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Up patriots to arms! Why and how to structure an European framework for accrediting career guidance practitioners

1. 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 3 main questions is, as suggested by the Cedefop tender, to develop a framework at European level to accredit people delivering career guidance. When doing this we face several main dilemmas I am going to discuss here.

Some preliminary definitions:

- Career guidance = career support = the help provided to individuals in planning and managing their careers (note 2). Includes activities such as informing, advising, using counselling skills, supporting, etc., related to career.
- Career guidance practitioner: anyone delivering career guidance, whatever its occupational title
- Competence (singular, not countable): the capability to perform well a job or task
- Competency (plural competencies): personal attribute (motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self image or social role, or a body of knowledge, etc.) causally related to effective or superior performance in a job (Boyatzis 1982). Other definition: Competencies: the human factors by which competence depends (Evangelista 2008).
- Framework: a system of rules, ideas, or beliefs that is used to plan or decide something
- Main task: each main identifiable and self standing activity a competent career guidance practitioner can accomplish (Evangelista 2007)
- Task: a unit of specific work; an activity needed to produce some result in a specific job, e.g., to write in a form the information collected during an interview

- To accredit: to certify; to officially recognize
- To assess: to judge or decide the amount, value, quality or importance of something.

2. Main dilemma 1: to accredit occupational profiles, main tasks, levels of competence or areas of activity

The first dilemma is between accrediting

- A. official titles (i.e. occupational titles): career counsellor, information officer, advisor, conseiller d'orientation, operatore di prima accoglienza, consulente di carriera, consulente di orientamento, etc.,
- B. main tasks, i.e. the main functions that people carry out when delivering career guidance,
- C. levels of competence as in UK's NVQ
- D. areas of activity as in EVGP Educational and Vocational Guidance Practitioner, the framework recently developed by IAEVG (see below).

Option A: according to the Cedefop tender (p.9)

'Guidance counsellors include a wide range of actors with different duties, occupational status and educational background. Career information and guidance are increasingly provided in a range of settings (schools, public employment services or the workplace) and by a diversity of actors whose primary occupation is not career guidance (school teachers, human resources specialists, line managers, public employment officers, trade union representatives...).'

Occupational titles identify and refer only to people that carry out an activity as their main occupation. A framework accrediting occupational titles will so exclude all the people whose primary occupation is not career guidance. If we want to build confidence in the consumer our framework should include all the people that deliver career guidance, whatever their occupational title. An additional difficulty with A is occupational titles in career guidance vary widely in Europe and often there is not agreement even inside the same country. Solution A would so require to describe and compare each existing title in every EU country, not an easy task. So we exclude solution A.

Option B: a task is a typically defined as a unit of specific work, that is, a set of activities needed to produce some result in a specific job, e.g., to write in a form the information collected during an interview. A main task can be defined as (Evangelista 2007): each main identifiable and self standing activity a competent career guidance practitioner can accomplish. So a task can be defined as a main task when is A. identifiable, B. self standing C. prominent D. requires significant distinct knowledge and skills to be carried out. To write in a form the information collected during an interview is not a main task, while deliver information related to career guidance as a separate activity face to face on 1:1 base does. To me this is the best option when dealing with services delivered by 'a diversity of actors whose primary occupation is not career guidance' because it allows to accredit exactly the main task(s) the practitioner performs. Task based options have also the important advantage to be more easily linked to the career guidance delivery process, and, this way, to more effective mapping of processes and training of personnel. For a list of main tasks, see below. This option has been adopted on the Project EAS quod on note 1.

Option C: here we accredit a level of competence, as in UK's NVQ system (note 3). The practitioner is assessed on a list of tasks (some mandatory, others optional), and then declared qualified at level 2, 3 or 4 in a precise area of NVQ (for example advice and guidance, personnel, counselling). This is more inaccurate on respect of a framework that accredits main tasks.

Option D: EVGP accredits 10 areas of activity: assessment, educational guidance, career development, counselling, etc. This too can be less accurate of option B because some of the EVGP areas can be carried out at a different level of complexity and expertise. For example assessment includes the quite simple assessment of the needs of the client, usually carried out with a short interview, and the assessment of client's potentialities, often carried out with complex psychometric tests. This can result in accrediting for the same area at the same level (only one level is provided) practitioners able to perform tasks of different levels or only the one able to carry out the more complex. Both solutions are unsatisfactory: the first creates confusion in the consumer, the second keep out from the accreditation practitioners carrying out basic career guidance tasks.

