

Main challenges and options when accrediting people delivering career guidance at European level

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1 ABSTRACT

Accreditation of people delivering career guidance is one of the main steps to guarantee good quality in career guidance delivery. This contribution deals with the main challenges and options we face when developing frameworks at European level for accrediting people delivering career guidance. Several approaches are identified and discussed. A framework accrediting the main tasks people delivering career guidance can accomplish, differentiated by clients' typology and an assessment focused on main tasks performance emerges as the best option.

2 INTRODUCTION

According to a recent Cedefop tender (CEDEFOP 2007):

Professional qualifications and occupational standards for guidance counsellors seem to be poorly developed in most Member States. There is a great diversity across Europe, in the initial training guidance counsellors receive, the qualifications required upon recruitment, and the opportunities retrieved for ongoing professional development.

This article deals with the following main questions (note 1):

1. how to improve career guidance practitioners skills at European level?
2. how to build confidence in the consumers (i.e. users) of career guidance services?
3. how to facilitate mobility of career guidance practitioners between different European countries?

A solution to the three main questions is, as suggested by the Cedefop tender, to develop a framework at European level to accredit people delivering career guidance. In doing this we face several main dilemmas I am going to discuss here.

3 MAIN DILEMMA 1: TO ACCREDIT OCCUPATIONAL PROFILES OR WHAT?

A traditional choice is to accredit official titles (i.e. occupational titles): career counsellor, information officer, conseiller d'orientation, operatore di prima accoglienza, etc... Occupational titles in career guidance in Europe vary widely; this option would require to describe and compare each existing title in every EU country, not an easy task. Furthermore occupational titles identify and refer only to people that carry out an activity as their main occupation. This option will exclude by accreditation all the many people who deliver career guidance but whose primary occupation is not career guidance (teachers, etc.).

A possible solution is to accredit main tasks. A main task is defined as the main identifiable and self standing activity a person delivering career guidance can accomplish (Evangelista 2007b). The following main tasks can be identified in career guidance (Evangelista 2008b): 1.

Deliver information related to career guidance as a separate activity, 2. Perform career guidance interviews, 3. Carry out career guidance activities in small groups, 4. Support clients on 1:1 base during a time span, including by networking and advocating on their behalf.

A main task based approach solves the differences highlighted above because it focuses on what the person does in practice, notwithstanding his/her occupational role. In a main task based framework each practitioner can choose the main task(s) in which to be accredited.

4 MAIN DILEMMA 2: TO DIFFERENTIATE BY CLIENTS TYPOLOGY OR NOT?

When examining career guidance services users, several groups can be identified. Each groups is homogeneous and differs from the others in terms of culture, age, gender, employability, etc. For each main task, standard accreditation should be granted for mainstream (same culture of the practitioner) students and adults, both employed and unemployed. Practitioners could ask to be additionally accredited for working with other clients groups such as immigrants, disabled, offenders and ex-offenders, native minorities.

5 MAIN DILEMMA 3: WHAT TO ASSESS IN THE FRAMEWORK?

A traditional solution is to accredit as competent people holding a prescribed educational or vocational qualification. This would be problematic because in many European countries no official educational qualification for delivering career guidance are requested and the educational qualifications requested in each European country may differ widely. To adopt this solution at European level requires one of the following: A. to agree at European level on a common training path for career guidance practitioners: this has been done for several medical professions, but it requires the formal agreement of all EU countries, very difficult to obtain. B. to compare all the existing educational qualifications and to draw tables of equivalence: this was initially adopted for vocational training qualifications (219 vocational training qualifications in 19 sectors were compared), but then it has been abandoned because too cumbersome. Solution C to use the European Qualification Framework: EQF equates only levels of qualifications, not their content, so you go back to B (on the pitfalls of EQF see Evangelista 2007a). Let's see other options.

When we examine a person at work, we see personal attributes (knowledge, skills, attitudes, etc., so called 'competencies', McClelland 1973) determine performance on tasks to be carried out. A possible solution is to accredit practitioners that can demonstrate a set of prescribed personal features. This can be called 'The American approach to competence' (Evangelista 2006a, 2008a) because has been developed in the US by McClelland (1973), Boyatzis (1982) and others. For a full appraisal see Evangelista 2006b. This approach has two main pitfalls: it comes out competence (the capability to perform well a job or task) depends on competencies (personal features -skills, knowledge, etc.- causally related with good performance, Boyatzis 1982). Similar words are used with different meanings so many misunderstandings arise. The second, most important pitfall is this too is an indirect method. The relationship between personal attributes and performance in main tasks is indirect, that is to say speculative. The reasoning is the following: 'If you are well organized, empathic, know career guidance theories, etc. than you will PROBABLY perform well the main task(s) on which you are seeking accreditation'. This approach is useful when is not possible (for example in recruiting or in career guidance) to observe directly the person at work; when instead dealing with people at work, as in our case, performance based approaches are more precise.

