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Title: Much ado about nothing? : a comparative perspective on adult career guidance policies in Finland and Denmark

Year: 2024

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Seidler Cort, P., Larson, A., Harjula, S., Kalalahti, M., Mariager-Anderson, K., & Vilkmán, M. (2024). Much ado about nothing? : a comparative perspective on adult career guidance policies in Finland and Denmark. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, Early online. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2024.2404990>

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To cite this article: Pia Seidler Cort, Anne Larson, Samira Harjula, Mira Kalalahti, Kristina Mariager-Anderson & Minna Vilkmán (22 Sep 2024): Much ado about nothing?- a comparative perspective on adult career guidance policies in Finland and Denmark, Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, DOI: [10.1080/20020317.2024.2404990](https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2024.2404990)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2024.2404990>



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Published online: 22 Sep 2024.



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Much ado about nothing?- a comparative perspective on adult career guidance policies in Finland and Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Transnational organizations like the OECD and the EU have, for many years, focussed on adult career guidance (ACG) as a policy for solving problems, especially those related to the labour market and labour market transitions. In this article, we take a closer look into the development of ACG policies in Finland and Denmark. Drawing on multiple streams theory, we investigate how ACG policies have developed over time, identifying policy windows and the coupling of ACG policies as a solution to different policy problems. We compare across the cases of Finland and Denmark in order to identify similarities and differences with the aim of understanding the development of ACG policies considering the transnational call towards more coherent national systems. Methodologically, we use document analysis, including the examination of policy documents, legal documents, reports and research articles. The period studied spans from the 1990s until today, reflecting the developments at transnational level with the EU Commission and the OECD pushing for more coherent systems.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 January 2024

Accepted 12 September 2024

KEYWORDS

Career guidance; lifelong learning; comparative studies; multiple stream analysis; policy analysis

Introduction

Adult career guidance¹ (ACG) has garnered increased political attention in the recent years, both internationally and nationally, as a solution to solving structural problems in the labour market by supporting the development of a 'transitional labour market' (Cort & Thomsen, 2014). Cedefop describes ACG as an 'opportunity structure', with the potential to support labour market transitions (Cedefop, 2014), while the OECD identified ACG as a 'fundamental policy lever to motivate adults to train and to help address the challenges brought about by rapidly changing skill needs' (OECD, 2021, p. 3). The OECD highlights that coordinating the numerous actors involved in career guidance policy poses a significant challenge (OECD, 2021) as ACG is often spread among many providers in various sectors. This results in unevenly distributed access, with a predominant focus on career guidance for young people within the education system and less attention given to adults in the labour market, whether employed or unemployed. In their report titled 'Career Guidance for Adults in a Changing World of Work' (OECD, 2021), the OECD calls for member states to 'expand availability of career guidance services, while ensuring that providers have the capacity (i.e. advisor time, training and funds) to meet the specialized needs of distinct groups (unemployed, employed, inactive)' (p. 9).

This call from the OECD for a more coherent ACG system echoes similar sentiments expressed by the Council of the European Union in their 'Resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies' in 2008 (Council of the European Union [CE], 2008).

In this article, we investigate whether the transnational calls for more coherent and comprehensive ACG systems have had any effects on policies in Denmark and Finland. We have chosen to compare Finland and Denmark due to their extensive publicly financed adult education systems and shared Nordic welfare state tradition, which offers a context that is at the same time both similar and different. The call for coherent systems can be perceived as a dominant transnational policy regarding ACG, potentially prompting national level adaption. Specifically, our focus is on tracing the development of public policies on ACG in Denmark and Finland to ascertain whether the numerous initiatives have led to the establishment of a more coherent system for all adults – or if they have mainly been 'much ado about nothing'?

The transnational call for lifelong guidance to support lifelong learning

Transnational organizations like the OECD and the EU have played a pivotal role in shaping the agenda

for ACG by emphasizing lifelong guidance (LLG) and its integration into the broader policy framework of lifelong learning (LLL), which gained increased global interest during the 1990s (Larson & Cort, 2022). In this context, LLG has been put forward as a crucial supportive policy for achieving the ambitions of LLL by assisting adults navigate transitions throughout their working lives and thus constituting a fundamental aspect of an effective LLL system.

The European Commission (EC) has been a key advocate of LLG. As early as 1994, the Commission stressed that ‘Public employment services should be encouraged to **sharpen the guidance and placement services offered to the unemployed**’ (highlight in original) (EC, 1994, p. 150). The primary objective of guidance at the time was to facilitate the reintegration of unemployed individuals into the labour market. Subsequently, in 2000, within the framework of the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (EC, 2000), the Commission expanded the scope of LLL to ‘ensure that everyone can easily access good quality information and advice about learning opportunities throughout Europe and throughout their lives’ (p. 16). In essence, ACG was envisioned as a *universal provision accessible for all*, not only within single member states but across Europe, and neither limited to specific target groups nor to specific sectors. The role of ACG is described as that of a broker: ‘With the client’s interests in the forefront, the “guidance broker” can call on and tailor a wide range of information in order to help decide on the best course of action for the future’ (EC, 2000, p. 17). The idea being that guidance should be detached from specific institutional interests.