3. Career guidance main tasks

According to my direct experience and to comparison of some existing frameworks (EVGP, Employment ENTO, CIC, OCCOPQ) (Evangelista 2007) four principal main tasks can be identified:

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

4. Main dilemma 2: to differentiate for clients typology or not?

According to the Cedefop tender (p.9) a competence based framework should include 'optional elements reflecting specialized knowledge and skills to be acquired by those who work (...) with different types of users.'

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, sex, employability, etc. Each main task has so to be carried out differently with diverse populations. For example small group activities (main task 3) will presumably be focused on educational paths when carried out with students and on job search techniques when with mainstream adults. For this reason accreditation has to be two dimensional: each main task should be accredited against specific main client groups. Here is a possible taxonomy of main clients groups:

- mainstream students (same culture of the practitioner)

- mainstream adults (employed and unemployed, women included) (same culture of the practitioner)
- immigrants
- disabled
- offenders and ex-offenders
- native minorities

A different option is to differentiate for settings of delivery: school, tertiary education, employment offices and so on. This is less convincing for two reasons:

- in each European country the same career guidance service can be found to be delivered in a different setting. For example in Italy employment offices are entrusted for career guidance of adult unemployed and young people 14-18 out of school and vocational training
- Lifelong learning policies and work instability bring in the same location people needing different career guidance services. For example in many European countries young people and adults may attend the same college.

5. Main dilemma 3: What to assess in the framework?

There are several approaches to assure competence of people at work (amongst them career guidance practitioners).

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
- B. to compare all the existing educational qualifications and to draw tables of equivalence
- C. to compare qualification using EQF

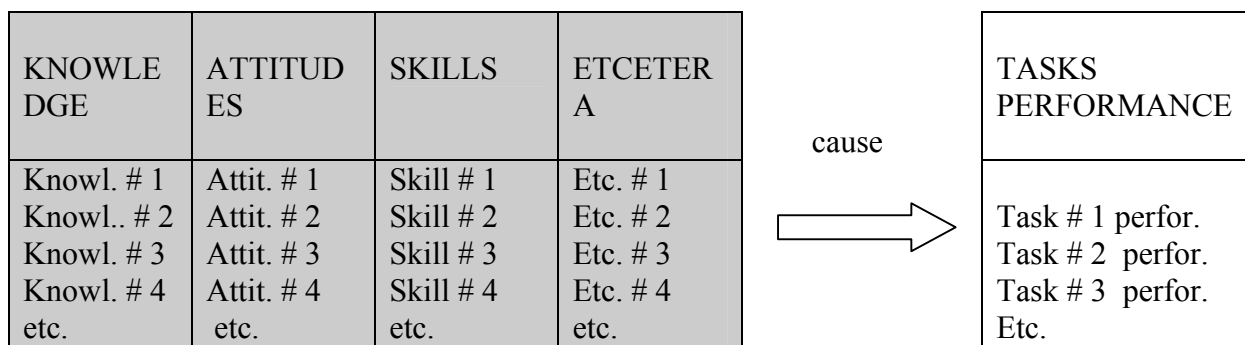
Solution A has been used for several medical professions (note 5), but it's questionable it could be for career guidance, because it requires the formal agreement of all EU countries.

Solution B 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 (use of EQF) has several pitfalls will be discussed in detail later.

Even if the problems highlighted above could be solved, this option remain questionable because the correlation between educational or vocational qualifications and performance in career guidance main tasks may be feeble.

A possible solution is to accredit practitioners that can demonstrate a prescribed set of personal qualities. When we examine a person who is working, we see personal attributes (knowledge, skills, attitudes, etc.) determine the performance on tasks to be carried out. The reasoning on which this option is based is ‘If you are precise, well organized, emphatic, (left side of the table below, note 6)..... than you will perform well the main task(s) on which you are seeking accreditation’. This can be called ‘The competencies approach to competence’ (if not clear, please go back to definitions at the beginning of this article), or ‘The American approach to competence’ (Evangelista 2006a, 2008) because has been developed in the US by McClelland (1973), Boyatzis (1982) and others.



