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# Individual Learning Pathways and Flexible Learning Opportunities – Implications for Lifelong Career Management Skills and Comprehensive Guidance Systems

## Introduction

Over the last decade lifelong guidance has been given increasing attention at both European and national levels. It is recognised as a crucial dimension of lifelong learning, promoting both social and economic goals: in particular, improving the efficiency and effectiveness of education, training and the labour market through its contribution to reducing drop-out, preventing skill mismatches and boosting productivity. Two EU Resolutions of the Education Council (2004<sup>1</sup>; 2008<sup>2</sup>) have highlighted the need for strong guidance services throughout the lifespan to equip citizens with the skills needed to manage their learning and careers, and the transitions between and within education/training and work. The Resolutions drew attention to four priority areas, i.e. the development of career management skills; accessibility of services; quality assurance; and co-ordination of services; and Member States were invited to take action to modernise and strengthen their guidance policies and systems.

An awareness of the need for better anticipation and matching of labour-market skills appears in the majority of the recent EU Policy documents proposed by the Commission and adopted by the Council, in regard to both the education and employment sectors. The EU2020 Strategy is the successor to the Lisbon Strategy, and has the challenge of proposing the EU's response to the globally-engendered economic fallout and the financial crisis, which require actions from the EU and the actors in the Member States. A Communication of the Commission (2010) sets out three strategic policy directions/priority areas to re-invigorate the economy, i.e. smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. In line with the Bruges Communiqué<sup>3</sup> on enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational

- 1 Council of the European Union (2004). *Strengthening Policies, Systems and Practices on Guidance throughout Life*. 9286/04 EDUC 109 SOC 234.
- 2 Council of the European Union (2008). *Better Integrating Lifelong Guidance into Lifelong Learning Strategies*. 31.10.2008. 15030/08. EDUC 257 SOC 653.
- 3 Communiqué of the European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training, the European Social Partners and the European Commission, meeting in Bruges on 7

Education and Training (VET), the Member States are invited to develop more attractive, career-oriented, accessible and flexible pathways for individuals, with the aim of excellence and equity in lifelong learning in VET being promoted. The goal is to enhance permeability between the different education and training subsystems (school education, VET, higher education, adult education), with facilitated validation of non-formal and informal learning, including workplace competence acquisition.

The Council conclusions on the modernization of Higher Education<sup>4</sup> underline its crucial role in boosting growth and the economy, by way of the link with research. The aim is to strengthen the *knowledge triangle* between education, research and business. The Member States are invited to:

- promote progressive pathways from VET to higher education;
- develop recognition of prior learning and experience;
- widen access for disadvantaged and under-represented groups, by providing more transparent information on educational opportunities, as well as better guidance to ensure the relevant choice of study;
- decrease drop-outs rates, in particular by providing relevant post-entry support;
- utilise graduate employment data (including tracked graduate employment outcomes) in course design, delivery and evaluation;
- tackle stereotypes still faced by women in reaching the highest levels in education and research.

An overarching goal is to strengthen labour-market intelligence, as well as the links between higher education institutions, employers and the labour market, in order to improve the match between skills and jobs.

Comprehensive policies and practices against early school-leaving<sup>5</sup> should focus on prevention, intervention and compensation. Prevention includes active measures to help integration and targeted support. Intervention activities seek to prevent students from dropping out, while intervention measures can focus on a whole school, or on individual students who are at risk of discontinuing their education. Compensation measures offer opportunities for education and training for those who have dropped out. The aim is to help young people to re-enter mainstream education, or provide a so-called *second chance*. There is evidence that prevention of early school-leaving offer better results than compensating for the negative effects of early school-leaving.

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December 2010 to review the strategic approach and priorities of the Copenhagen process for 2011-2020.

4 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the Europe economic and social Committee and the Committee of the regions: Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernization of Europe's higher education systems. 20.9.2011. COM (2011) 567 final.

5 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the Europe economic and social Committee and the Committee of the regions: "Tackling early school leaving. A key contribution to the Europea 2020 Agenda" 31.1.2011-COM(2011) 18 final.