The following years saw an increased awareness of the role of ACG (Cedefop, 2004, 2005; OECD, 2004), and the concept ‘lifelong guidance’ entered the policy documents in the follow-up on the programme (EC, 2000). LLG became associated with, and a crucial support policy for, the overarching LLL framework:

The role, quality and co-ordination of information and guidance services should be strengthened so that they support learning at all ages and in a range of settings, empower citizens to manage their learning and work, particularly making it easier for them to access and progress through diverse learning opportunities and career pathways. (CE & EC, 2004, p. 10)

LLG was especially seen as a means to counteract the low participation rates in LLL among low-skilled and unemployed individuals. Throughout the decade, the twin policies of LLL and LLG were extensively promoted through numerous reports and resolutions, culminating in the adoption of a ‘Resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies’ in 2008 (Council of the European Union,

2008). By endorsing this resolution, member states pledged to adopt its objectives at the national level and translate them into actionable national policies. The resolution offered a broad conceptualization of LLG:

... a continuous process that enables **citizens at any age and at any point in their lives** to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which those capacities and competences are learned and/or used. (our emphasis) (CE, 2008, p. 2)

LLG was envisioned as a practice through which individuals could manage not only their work life but their entire life,² either through an external system providing career guidance or through career guidance as a learning process whereby individuals would develop their own ‘career management skills’ (Barnes et al., 2020). This dual approach called for a *more coherent ACG system* capable of providing both information and opportunities for individuals to learn how to effectively ‘manage their career’. In this sense, the EU remains closely aligned with the OECD’s call for ‘expanding the availability of career guidance services’ (2021).

The transnational call for more coherent ACG systems is the starting point for this article where we examine ACG policies in Finland and Denmark to trace their development and investigate the issue of coherence in ACG systems. We do this by comparing the evolution of ACG policies in the two countries to identify differences and similarities. This comparative analysis aims to understand the changes in policy occurring in both countries and to pinpoint developments aimed at strengthening the provision of ACG. Our analysis begins in the 1990s, a period when lifelong learning gained momentum as a transnational policy (Delors et al., 1996; EC, 1995; OECD, 1996), increasing the focus on lifelong guidance as a fundamental support structure for easing transitions both in education, training and the labour market (Sultana, 2012). We investigate the national contexts, exploring changes in politics and identified problems, to investigate how ACG was incorporated and developed in national policies.

Theoretical concepts

One of the notable observations from our data was the recurring emergence of ACG as a ‘policy solution’ to diverse policy problems. ACG seemed to be used as a versatile tool, often pulled out of the hat to address a range of issues, whether it was easing unemployed individuals’ transition into the labour market or persuading small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) to enrol their employees in customized

labour market courses. This made us turn to Multiple Streams Theory, developed by Kingdon (1984) and Zahariadis (2003), as an approach to better understand our observations. According to the theory, an issue enters the political agenda, and a decision concerning this issue can be made when three analytically independent streams – problems, policies, and politics – are coupled. Such coupling is more likely to occur when a policy window opens, facilitated by policy entrepreneurs advocating for their preferred policy or highlighting what they consider as a central problem.

According to the theory, a ‘*problem*’ is a condition defined as a problem by an actor, and what constitutes a problem depends on the values and beliefs of those defining which conditions are to be considered problems. ‘*Policies*’ are solutions or ideas generated within policy communities. While policies might follow the identification of a problem chronologically, they might also precede problems and ‘be on the outlook’ for problems to solve. ‘*Politics*’ encompasses the ‘national mood, pressure-groups campaigns, and administrative or legislative turnover’ including changes of government. A ‘*policy window*’ refers to a change in either the problem stream, where a problem gains attention, or in the politics stream, providing policy entrepreneurs with an opportunity to couple the three streams in favour of their preferred solution or draw attention to specific problems and consequently affecting the decision agenda (Kingdon, 1984; Zahariadis, 2003). The opening of a policy window can sometimes be predicted, such as when the OECD publishes its PIAAC results. Other times, policy windows emerge unexpectedly, as seen with the COVID-19 pandemic, which renewed political interest in AE, particularly in Denmark (Cort & Larson, 2024). As policy windows are fleeting, policy entrepreneurs must remain alert and prepared to act swiftly to capitalize on them (Kingdon, 1984; Zahariadis, 2003). The term, *policy entrepreneur*, refers to ‘individuals or corporate actors who attempt to couple the three streams’ (Zahariadis, 2003, p. 155) by investing resources such as time, money, and energy in promoting their ‘pet policy’.

Methodology

We have chosen to compare Finland and Denmark based on Steiner-Khamsi’s model of comparing across contexts that are simultaneously similar and different (see Steiner-Khamsi, 2013). Both countries boast extensive publicly financed adult education (AE) system, providing AE at all levels of the education systems. Additionally, both nations are influenced by the Nordic welfare state tradition, characterized by a focus on universal provision (Esping-Andersen, 1990), which emphasizes

providing access to welfare provisions for *all* citizens. Since the 1950s, both Denmark and Finland have been members of the Nordic Council (The Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers, n.d.) and of the Nordic Council of Ministers, established in 1971 (The Nordic Council and the Nordic Cooperation, 2024). Furthermore, they are both members of the Nordic Network for Adult Learning and its network on guidance.

In terms of participation in transnational organizations, Denmark preceded Finland in joining both the OECD and the EU. Denmark joined the OECD in 1960 and the EU in 1974, whereas Finland did not become a member of the OECD until 1969 and joined the EU as late as 1995. A notable difference lies in their attitudes towards the EU. Denmark is EU-sceptical and often diverges from ‘the specific policies produced by these [EU] institutions and decision-making procedures (Wivel, 2018, p. 28). Conversely, Finland has embraced EU policies and tools to a higher degree (Franco et al., 2019; Tiilikainen, 2006) and has ‘pursued what has often been labelled as a model pupil strategy’ in regard to the EU (Ojanen & Raunio, 2018, p. 35). Our assumption was therefore, that Finland would be closer to achieving a coherent ACG system than Denmark. However, our assumption was refuted as our analysis will show.