The human factors by which competence depends can be assessed by different means depending on their nature: personality tests, attitudes tests, oral or written tests (for technical and general knowledge), interviews focused on personal skills such as the BEI Behavioral Event Interview developed by McClelland (on BEI see Evangelista 2008).

This approach has two main pitfalls:

- the personal attributes are called competencies, so it comes out competence depends on competencies. Similar words (competence, competency, competencies) are used to mean different elements, so many misunderstandings arise (Evangelista 2008).
- 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 real reasoning so is the following: ‘If you are precise, well organized, emphatic, than you will PROBABLY perform well the main task(s) on which you are seeking accreditation’.

The competencies based approach is useful when is not possible (for example in recruiting or in career guidance) to observe directly the person carrying out a job; when instead dealing with assessing competence of people at work, as in accrediting people delivering career guidance, then performance based approaches are more precise.

A performance based approach is an approach where assessment is carried out focusing directly on how the person performs his/her job, for this reasons is much more effective in recognizing competent practitioners (Evangelista 2008). This way we assess performance in

carrying out job tasks (tasks are the actions that can be identified in a flowchart describing how a job is carried out) and the overall performance results (right side of the table above). Personal attributes can be assessed too (for example technical knowledge) but only related to a specific task (for example 'How you choose your tools when cutting seasoned wood?'). This approach can also be called 'The UK approach to competence' (Evangelista 2008), because it is used in the UK's NVQ, National Vocational Qualification framework. In this approach, most used methods for assessment are a combination of the following (Evangelista 2008):

1. direct observation of the person whilst carrying out his/her work
2. simulation of tasks and work situations,
3. discussion of case studies,
4. testimonies from colleagues and supervisors,
5. examination of documentation produced by the person whilst carrying out his/her work,
6. examination of portfolio based evidence etc,
7. task based interview.

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 with the competencies based approach will use questions such as: '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. (Evangelista 2008). An interview carried out following the performance based 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? In an interview, how do you explain privacy arrangements / signal time is limited? What are the main challenges in managing an interview? How do you address them?'

6. Main dilemma 4: how to spread the framework?

We need a European framework, but the European Commission has not the power to impose occupational profiles or frameworks to Member States. So it should be a voluntary framework diffuse through a bottom-up process. Who could fuel it? In the last years several networks for research and discussion on career guidance have been promoted by the Commission (for example the Expert Group on Career Guidance by the European Commission, the Career Guidance Virtual Community by Cedefop, 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. Most European practitioners associations are currently member of IAEVG, but so far in my opinion IAEVG has not worked enough in a European perspective.

To spread a European framework to accredit practitioners we need the direct involvement of European practitioners associations (hence the title of this paper, note 7). A European Federation should be promoted.

Apparently the Commission is working with different aims: professional associations are quoted only once (p.13) in the Cedefop tender –see paragraph below. In my opinion the Commission should instead 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 to foster this, but for brevity are not discussed here. An important point to be considered is the tradeoff between reliability of the assessment and cumbersomeness of the assessment process.

7. An exercise in foretelling: the Cedefop tender

As is well known, Cedefop is an agency of the European Union. It ‘provides policymakers, researchers and practitioners with information to promote a clearer understanding of developments and so enable them to take informed decisions on future action. (...) It assists the European Commission in encouraging, at Community level, the promotion and development of vocational education and training’(CEDEFOP 2007: 6) and career guidance. The tender specifications can give insights on how the European Commission is thinking to structure an European framework for career guidance practitioners. Let's examine how the tender addresses the main dilemmas we outlined:

Main dilemma	Cedefop apparent choice	Text of the tender
1. to accredit occupational profiles, main tasks, levels of competence, areas of activity	Not occupational profiles	The contractor will design a competence-based framework for guidance practitioners, which can embrace but also differentiate a variety of career guidance roles. P.9 The contractor will explore the knowledge, competencies, and skills which underpin effective professional delivery in different settings, as well as shared and distinctive functions implemented by guidance staff. P.9
2. to differentiate for clients typology or not?	differentiate	Competence based frameworks describe (..) optional elements reflecting specialized knowledge and skills to be acquired by those who work in specific areas (schools, tertiary education, employment offices...) and with different types of users. P.9
3. a framework based on official educational	competence	The professional development of guidance staff can be encouraged through the development of comprehensive career guidance competence-based frameworks p.9

qualifications or on competence?		
4. a competence based framework assessing competencies or tasks?	competencies	The contractor will explore the knowledge, competencies, and skills which underpin effective professional delivery in different settings p.9
5. how to spread the framework?	career guidance practitioner associations involvement not a priority	The study will highlight a series of recommendations for the different stakeholders concerned with the training and qualifications of career guidance counsellors. P.9 The framework is to serve as a working tool to support guidance practitioners and policymakers to develop national and sectoral frameworks, quality assurance tools and professional standards, which will need to be contextualised according to specific national conditions. P.10

Annexes

8. EVGP Educational and Vocational Guidance Practitioner Features

EVGP (retrieved at <http://www.cce-global.org/review-management/evgp>) is the framework launched by IAEVG at the beginning of 2007 for accrediting career guidance practitioners at international level. It is based on a list of core competencies and a list of specialized competencies grouped by areas of activity (assessment, educational guidance, career development, counselling, information management, etc.). A ‘minimum entry level’ based on a combination of formal education and experience is ‘normally requested’ to apply for accreditation.

The core competencies list attitudes, skills and knowledge, while on the contrary specialized competencies includes also few tasks. For example 3.3. of EVGP specialized competencies read as: ‘Plan design and implement lifelong career development programs and interventions’.

The practitioner is going to be assessed against each of the core competencies and each of the competencies listed with 2 or 3 digit numbers under ‘specialized competencies’.

EVGP accredits the ‘Educational and Vocational Guidance Practitioner’ (p.4 of the application form). The EVGP certificate will indicate the area(s) of specialized competencies that have been ‘approved’ (i.e. accredited) (application form, p.2). Apparently the core competencies will not be listed in the official certification. To be accredited, the approval of at least one area of specialized competencies is requested.

As already explained in paragraph 2, framework based on main areas can create confusion in the consumer or exclude from accreditation practitioners carrying out basic career guidance tasks.

Some other pitfalls can be identified in EVGP.

A. Not all the areas identified are fully convincing. For example:

- assessment in EVGP is listed as a distinct area while on the contrary in career guidance it is transversal to other areas such as educational guidance and career development
- in EVGP counselling includes counselling on personal issues (sexual identity, health education and other) that at least in Europe is not considered belonging to career guidance
- research on career guidance is not a typical career guidance delivery activity. To include it on EVGP is coherent with IAEVG membership that includes practitioners and scholars, but it is questionable a framework addressed to career guidance practitioners accredits scholars.

B. The assessment is currently been entrusted to a single organization (CCE, Center for Credentialing & Education, based in the US)

- control of credentials of their own members is one of the main task and power of every professional association. EVGP in its present form disempowers the national practitioners' associations, where existing
- it is open to scrutiny if an organization located in a different continent (in this case North America) can well evaluate training and education done in a different one (for example Europe, Asia or South America). The control of national practitioners credentials (including the training they underwent) is by far better evaluated by local (same country) organisations.

C. EVGP can compete and interfere with national accreditation schemes (where existing). Let see some cases:

- Countries, like France, where the requisites of the guidance counsellors are set by the law. EVGP accredits people that don't have the minimum requisites requested by the national law to work in the field and confuse the consumers.
- Countries, like Italy, where the requisites of the guidance counsellors are not set by the law, but by practitioners' associations. EVGP accredits people that don't have the minimum requisites set by national associations.
- Countries where no accreditation scheme, nor set by the law neither by practitioners associations exists. This is the case where EVGP is most useful.

9. EQF European Qualification Framework features

Very in brief, in 2006 the European Commission proposed to the Parliament the approval (in 2007) of a Directive on a European Qualification Framework (note 8). Its implementation by EU Member States will be voluntarily. The aim of EQF is to allow comparison of existing qualifications across differing national education and training systems. EQF doesn't provide any system for recognizing not formal learning nor awards qualifications (note 10). In the field of accreditation of non-formal and informal learning the Council of the EU has so far produced only a list of very general (useless) principles in 2004 (Evangelista 2006d).