## A Need for Lifelong Career Management Skills

The current EU policies embodying the notion of competence development imply an active role for citizens. The role and locus of lifelong guidance in this respect needs to be recognised more widely. One key element to prevention, as well as to the promotion of engagement and active transitions, is the development of lifelong Career Management Skills (CMS) as a continuum starting from primary- and secondary-level education. Career Management Skills are a range of competences which provide structured ways for individuals and groups to gather, analyse, synthesise and organise self, educational and occupational information, as well as the skills necessary to make and implement decisions and transitions (ELGPN 2010)<sup>6</sup>.

Such competences are required if citizens are to manage the complex transitions that mark contemporary educational, training and working pathways. Given the requirements of a knowledge-based economy, and the need to respond to rapid changes in technology, markets, and related employment opportunities, citizens' engagement with formal learning, training and re-training is likely to last well into adulthood. The teaching of CMS can support citizens in managing non-linear career pathways, and in increasing their employability, thus promoting social equity and inclusion.

CMS curricula should empower citizens. It is important to ensure that CMS do not focus on presumed individual deficits, but rather acknowledge that individual achievement (including employment) is strongly defined by the strength or otherwise of the economic environment. In real terms, this distinction is evident in CMS curricula that stress *learning for work* (where individuals have to learn coping skills to adapt to a situation), and *learning about work*, where the focus is on a critical understanding of oneself in context (ELGPN 2010.)

According to Watts (2009)<sup>7</sup>, consistent career-guidance services are effectively acting as an additional bridge between VET programmes, HE programmes and the world of work, viewing the student as an active agent in the relationship. Guidance should be redirected from a testing to a tasting approach, providing young people with an opportunity to acquaint themselves with different vocational trades and career possibilities<sup>8</sup>. The role of guidance is to ensure that students are well-informed about labour-market needs. This means that the services need to be supported by high-quality information on current options as well as emerging competence areas. All this information needs to be available

6 ELGPN. (2010) Lifelong Guidance Policies: Work in Progress. A report on the work of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network 2008-10. Jyväskylä: ELGPN

7 Watts. A.G. (2009). The Relationship of Career Guidance to VET. Paris: OECD

8 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the Europe economic and social Committee and the Committee of the regions: "A new impetus for European cooperation in VET to support the Europe 2020 strategy" – 9-6-2010- COM(2010) 296 final

in forms and in terms which individuals can understand, related to their needs.

The EU countries use different models in integrating lifelong guidance into VET (ELGPN 2010). The CMS can be promoted within a stand-alone and timetabled subject, or as a series of themes taught across different subjects in the curriculum, or through extra-curricular activities. One option by which the development and self evaluation of the CMS may be supported is the portfolio approach. Using a portfolio shifts the ownership of learning and professional development to the individual student, offering him/her a chance to go back and forth between the past, present and future. Within a portfolio, students can learn to set goals for their learning, and to analyse themselves as learners. Personal experiences and reflections are potential means by which theory and practice may be brought together and integrated. The portfolio also helps with clarifying individual strengths and weaknesses for future development. The aim for students is for transferable skills to carry them through their working career to be generated, this allowing for mobility between firms and between occupations. This includes flexibility between occupations, to take account of changes in labour supply and demand, and in individuals preferences and goals (Watts 2009).

## Implications for Career Guidance Systems

The renewed emphasis on CMS should not be interpreted as suggesting that those who end up out of work have themselves to blame for failing to prepare for transitions. Care should be taken to avoid the individualisation of social issues: while CMS can support and facilitate transitions, many problems that individuals face lie not in the individuals themselves, but in structural failings in the economy. The ELGPN member countries have started to examine ways in which to ensure that individuals are not expected to assume greater individual responsibility without being offered appropriate support, particularly of a collective nature. Coherent and accessible career guidance services as a form of social contract, if embedded in a critical lifelong paradigm, can be one form of such collective support (Sultana 2011)<sup>9</sup>. Several EU Member States have made progress in integrating CMS into their school curricula, and to a lesser extent deliver elements of these skills to adults through Public Employment Services. In the higher education sector, innovative approaches have been developed in the context of the Bologna Process (ELGPN 2010). Challenges remain nevertheless.