The ‘tertium comparationis’ or the common quality between two compared entities, in this context refers to ACG policies targeting individuals who have exited the formal educational system and are navigating diverse life trajectories, which may or may not involve active employment.³ Our analysis compares policy developments in the two countries, examining similarities and differences in policy initiatives, target groups, and the role and organization of ACG within national education and employment policies. This approach follows the comparative method as developed by Bereday (1964).

Our comparison of ACG in Denmark and Finland is based on a qualitative analysis of policy documents, including strategies, plans, agreements, and bills, as well as secondary analysis of previous research within the field. In our search for relevant documents, we have identified those where ACG was mentioned, even if not always the primary focus.

The relatively low number of documents from Denmark compared to Finland can be attributed to fewer reforms of ACG in Denmark, cf. Table 1. It should also be noted that a central document in the

Table 1. Number of documents included in the analysis.

Document type	Denmark	Finland
Policy and legal documents	11	16
Reports and research articles	16	22

Danish case is an OECD review of career guidance policies in Denmark (2002). This document was compiled in close collaboration with the Danish Ministry of Education and the Danish Ministry of Employment and the central stakeholders within the Danish Guidance and Counselling system.

In our analysis of the policy documents, we were inspired by content analysis (Boréus & Bergström, 2017). We treated the documents as a source for information about the ACG policy and the context in which the policy emerged (Karppinen & Moe, 2012). Our aim was to trace the policies on ACG over time, examining the role of ACG, the target groups addressed, and its organization. This allowed us to understand whether the trajectory resulted in a more comprehensive ACG system, addressing the 'patchiness' described by the OECD (2021).

ACG policies in Finland

In accordance with the transnational trend, ACG in Finland has evolved from 1990 to 2022 as a solution to various challenges faced by diverse groups of adult learners defined as problems and linked to developments in education and employment policies. ACG is perceived as a support structure aimed at assisting individuals in completing an education programme or (re-)entering either the education system or the labour market. While transnational policies put forward by the EU and the OECD mainly targeted low-skilled individuals, in Finland, after the 1990s there seems to have been a distinct emphasis on adult students in further and higher education.

1990s: ACG as a panacea to many different problems

The early 1990s in Finland were marked by an economic recession that significantly influenced the political landscape (e.g. OECD, 1991). The recession led to widespread unemployment, making joblessness a critical issue that was defined as a problem. In response, adult education (AE) was promoted as a potential solution. In 1993, the Finnish Government proposed a bill to Parliament that recommended transforming former evening courses at upper secondary schools into upper secondary schools for adults. This transformation aimed to address the specific needs of adult learners, such as providing flexibility and integrating immigrants (HE 312/1993).

During this period, ACG was intended to support AE and was closely associated with vocational education, employment services, folk high schools, and private sector services, particularly those related to the workplace. This broad association led to a diversity of methods, financing, and qualifications for

guidance counsellors (Lehtisalo & Raivola, 1999). However, during the period of mass unemployment, most guidance services were focused on increasing the employability of adults. For instance, the law on labour market training for adults (Laki 763/1990) emphasized courses relevant to the labour market, and support was therefore allocated only for studies or degrees that were considered employable. In 1992, the law was further clarified to exclude higher (tertiary) education (Laki 1479/1992). These legislative measures closely linked ACG to vocational education and employment services, positioning ACG as a solution to the problem of unemployment.

For the rest of the decade, unemployment remained the main problem on the agenda, and ACG was perceived as an important part of the solution. ACG as a solution was in line with (global) changes in politics where unemployment became individualized as a problem rather than being perceived as a societal problem and an inescapable part of economic trends (Dwyer, 2004; Eversberg, 2016; Walters, 1997). The focus in AE policies was on employability and returning unemployed adults back to work as quickly as possible. ACG was tightly knit with these aims, and the idea of 'learning to learn' was presented as an individual need closely connected with the individual skills matching the needs of an ever-changing labour market. In this respect, ACG was perceived as a support function aimed at assisting individuals interested in changing studies and/or connecting employment opportunities to degree-based and academic education (Surakka & Törmä, 1994).

After Finland joined the EU on 1 January 1995, the development of Finnish ACG was also influenced by the EU guidance policies and guidelines, introducing systemic evaluation and self-evaluation models and lifelong learning aims (Hake, 1999; Toni & Vuorinen, 2020; Vuorinen, 1996). The evaluation of the guidance systems shed light on a number of problems following societal changes that affected employability: 1) a shift from industrial to knowledge-based society, 2) a decreased importance of institutions and increased expectations to individual responsibility, and 3) a growing distance between education and the 'world-of-work', necessitating upskilling. As a result, the Finnish Government revised their AE policy to focus on entrepreneurship, self-governance and nation-specific features of employment and education, as well as recognition of previous education and work experience as solutions. This refocus influenced the guidance counsellor's education (Vuorinen, 1996). However, even after adapting the EU policy focus on lifelong learning and recognizing societal changes affecting adults' career paths, Finnish ACG was still mainly centred on educational transitions and employability. ACG was considered part of employment policies, even when it took place in the

field of education. In the 1990s, the focus of ACG, thus, was primarily on solving the problem of employability at the level of the individual.

