivery, professionalisation and evidence of the impact. By exploring the logical relationship between qualitatively different conceptions, it provides policy-makers and other stakeholders with a way of holistically viewing the varying levels of lifelong guidance systems development. The matrix presented in this article may serve as a catalyst for reflection on crucial elements, such as legislation, leadership and cooperation, that have the potential to improve systems development in lifelong guidance. In addition, the hierarchical structure of the findings may provide a tool for evaluating (or even monitoring) systems development in lifelong guidance both at the national and international level. As this structure is based on the concepts of career experts, it will be relevant and applicable.

International academic reviews of career guidance policy (e.g. Barnes et al., 2020; Watts, 2014) have noted that policymakers expect career guidance to focus on the individual's goals while also contributing to wider policy objectives. Consequently, lifelong guidance can be described both as an individual right that guarantees access to a good life and as a soft policy instrument and a mechanism for the wider transformation of society. The variations that exist between and within country systems testify to the continuing ambiguity and indeterminateness that exists at the heart of career guidance services, confounding any claim to coherence and consistency. Indeed, the study's findings confirm that it is unlikely that any single service provider or sector alone can respond to increasing demands on guidance. Therefore, the future development of lifelong guidance services requires a shift away from the traditional services of experts towards transdisciplinary collaboration which will allow established networks, jointly agreed policies and a division of labour amongst different service providers in education, employment, youth and social sectors (Kettunen



& Felt, 2020). This has become a particular issue in a world learning to live with the multiple fall-outs from the pandemic and dealing with the destructive impacts of the war in Ukraine. It is, therefore, evident that securing political support and wider stakeholder participation will be crucial for establishing a systemic view for coherent lifelong guidance services and subsequent mechanisms of exchange on system enhancement.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical approval** The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity defines ethical principles for research in the humanities and social and behavioural sciences under three headings: (1) respecting the autonomy of research subjects; (2) avoiding harm; and (3) privacy and data protection (National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2009). This study was planned, conducted and reported according to these guidelines, and so meets the requirements of good scientific practice. Furthermore, this study applied the guidelines for research integrity (Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, 2012) by following the principles that are endorsed by the research community; integrity, meticulousness and accuracy in conducting the research, and in recording presenting, and evaluating the research results.

**Informed consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

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