When CMS training is infused throughout the curriculum, it should connect with learners' frameworks of relevance. In other words, curricula

9 Sultana, R. (2011) Flexicurity: Implications for lifelong career guidance. A concept note commissioned by the ELGPN. Presented in the 9th ELGPN Plenary meeting 13-14 Septemeber 2011, Warsaw Poland.

should recognise, acknowledge and build on learners' life experiences, which are considered a source of strength on which other knowledge, skills and understanding can be developed. CMS curricula should also be co-constructed with learners, not only to ensure relevance, but also to democratise both knowledge and the pedagogical relationship. Curricular programmes are not therefore determined inflexibly in advance, but are rather proposed and negotiated with learners, whose voice is respected when it comes to identification of needs, articulation of goals, and identification of appropriate pedagogy and assessment (ELGPN 2010).

There is also a need for a clear training strategy for those delivering CMS, whether in the educational or PES sectors. In schools, additional training is required when CMS is delivered through a curriculum infusion model, since this requires awareness on the part of all teachers as regards their role in teaching CMS. It is also crucial to develop a consistent strategy on how different providers can work together to offer CMS programmes more effectively, in ways that make the best use of their specialised knowledge of the worlds of education, training, and employment.

## Promoting Lifelong Guidance Practice and Policy Development through Structured Co-operation

The Commission, closely assisted by Cedefop and the European Training Foundation, has actively supported lifelong guidance policy development by commissioning studies, producing a handbook for policy makers jointly with the OECD<sup>10</sup>, and promoting peer learning and the development of common reference tools with the support of a European expert group which met between 2002 and 2007. In 2007, the Member States decided to set up a European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network<sup>11</sup> (ELGPN). The Commission currently provides financial support to the ELGPN under the Lifelong Learning Programme, and takes part in meetings of the network.

The participating countries designate their representatives to the network, and are encouraged to include both governmental and non-governmental representatives. The Network members gather for a plenary meeting twice a year, but much of the more detailed work is conducted through smaller working groups and work packages. Working methods include thematic studies, commissioned papers and structured field visits or Peer Learning Activities (PLA). Field visits have enabled the host countries to inform and enrich their own policies and practices, and to involve key policymakers within these processes. Through appropriate liaison arrangements, the network ensures regular contact with other relevant bodies and networks at national, European and international

<sup>10</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & European Commission (2004). *Career Guidance: a Handbook for Policy Makers*. Paris: OECD.

<sup>11</sup> More information about the ELGPN can be downloaded from the ELGPN website <http://elgpn.eu>.

levels. With EU funding, international consultants have been contracted to support the ELGPN's in-depth work.

The ELGPN aims to assist the European Union Member States (and the neighbouring countries eligible for the EU Lifelong Learning Programme) and the European Commission as they work to develop European co-operation on lifelong guidance in both the education and employment sectors. Its purpose is to promote co-operation at Member State level in implementing the priorities identified in the EU Resolutions on Lifelong Guidance (2004; 2008). As a Member-State-driven network, it also represents an innovative form of the Open Method of Co-ordination within the EU.

The ELGPN aims to provide added value to participating countries, through actions which include:

- the pooling of ideas on mutual problems and solutions;
- the testing of ideas and innovation;
- the showcasing of good practice;
- the streamlining of operations and services in practice, through the sharing of insights between different countries, with a view to performance being boosted and cost-effectiveness enabled.

ELGPN Members report that participation in the network has enriched their awareness of possible responses to common challenges, and given them a fresh perspective and new insights into their national guidance provision. Specific issues on which progress is considered to have been made include:

- support for improved co-ordination of services (currently all 30 countries have either set up or are in the process of developing a guidance forum or other representative structure);
- emergence of a common understanding of career management skills;
- appreciation of the potential for new technologies to broaden access to services by complementing face-to-face provision with telephone and interactive internet-based services;
- understanding of the need for a stronger evidence base, linked to quality assurance.

The ELGPN 2011-12 Work Programme will examine how guidance as an integral element contributes to EU guidance policy development in at least six sectoral policy areas, i.e. schools, VET, higher education, adult education, employment and social inclusion. The aim is to deepen the interfaces between these policy areas, and to shift ELGPN activities from conceptual work to policy implementation, with more structured co-operation with other policy sectors. This work will draw on previous ELGPN phases with national examples.

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