2000s: ACG to support the flow of adult students into Universities of Applied Sciences

As previously noted, Finland has historically been more inclined to align with EU policies compared to Denmark. During the 2000s, the EU's advocacy for the implementation of LLL strategies in the Member States exerted a significant influence on Finland, reflecting the broader EU policies. In line with the EU, LLG policy in Finland was regarded as a crucial support policy for the successful implementation of LLL. Moreover, amidst global economic and political shifts emphasizing neo-liberal economic ideologies and human capital development in the politics stream, the notion of citizenship, as outlined by the Finish Ministry of Education (FMoE) (2003), began to merge with employability. Education was seen as a mean to educate active citizens, who participate in civil society and work. It was further coupled with what was considered a need for individuals to continually update their academic knowledge and readiness for further studies (FMoE, 2003; Heikkinen, 2007). AE, in alignment with 'LLL' principles, was envisioned to cater to the adult population's demand for extensive and relevant guidance services. Such services would play a significant role in managing career trajectories and life decisions, facilitating the supply of a skilled labour force, and optimizing educational resource allocation. The labour administration would be the central operator of this framework (Finish Ministry of Education [FMoE], 2002b).

With the establishment of Universities of Applied Sciences (*ammattikorkeakoulu*) in Finland in 1991, which also included routes for adult students such as open courses and part-time studying opportunities (Finish Ministry of Education [FMoE], 2002b, 2004, 2005), the specific needs of adults gained renewed attention. In 2001, a committee thus suggested that tailored guidance services be offered to adults in universities of applied sciences, accessible online and outside office hours, with a focus on career guidance and future planning. Blended guidance and accreditation of prior learning were proposed, along with the need to update certain skills areas, particularly IT skills (FMoE, 2002a). This complemented the existing focus of ACG as a solution coupled to unemployment and career-related challenges as problems.

During the 2000s, the emphasis in ACG policies shifted from a dominant focus on employability to also focussing on facilitation of the transition of adults into higher education and universities of

applied sciences. According to Onnismaa (2007), despite increased attention to ACG during this period, numerous deficiencies persisted. One such deficiency was that, although ACG was considered part of LLL policies, it remained underdeveloped in Finnish AE policies. Also reports indicated that the shortcomings were associated with qualitative factors, such as difficulty navigating AE internet services and a shortage of professionals specialized in adult education guidance (Finish Ministry of Labour [FMoL], 2006; Onnismaa, 2007). In addition to the focus on universities of applied sciences, ACG in the 2000s was still also targeted other groups, such as unemployed people in need for support to access the labour market and employers requiring specific AE provisions for their employees. Further, changes in the Finnish society and work life leading to new definitions of problems such as a diversity of learning needs, challenging financial circumstances, and what was seen as a growing necessity for education-related knowledge, called for multi-professional collaboration (Nykänen, 2013). When it came to recognizing the complexity of these challenges, a single guidance professional or organization was deemed insufficient, leading to the organization of services into networks and collaborative modes (Nykänen, 2013; Nykänen et al., 2007). These networks, while administered by the state, also involved actors from the private sector.

2010s: Regional forecasting and collaboration

The global financial crisis that began in 2008, coupled with the three successive right-wing governments in Finland between 2011–2019, opened a policy window in the politics stream for putting forward a policy with focus on cuts in the public expenditures and in the sector. The policy agenda from 2012–2019 thus focused on stimulating economic growth, increasing employment, managing national debt, and achieving fiscal balance in the public sector (Saari, 2017).

According to Nykänen (2013), adult guidance services in Finland at that time could be characterized as intersectional networks of guidance professionals, coordinated by public authorities and relying on public funding. Intersectional cooperative practices were legitimized by the various and diverse needs of the adult counselees. An example is the 'vocational development services', led by vocational psychologists, which in 2013 was aligned with the objectives outlined in the national strategies for employment and entrepreneurship (Toni & Vuorinen, 2020) and integrated into employment and business services, although they were still dispersed among many different providers.

In the context of ACG policy during the 2010s, ACG continued to serve as a supportive measure for LLL, addressing the perceived problem of insufficient

participation in LLL initiatives. Ensuring equality in guidance, fostering individual career maintenance skills, and cultivating competent guidance counsellors were deemed essential for the advancement of ACG (MoEC, 2011). A multi-professional system of ACG began to emerge, facilitated by a collaboration between the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (FMoEC) and the Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (FMoEE), in conjunction with education providers and employment services on municipal and regional level (FMoEC, 2018). AE and ACG as field of responsibility was moved to the FMoEE, which early in 2013 spearheaded the establishment of regional groups known as ELO groups.⁴ These groups were included in the performance contracts of regional centres (ELY centres), and they were tasked with sharing information on the business environment, infrastructure, and employment opportunities within Finnish regions. A crucial aspect if their mandate was to foresee regional education and training needs to secure regional competitiveness. ACG solutions were thus coupled with problems at the regional labour markets. By incorporating ELO group activities into the performance contracts between the ministry and the ELY centres, the ELO groups became firmly rooted in their respective regions (ELY, 2020). ACG initiatives were largely aligned with national strategies aimed at addressing future demands for competencies and skills, such as those arising from an ageing work force and growing skills shortages. Consequently, there was as a feeling of a growing need for new policies providing coaching and training to ensure work change security (Toni & Vuorinen, 2020).

2020s: ACG – still a patchy system?

After nearly a decade of economic crises and 'belt-tightening' financial politics, a potential policy window opened in 2019 within the politics stream, marked by a shift to a predominantly left-wing administration. However, within the problem stream, a fragmented ACG system persisted, despite efforts to address it over the years. ACG remained fragmented across various ministries and organizations, posing challenges for both individuals and employers in locating services, despite the establishment of the ELO groups. National actors within ACG services are under different ministries' field of responsibility. Central agencies such as the National Agency for Education (OPH) wield power in implementing and planning guidance-related issues, while regional guidance actors like the ELY centres, Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVI), municipalities, schools and social service units are responsible for the regional strategic guidance development projects (Nykänen, 2013). ACG operates through educational

institutions as well as ACG services for adults, mainly provided by public employment services and one-stop guidance centres for those under 30 (Finish National Agency for Education [FNAE], 2023).