In performance based approaches assessment is carried out focusing directly on how the person performs his/her job, so it is much more effective in recognizing competent practitioners. This approach can be also called 'The UK approach to competence' (Evangelista 2006a, 2008a), because it is used in the UK's NVQ, National Vocational Qualification framework. Differences between the two approaches (and superiority of the latter) are clarified also by the possible questions in an assessment interview. An interview carried out following the 'American approach' will use questions such as: (McClelland 1998) 'What motivate you in work?', 'What do you think are your strong and weak points?', 'How do you deal with stress?', 'Describe the worst project you worked on', 'Describe a time you had to work with someone you didn't like', 'Describe a successful outcome you accomplished working in a team' and so on. An interview carried out following the 'UK approach' (aimed for example at assessing competence to carry out a career guidance interview) will use questions such as. 'Which are the main steps of your interviews? How do you explain your role / explain privacy arrangements / start the interview / end the interview / ask permission to take notes? What are the main challenges in managing an interview? How do you address them?'

A framework with these features is discussed in Evangelista 2008b.

6 MAIN DILEMMA 4: HOW TO SPREAD THE FRAMEWORK?

We need a European framework, but the European Commission has not the power to impose frameworks to Member States. So it should be a voluntary framework diffuse through a bottom-up process. Who could promote it? In the last years several networks have been promoted by the Commission (for example the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network, ELGPN, the Career Guidance Virtual Community, some National Fora), but surprisingly so far national career guidance practitioners associations have been ignored. In National Fora most participants are generic training or research organizations and not career guidance practitioners organizations. To spread a European framework to accredit practitioners we need the direct involvement of European practitioners associations. In my opinion the Commission should work in two directions: 1. to foster the development of professional associations in countries where such associations still don't exist 2. to create possibilities for discussion and reciprocal acquaintance between national associations so they can establish a European Federation. Several measures can be adopted for this, but for brevity are not discussed here.

7 WHICH WAY NOW?

Last October CEDEFOP organized at Thessaloniki a *Peer Learning Event On Quality in Career Guidance and Counselling – Towards European frameworks for the training and competence of career guidance practitioners* (note 2) to which I was invited. Apparently most of the participants to the workshop (many of them working for educational organizations) were interested in a competence framework (a list of elements that should assure competence in workers or perspective workers, Evangelista 2008a) to be used to better design educational curricula. This is to say they were interested in a 'Educational qualifications approach to competence' (Evangelista 2008a). You follow such approach when you try to assure competence of workers by requiring them an educational qualification. The discussion went so to accreditation of prior learning, individualized learning plans, part time study, master's degrees, etc. This is a legitimate approach, but, applied to the accreditation of career guidance practitioners would require all of them undergo a period of study in an educational organization. Please note there are other approaches such as 'The competencies based approach to competence' and 'The performance based approach to competence' (described in Evangelista 2008a) that allow to be accredited without getting an educational qualification. So is 'The educational qualifications approach to competence' the best option? Is it feasible for all?

Traditionally educational organizations have been most concerned with transmitting information, not to develop skills. To comply with the so called 'Bologna Process' now all the educational organization have to describe the desired learning outcomes also in terms of competence. 'At the end of the course, the student will be capable of' (a list of skills to be developed and/or or work task to be mastered follows). It is open to debate how much of this is reached, as most of teaching and assessment, even in educational organizations that have structured they courses in terms of skills to be developed, remain focused on information, and very seldom learning outcomes in terms of capabilities are assessed by sector professional organizations. An evidence courses addressed to career guidance practitioners are most concerned with giving them an educational qualification than making them competent is the following: in such courses no initial assessment and selection to discharge the already competent is carried out, so competence is not really the issue.

This is not to say to structure courses in terms of skills to be developed is bad; I say it is an improvement, but the accreditation of real practitioners (experienced workers) is another matter and requires a different (a performance based) approach as the UK's NVQ National Vocational Qualification system. A performance based approach to competence is the EAF Accreditation Framework for the European Career Guidance Practitioners described in Evangelista 2008b.

8 NOTES

1. I have discussed in deep these issues with my Colleagues of the Leonardo da Vinci Project EAS European Accreditation Scheme for Career Guidance Counsellors IT/06/C/F/TH-81406. By the way this article is based on my personal opinions and do not involves in any way my Colleagues or the Project.
2. CEDEFOP, Thessaloniki, 13-14 October 2008. *Peer Learning Event On Quality in Career Guidance and Counselling – Towards European frameworks for the training and competence of career guidance practitioners*

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