EQF consists of a list of eight levels. For each level a description of the corresponding level of knowledge, skills and responsibility and autonomy is provided. See for example how the first three levels are structured.

Levels	Knowledge	Skills	Responsibility and autonomy (note 11)
1	basic general knowledge	basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
2	basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study	basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	work or study under supervision with some autonomy
3	knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study	a range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information	take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study adapt own behavior to circumstances in solving problems

Each national existing educational and vocational qualification is going to be related with a specific level of the EQF, so to allow comparison. In other words, a person holding a national vocational qualification of let say level 4 in a specific field can work or study in all the other European countries where the requested national qualification in that field is a level 4 qualification.

The EQF has some pitfalls:

1. it is said to be a competence based system, but if we agree on a definition of competence as 'the the ability to perform well a job or task' this is not true. It is not true when the system is used for educational qualifications (no competence –as defined- is usually developed in education)
2. two people holding the same educational qualification (for example the same diploma) are considered the same level of competence. This cannot be accepted

3. in EQF a specific level of knowledge is always related with a specific level of skills and of responsibility and autonomy. This too cannot be accepted. Knowledge, skills and responsibility and autonomy can be combined in each person in many different ways.

10. How well a European framework can facilitate mobility of career guidance practitioners between different European countries?

Frameworks based on educational or vocational qualifications require to develop tools for portability or equivalence of the qualifications. This can result cumbersome or imprecise. On the contrary a European framework based on main tasks seems to allow each career guidance person, once accredited, to work immediately in every European country. This is not exact.

The point here is the role of information in career guidance. Two quotations:

‘Information (is) a commodity which underpins all guidance activities, including - but not confined to- that of informing’ (Brown 1999)

‘This is therefore a good time to point out that interpersonal skills (..) are necessary but not sufficient for effective careers guidance. What makes that guidance effective is the application of, and reference to, expert knowledge and understanding of the labour market and its functioning. Careers guidance, in relation to counselling, we might argue, is an applied discipline in a way analogous to engineering’s relationship to physics or maths’ (Offer 2001)

A career guidance practitioner let say from Italy doesn’t have the knowledge of the educational systems, labour market, occupations, job search of the other countries, nor where to find them, so it cannot immediately work in a different country. This case, a convenient period of learning and work under the supervision of a local practitioner has to be required.

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 development.

2. I personally prefer ‘career support’ (Kidd 2006) to ‘career guidance’, but I will use the latter.

3. On NVQ see for example Employment NTO at <http://www.ento.co.uk/info/index.php>

4. In my experience a career guidance interview can be followed by: A. an availability of the practitioner to meet or to answer by telephone or email to further questions if needed by the client B. periodic further meetings to support the client while is implementing his/her action plan (for example a meeting every fortnight to review a job search). In this case the support given by the practitioner is mostly informational and psychological in nature, and doesn’t imply carrying out a job search on behalf of the client. It can be carried out on 1:1 or in a small group base C. periodic further meetings to support the client while is implementing

his/her action plan PLUS continuous contacts with educational authorities or employers on behalf of or to advocate the client with educational authorities or potential employers. Case A happens with about 70% of clients. Case B. can be called 'follow up' and defined as: direct support to clients while implementing their action plan. Case C. can be called 'mediation' and defined as direct support to clients while implementing their action plan plus advocating the client with educational authorities or potential employers. The contacts with potential employers can also start before meeting the client (the practitioner contacts potential employers looking for job openings for future clients) and include a matching between the clients in charge and the retrieved job offers. B and C are necessary when working with clients of medium or low employability, and form the 'take in charge' area. To me, mediation is a main tasks, while A and B are not prominent and so are part of the 'Perform career guidance interviews' main task.

5. See Directive 2005/36/CE by the European Parliament and the Council of 7th September 2005 relative to the recognition of professional qualifications, Official Journal of the European Union C58 E1 of 08 March 2005, Capo III artt. 21-49. See also (in Italian) Evangelista 2006b

6. The idea for this table was given me by Sasa Niklanovic.

7. See a list at <http://www.orientamento.it/risorse/europee.htm>

8. European Commission 2006a. For an appraisal see, in Italian, Evangelista 2006e.

9. This is clearly stated also by European Commission 2006b

10. Referred to as 'competence'

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