In the LLL strategy from 2020 (The Finish Government [FG], 2020), the LLG field is defined as a collection of information, guidance and counselling services (TNO services) involving multiple actors. TNO services for adults are considered a support system promoting LLL, active citizenship and working life functionality (see Rantamäki et al., 2010; Vuorinen, 2013). In essence, they are perceived as a solution to a range of problems. TNO services provide information, offer advice or problem solving, as well as personal guidance (FG, 2020, 2023). The development of TNO services has been tied to guidance development in AE and for special groups such as the unemployed (Kangastie, 2018). Several TNO projects are rooted in regional network cooperation, contributing to the implementation of guidance strategies in specific regions (Kangastie, 2018).

Despite systematic efforts to establish national counselling policies for young adults, guidance for adults remains fragmented and primarily associated with educational institutions or employment services. Anticipatory guidance for employed adults is lacking (FG, 2020). Guidance services are not available for adults outside educational institutions, and regional differences are evident. Guidance networks primarily focus on promoting LLL requirements.

ACG policies in Denmark

ACG policies in Denmark has mirrored those in Finland, serving as a solution to various policy problems, particularly those related to employment and labour upskilling. Despite a consensus among a wide range of policy entrepreneurs advocating for a more coherent system, this objective though has not – yet – been achieved: ACG in Denmark remains fragmented among multiple actors, both public and private.

1990s: Career guidance mainly targeted youngsters and unemployed adults

During the 1990s, Danish career guidance was governed by the 'Act on Educational and Vocational Guidance' from 1981 (Lov om uddannelses- og erhvervsvejledning, 1981). The act established a Council for Educational and Vocational Guidance and mandated that educational and vocational guidance be provided by various entities including the public unemployment service, schools, other educational institutions, as well as other public authorities and institutions. Notably, the act was placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Employment, highlighting the coupling of guidance as a solution with

employment-related problems. In addition, the Minister of Employment was tasked with appointing the head of the Council for Educational and Vocational Guidance. The majority of guidance services were offered within educational institutions, supplemented by cross-sectoral guidance services, a student advisory service, private actors, and the Council for Educational and Vocational Guidance. Each sector provided its own in-service courses in guidance (S. Jensen, 2020).

In 1996, the Minister of Employment proposed amendments to the law on educational and vocational guidance which were subsequently unanimously passed by parliament (Lov om ændring af lov om Uddannelses- og erhvervsvejledning, 1996). While these changes were minor in nature, the primary objective of the law was to bolster the Council for Educational and Vocational Guidance. At the same time, the Ministry of Education issued a discussion paper advocating for a revision of AE provision to align more closely with the mainstream educational system – a system referred to as a ‘parallel system’ (Jensen, 1996). The new AE system introduced a modular structure allowing for individualized combinations, with the anticipation of heightened demand for ACG among adults seeking flexible modular qualifications.

Throughout the decade, unemployment was identified as a problem to which ACG was coupled as a solution, primarily targeting unemployed individuals. Guidance for the unemployed was provided through the union-based unemployment insurance system and municipal services for those outside this framework. Additionally, educational institutions offered guidance to adults engaged in education, akin to the services available to young people. However, for adults who were neither unemployed nor enrolled in education, the available guidance options were limited (OECD, 2002). Overall, the ACG system in Denmark, as characterized by the OECD, was considered ‘patchy’ (OECD, 2002, p. 10).

2000s: ACG as a high political priority – but with less action

At the beginning of the 2000s, the Danish economy was characterized by stability and a low unemployment rate (OECD, 2002), making employment less of a problem. As the Danish labour market at the same time was characterized by a high labour force participation rate, a new problem was introduced in a report from the OECD: how to increase the workforce. Addressing this challenge involved raising participation rates and enhancing skill levels. Integrating weak groups on the margins of the labour market (e.g. immigrants and refugees), encouraging older workers to remain in the labour force longer, and

stimulating younger workers to enter the labour market earlier by obtaining a faster passage through the initial education system (OECD, 2002, p. 3) was presented as solutions.

The persisting patchiness of the ACG system also remained a concern, exacerbated by the dual role of educational institutions as both providers of guidance and education. In 2000, two members of the Conservative Party proposed a parliamentary resolution advocating for the establishment of independent ACG centres separate from educational institutions (Mikkelsen & Kirkegaard, 2000). Although the proposal did not pass, the parliamentary committee encouraged the Minister of Education to conduct further analyses to explore alternative models for career guidance and counselling (Jensen, 2020). Notably, this proposal primarily focused on guidance for young people, with limited attention to ACG. The only mention of ACG was related to guidance provided by the employment services. This initiative led to the publication of a report on cross-sectoral guidance in 2001 by the Danish Ministry of Education (Danish Ministry of Education [DMoE], 2001). Among its conclusions was the recognition of the need for improved coordination of guidance related to AE and the professionalization of ACG, a point also emphasized by the OECD in their review of Danish career guidance. The OECD report thus might be seen as an opportunity to advocate for a specific policy change.

