

A review of

NICEC-THE GUIDANCE COUNCIL (2004)

CEDEFOP commissioned Preliminary Study on Quality Guidelines and Criteria in Guidance.

FINAL REPORT, May 2004

The Report is available at http://www.orientamento.it/risorse/cedefop_quality.pdf

Study or Manifesto. Describing the meta-criteria approach, the authors affirm that ‘The meta-criteria proposed in the present report correspond to the common core of meta-criteria found at the heart of the wide range of different approaches to quality assurance in the existing 25 Member State and 3 candidate countries’ (p.16 - please note all the page numbers refer to the Final report May 2004). This is not true. In their study, the authors benchmark the European practices in guidance against their own idea of quality in guidance. They limit themselves to identify from the beginning several points they think important (the meta-criteria have only been ‘suggested’ by the quality systems they found, p.19) and then to ask: ‘Does this exist in your Country? Do you think it would be useful?’.

For example, none of the respondents affirm that consumer associations are involved in guidance delivery, or that the private sector is covered by quality assurance systems, but both are suggested as meta-criteria. From this particular point of view some parts of the study are more a manifesto than a study. It’s OK, as most of the chosen criteria make sense, but this is worth noting. The study/manifesto has been discussed with the Expert Group on Lifelong Guidance and submitted to 30 European guidance practitioners (me included), but with this approach (the question ‘Do you think this would be useful?’ suggests an answer like: ‘Yes, why not?’) several important points can be missing because the questionnaire didn’t mention them or they don’t come out in their real importance. (see below).

Client and consumer association involvement. Generally speaking, client satisfaction is important for every service/product, but please remember guidance is, like medicine, a field where the client is often unable to evaluate the efficacy of the service received. To be more clear, in medical services, the patient is able to correctly evaluate elements such as the waiting room reception, the appointments system, the ‘turn-taking’ procedure, the courtesy shown by the doctor and the clarity of his explanations (all aspects to do with the way in which the service is supplied). However, the patient is unable to assess the most important elements, those of accuracy of diagnosis and prescribed treatment (aspects to do with the efficacy of the service). Collecting and evaluating clients feedback in guidance service is useful, but ‘to involve the user in design and management (..) of guidance services and materials’ looks a bit too far and is not clear how it can be done. Moreover in many countries consumer associations are not developed, don’t know anything about guidance and most of guidance services are delivered by public or public funded organisations. So, should be a real priority to involve the users and consumers associations in design and management of guidance services? On the contrary I am surprised that a. citizen and user involvement don’t say anything about the privacy of the data collected on clients, the impartiality of the service and the related differentiation between careers guidance and recruiting and job matching. I would suggest to cancel users and consumer associations involvement in design and management of services and to introduce instead something like: ‘Quality assurance systems for vocational guidance should:
-firmly distinguish careers guidance by recruiting and job matching
-guarantee the impartiality of the service and the privacy of the data collected on clients.

Are we overdoing on quality? The report takes for granted that quality assurance systems based only on training and qualifications of practitioners are not enough (‘While the training and qualifications of practitioners are clearly crucial components in establishing norms of good practice and promoting quality, they do not, by themselves, constitute a quality assurance system’, p.13). I

would like to stress that the approach based on checking practitioners' professionalism is traditionally used in all independent professions including medical or psychotherapeutic professions where bad practice can have much more harmful effects than in careers guidance. Perhaps the report approach should be better justified.

Careers practitioners professional associations, qualification, competencies and training: the real emergency. According to the report 'A comprehensive system of qualification across every guidance sector (...) is generally lacking' (p.13). Only 13 countries (on 20) require guidance practitioners to hold or be working toward agreed minimum levels of qualification (p.21, this means in at least 7 countries is formally possible to work in the careers guidance field without qualifications and competencies), only 7 (on 20) require on going professional development (p.21). Most of the countries don't have professional organisations or they are not included in the development of standards and quality assurance procedures (my inference from data at p.21). My impression is that the authors of the report underestimate the importance of these points. They miss the first and most important aspect of professionalism: 'Are the professional figures working in careers guidance, their qualification and skills regulated?' Without an official list of occupations in careers guidance and a definition of their qualifications and/or competencies nothing more can be said. This point was missing in the questionnaire and the final meta-criteria gives it for granted: 'Quality assurance systems for careers guidance should: require practitioners to have the competence needed to perform the guidance tasks they are called to undertake, and should require guidance practitioners to hold, or be working towards, qualifications that ensure that they have the competencies required to undertake guidance tasks.' (p.33). Which competences? Which qualifications? Should competencies and qualifications be previously described somewhere? In the conclusions and recommendations nothing is said about careers practitioners professional associations, qualification, competencies and training, except that 'Reliance on the professionalism of staff may not be sufficient' (p.30, in bold letters) and that 'Professional associations should consider the extent to which the user perspective is incorporated into existing competence end ethical frameworks (p.35, again in bold letters). And what if in most countries there are not professional associations and in many other not an agreed list of competencies and qualifications? On the contrary nearly one page in the recommendations section is devoted to citizen and user involvement (pp.32 and 33).

Other

Quality depends on many different factors, so in general statements is worth to focus on the most important and to provide for procedures that allow each time to signal situations that undermine quality due to other factors. Section d. coherence can be shortened and point e. Careers guidance not funded by the state can be subsumed under c. Service improvement ('Quality assurance systems for vocational guidance should apply to all sectors, public and private'.)

To require services to form working links with, and provide support for, groups and bodies that offer guidance informally (under c. Service improvement) looks useful but not so important. But if we want to maintain this principle we should add also working links with vocational training agencies and employment services.

So my final proposal is as follows:

a) Citizen and user involvement

Quality assurance systems for career guidance should:

- Guarantee the impartiality of the service and the privacy of the data collected on clients.
- Firmly distinguish careers guidance by recruiting and job matching

- Include information for the user regarding their entitlement (for example through users' charters)
- Ensure that individual users are regularly consulted on their experience of and satisfaction with the service and require service providers to make systematic use of the findings from such consultations.

b) Practitioner competence

Quality assurance systems for career guidance should:

- Describe and regulate practitioners qualification and competence
- Foster the development of guidance practitioners professional associations and include them in the development of standards and quality assurance procedures.
- Include the monitoring or assessment of the work of guidance practitioners with respect to the outcomes of guidance interventions that they are expected to deliver
- Require on-going professional development and service improvement.

c) Service Improvement

Quality assurance systems for career guidance should:

- Apply to all sectors, public and private
- Include clearly defined standards of service (20), some way of monitoring whether a service meets those standards, and, where this is not the case, a procedure to follow to bring them up to standard
- Include some way of differentiating and monitoring service provision in relation to the needs of different target groups.

d) Coherence

Quality assurance systems for career guidance should:

- Provide for national fora consisting of government departments involved with guidance, professional associations and representatives of private agencies, employers, trade unions and other non-State providers involved in guidance.

A final point about the general meta-criteria approach. The existence in a Country of one or more of the agreed meta criteria is not enough. So for example in a Country there can be 'agreed minimum levels of qualification' but if the level are too low, then guidance delivery is not good. The same applies for all the meta-criteria. That a meta-criteria exists is not enough. It should also be effective. We know this study is a first step, but there will be much more to discuss.

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