In November 2001, a policy window opened in the politics stream as a liberal-conservative government assumed power, succeeding a social democratic government. The transition paved the way for a comprehensive reform of the guidance and counselling system in 2003, drawing upon the 2001 report on cross-sectoral guidance and the OECD review from 2002. The reform entailed the relocation of guidance and counselling services from educational institutions to newly established independent and professional institutions at the national, regional, and municipal levels (DMoE, 2003). Additionally, career and labour market information became accessible online through the launch of a new national guidance portal named ‘Uddannelsesguiden’ (‘the Education Guide’). Simultaneously, a new division for guidance was established within the Ministry of Education (S. Jensen, 2020).

In a report published by the Ministry of Education (DMoE, 2003), the rationality for the reform was described as ‘making it easier to find and choose education and work, thus simplifying the entire guidance system’ (p. 3). This rationale has been a recurring theme in various guidance and counselling system reforms over the years, emphasizing guidance as a solution to facilitate transitions. However, the primary focus of the reform was on guidance and

counselling for young people. It was explicitly stated that adults aged 25 and above interested in secondary education would be target of a subsequent reform. Consequently, they had to rely on online solutions or seek guidance from the employment services and municipalities.

The reform of the ACG area was implemented in 2007, building upon the groundwork laid by the 'Globalisation Council',⁵ established in 2005 by the government. The council was tasked with providing recommendations on how Denmark could enhance its competitiveness in the global economic arena. Additionally, the reform was influenced by a tripartite agreement on lifelong upskilling and education for all in the labour market (Cort et al., 2015). In the report from the tripartite talks, it was once again concluded that 'There are many different guidance offers today, but there is no complete system for guidance and counselling in either the public or private sectors' [own translation] (Danish Ministry of Finance, 2006, p. 17). The absence of a unified guidance system for adults was reiterated as a problem, along with challenges related to the competitiveness of the Danish economy. Consequently, it was concluded that a reform was necessary to strengthen and centralize the various guidance services. Moreover, there was an emphasis on the need for outreach guidance, especially for groups not participating in adult education and training (AET), the problem being defined as insufficient participation in AE.

The partners involved in the work leading up to the reform reflected the objectives of ACG policies, which aimed to enhance 'the global competitiveness of Denmark by improving access to AE and thereby improving the employability of the Danish workforce' (Cort et al., 2015, p. 296). These policies also sought to integrate individuals at risk of marginalization. Not surprisingly, ACG primarily targeted unskilled and low-skilled adults (Cort et al., 2015).

In response to the call for a more coherent ACG system, the government and opposition parties reached an agreement in 2007 for 'better ACG and counselling for employees and companies'. A central aspect of this agreement was to enhance the visibility of public ACG services, particularly among groups less likely to utilize them, such as low-skilled individuals and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Cort et al., 2015). As a result of this agreement, a national e-guidance portal was established, and 22 career guidance networks were formed on a 3-year contract basis. These networks aimed to conduct outreach guidance activities for low-skilled individuals and SMEs. The networks were led by local educational institutions (Cort et al., 2015).

Not long after the reform of the ACG system and the establishment of the ACG networks, the economic landscape underwent significant changes due

to the global financial crisis in 2008, which opened a new policy window in the problem stream. Although economic shifts had been occurring for some time, the crisis exacerbated the situation (Rangvid, 2013). While the beginning of the decade had witnessed full employment and historically low unemployment rates in 2007, the financial crisis led to a surge in the unemployment rate.

At the end of the initial three-year period following their establishment, the 22 ACG networks underwent evaluation. The evaluation report (Jessing et al., 2010) determined that the networks had primarily concentrated on engaging with companies, their leaders, and groups of employees within those companies, with less emphasis on individual contact. By the time the evaluation report was published, the networks had already been replaced by 13 Centres for Adult Education and Continuing Training in January 2010 (Cort et al., 2015; The Danish Evaluation Institute [EVA], 2010). These centres aimed to bolster the vocationally oriented adult and further education system. According to the bill presented in parliament, the centres would assume the responsibilities of the networks in relation to enterprises and their employees (Forslag til Lov om ændring af lov om arbejdsmarkedsuddannelser m.v., 2009).

2010s: From high priority to low priority

The establishment of the 13 Centres for Adult Education and Continuing Training aimed to provide a single-entry point for information on AET, particularly targeting those less likely to participate. Once again, ACG, as a solution, was coupled with a fragmented ACG system and a low participation rate in AE among those considered most in need, as a problem. Additionally, the centres were tasked with coordinating outreach guidance for companies, advertising, and addressing field needs. These centres were located within educational institutions offering AET (EVA, 2010).

Building on the 2007 agreement on 'Better guidance and counselling for employees and companies', the chairman of the Council for ACG acted as a policy entrepreneur by publishing his recommendations for future ACG in May 2010 (Pedersen, 2010), 'pushing' for his preferred policies.⁶ These recommendations included initiating further studies to explore options and barriers in organizing the guidance and education system with a focus on lifelong competence development. Pedersen highlighted and coupled the policy solutions with problems as the ongoing crisis, the increase in youth unemployment, and other structural developments, emphasizing the importance of guidance and counselling for 'mobication' (mobility through education). He explicitly referred to the EU resolution from 2008 on LLG

stressing that ‘... lifelong learning can only be fulfilled by offering lifelong guidance ...’ (Pedersen, 2010, p. 3), echoing both the EU and the OECD agendas for LLL.

In 2014, another policy window opened in the political stream with a new centre-left government led by the Social Democratic Party, followed by an act revising the law on guidance (Lov om ændring af lov om erhvervsuddannelser [...], 2014). However, while vocational education for adults was introduced concurrently, the changes in the law on guidance only pertained to guidance for youngsters, not adults. Consequently, the opening of this policy window did not lead to significant changes regarding the guidance of adults.

In the following years, November 2014 to September 2015, the Danish Evaluation Institute conducted a study of ACG at AE centres and institutions offering VET (The Danish Evaluation Institute [EVA], 2015). The report noted that the current ACG did not work optimally, citing a lack of transparency regarding where to obtain guidance and the discrepancy between those receiving guidance and those most in need. As a result, the ACG landscape remained ‘motley’ according to the report. Concurrently, Cort et al. conducted a study of ACG and concluded that ‘Despite a focus on the potential of ACG and the previous government (2001–2011) setting up a Council for ACG, ACG remains a residual policy area’ (Cort et al., 2015, p. 5).

Despite the 2014 revision of the guidance law, what was considered persisting problems prompted a belief that further policy changes were necessary. In 2017, the government and the social partners entered a tripartite agreement for 2018–2021 aimed at strengthening adult and further education and enhancing its flexibility (Danish Ministry of Employment [DMoEm], 2017). Acknowledging the absence of a common national offer of ACG, independent of institutions, the agreement highlighted the need of a single point of entry for ACG, emphasizing digital delivery (DMoEm, 2017, p. 16). Plans were made to develop a platform to assist citizens in understanding educational options and needs, along with a digital education plan for individuals.

In 2018, following the tripartite agreement, the 13 Centres for Adult Education and Continuing Training were closed and incorporated into the already established unified digital service called eGuidance, which was initiated with the reform of vocational education and training in 2014. However, not all stakeholders welcomed this change. According to Carla Jessing, the head of the Danish Association of Counsellors and a policy entrepreneur, expressed concerns that relying solely on an online platform might further marginalize those most in need of guidance and counselling. Instead, she advocated for

more diversified offerings, including outreach initiatives and easily accessible guidance services ‘from the street’ (Jessing cited in Wisler, 2018), thus putting forward other policies into the policy stream without however succeeding in coupling them to the problem of insufficient participation in AE and entering the decision agenda.

2020s: from low priority to no priority of adult career guidance

With a change in government in June 2019, a new policy window opened in the politics stream. However, by 2021, when the Ministry of Children and Education evaluated the online ACG platform ‘eGuidance’, it was apparent that the outreach to companies, previously facilitated by the Centres for Adult Education and Continuing Training, was not effectively continued through eGuidance, with minimal utilization by companies (Danish Ministry for Children and Education [DMoCaE], 2021).

Moreover, the same year, researchers in the field of guidance and counselling wrote a column titled ‘ACG – we don’t talk about it much’ (Mariager-Anderson & Thomsen, 2021). In the column they highlighted the lack of discussion around ACG, particularly amidst the labour market changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic; that is, though the pandemic opened a policy window in the problem stream (Cort & Larson, 2024), the problems caused by the pandemic was not coupled with ACG as a solution. Mariager-Anderson and Thomsen concluded that ‘Since the last significant reform of the guidance system in Denmark in 2003, we have been waiting for initiatives regarding the establishment and quality assurance of a **coherent system** aimed at providing professional career guidance to adults in the labour market’ (our emphasis) (Mariager-Anderson & Thomsen, 2021, p. 17). Thus, according to the authors, ACG was not high on the political agenda.

The newest development in the politics stream occurred in 2022 with a change in government. This new administration announced plans to dissolve municipal employment centres and delegate their responsibilities to other entities such as labour unions and their services for the unemployed (The Danish Government, 2022). However, as of mid-2024, ACG still does not appear to be something ‘we talk about much’. Despite multiple policy windows, including changes in government, a financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, there seems to be little noticeable change. While ACG has transitioned to an online format, the overall landscape remains largely unchanged. A recurring theme throughout the years has been the aim to simplify the system, making it easier for those seeking ACG to identify the

appropriate contacts. However, for those most in need who may be unaware of the available resources, the options have become more limited, including outreach activities.

Comparing Finland and Denmark

Comparing ACG policy in Finland and Denmark reveals both similarities and differences with the former outweighing the latter. Not surprising, reports and recommendations at transnational level have continuously opened policy windows in both countries, shedding light on specific problems in the problem stream and simultaneously coupled them with specific solutions in the policy stream. The transnational agenda has thus facilitated the inclusion of various ACG policies on the decision agenda as solutions to different problems, such as a need to support individuals in navigating the AE system and meeting the needs of the labour market demands. ACG's central role in policies appears to be efficiency of transitions, aiming to ensure that adults on the margin of the labour market move either into continuous or further education, or into a job. Consequently, ACG in both countries is regarded more as an employment policy tool aimed at facilitating transitions than as an educational policy.

The alignment of policies in Finland and Denmark with the directives of the EU and the OECD is noteworthy, yet it's equally striking that tangible results have not materialized in either country. Despite open policy windows in the politics stream, such as changes in government and recurrent openings of policy windows in the problem stream following financial as well as health crises, there have been minimal changes in the actual organization of ACG in either country. In Denmark, successive governments of different ideological backgrounds have aimed to establish a single entry-point for ACG, with a specific focus on low skilled workers and SMEs. Similarly, in Finland, the ELO-groups were established with the same purpose. The organization of ACG has also been similar across the two countries, with both emphasizing network organization to connect different actors in an attempt to bridge the gap between supply and demand.

The network organization in both countries has had, in the case of Finland still has, a focus on providing guidance not only to individuals but also to enterprises. In Finland, the problem of meeting the needs of employers was coupled with a solution involving regional networks aimed at creating a supply of specific skills to meet the demands of the regional labour markets. In Denmark, similar networks were established with more or less the same focus on matching skills needs and training provision. However, while the network organization in

Finland persists, the Danish networks were closed down and replaced by a digital solution: eGuidance.⁷

Despite the overarching political rhetoric advocating for establishment of a universal offer, ACG as policy has been primarily coupled with specific labour market problems rather than serving as a universal offer to all adults, whether inside and outside the labour market. In both countries, ACG policies target specific groups of adults, including the unemployed, the low-skilled, and, in the case of Finland, immigrants as well. Aligned with transnational policies, the low skilled population is particularly considered a 'problem' that has been coupled with increased ACG opportunities as policy solution. This is consistent with research indicating that this specific target group is less likely to participate in AE (e.g. Cedefop, 2012; Gvaramadze, 2010; Larson, 2004). A central objective of ACG has thus been to encourage this target group to engage in AE. Consequently, ACG becomes a public supply facing the challenge of generating its own demand among adults and enterprises. It also means that ACG is less about adults 'managing their individual life paths' than ensuring correspondence between the skills needs of enterprises and the upskilling of workers (Cort et al., 2017).

One of the key distinctions between the Finnish and Danish ACG policies is the Finnish emphasis on enhancing the study skills of adults entering or returning to further and higher education. Specifically, in the development of Universities of Applied Sciences in Finland, the focus of ACG has been on supporting adults through a 'learning to learn' approach. In contrast, Denmark does not place the same level of emphasis on adults entering further and higher education or addressing their specific needs (Larson et al., 2023). Adult students in further and higher education in Denmark receive similar offerings to those available to their younger counterparts. In this regard, the Finnish policy encompasses a more comprehensive array of services compared to the Danish approach.

Concluding remarks

Despite the presence of extensive public AE systems, both Finland and Denmark have struggled to meet the transnational call for a coherent ACG system through their policies. Since the 1990s, ACG in both countries has received political attention as a policy solution to problems relating to education, employment, and particularly labour market skill needs. In Denmark, however, ACG has never been established as a standalone public institution; instead, it remains fragmented among various actors in both the private and public sectors. In contrast, Finland has seen ACG develop alongside LLL policies and educational reforms. However, despite systematic efforts to establish national counselling

policies for young adults, policies for adults remain fragmented and tied to educational institutions or employment services. Considering that ACG needs to address diverse target groups with varying demands and bridge the gap to AET offered by multiple providers, establishing a coherent system with universal access remains a significant challenge, if not a wicked problem.

Despite recurrent national recommendations urging development of a guidance system for citizens across different life situations, the focus has primarily been on low-skilled individuals and adults on the margins of the labour market. This focus aligns with the transnational policies of organizations like the EU and the OECD, which are primarily concerned with low-skilled workers at risk in the labour market due to technological and structural changes. Cort et al. (2017) highlight a distinction in EU LLL policies between desirable, active skilled workers who willingly engage in lifelong learning and inactive, reluctant low skilled workers who are at risk of social exclusion (p. 3). The underlying rationale of guidance as a soft steering mechanism, rather than as a tool for empowerment and social justice (Hooley et al., 2018), is evident both at transnational and national levels. Consequently, the function of ACG in policy becomes limited to addressing the alignment of skills with labour market needs rather than supporting citizens' life trajectories, however diverse. Further, policy entrepreneurs promoting AEG though present, seem not to have been able to significantly get it high on the political agenda compared to guidance targeted youngsters.

A central question arising from these findings is whether the push for a more coherent ACG system in both Denmark and Finland is a consequence of transnational policy influence. Can we establish a top-down causality between the transnational or the national levels? The OECD report from 2002 impacted Danish guidance policies in the 2000s, and the EU discourse on lifelong learning has influenced policies in both countries. Thus, the concurrence focus on coherence within ACG is not a coincidence but reflects how policies move across space and time, connecting policy ideas, objectives, content, instruments and practices in an intricate web that links local practices with national and transnational policies (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996). What is particularly intriguing in these cases is that despite numerous political initiatives and good intentions, public ACG remains a fragmented collection of activities regulated by various ministries and embedded in different institutions. Thus, these recurrent initiatives have not resulted in establishing ACG as a coherent system. The question remains whether the policies are much ado about nothing or if they represent an ideal of ACG that is disconnected from the complexities of education systems, labour markets, and the needs of highly differentiated target groups.

Notes

1. In this article, we employ the term 'adult career guidance' to distinguish it from other forms of guidance (such as marriage or financial guidance).
2. Fejes and Dahlstedt (2013) points to lifelong guidance policy as a confessional practice which aims at steering individual behaviour through the internationalization of the value of lifelong learning.
3. Our analysis revealed that ACG policy also targets enterprises – especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) – who employ especially low skilled workers.
4. ELO groups are cooperative networks that promote quality and availability of guidance services. The output includes drawing up descriptions of the conditions of guidance activities and mapping needs for guidance development (ELY, 2023). The groups consist of representatives from ELY centres, employment offices (TE-office), Regional State Administrative Offices (AVI), schools, municipalities and other organizations (Laitinen et al., 2014).
5. It should be noted that the Globalisation Council took up the objectives of the Lisbon Declaration at a national level. When reading the governmental reasoning for the council, there is a high degree of interdiscursivity to the EU agenda.
6. The Council for ACG could not come to an agreement about recommendations and the chairman chose to publish his own recommendations based on the work which had been carried out within the Council.
7. One could argue that this provides a single-entry point, however the evaluation of the portal (DMoCaE, 2021) shows that it is primarily young people who use the portal and for the target group of low skilled the barrier for accessing a digital service may be insurmountable.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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