

Chapter 3

Career guidance

One way of ensuring that vocational programmes meet labour market needs is to give VET students good guidance. As careers diversify, career choices and therefore career guidance are becoming both more important and more demanding.

To meet this challenge, there needs to be a coherent career guidance profession, with personnel experienced in labour market issues and separated from psychological counselling. Guidance needs to be adequately resourced, with some assurance of pro-active one-to-one delivery of guidance at key career decision points. Guidance personnel need to have an independent base to underpin their objectivity, and be able to call on a wide range of information and web-based material. Strong links between schools and local employers are very important means of introducing young students to the world of work. Guidance initiatives also need to be carefully evaluated.

The main features of career guidance

As described in Chapter 2, student preference can play a very important part in determining the mix of vocational provision in many countries. Rather than being something opposed to employer needs, it can, if well-guided, help to deliver a mix of provision which is in line with those needs. A major review of career guidance policy and practice was undertaken by the OECD (2004) and as part of the Learning for Jobs exercise one of the authors of the 2004 report revisited the issues and linked them to the particular challenges of guidance in VET (Watts, 2009). Figure 3.1 provides one (quite limited) indicator of the prevalence of career guidance in OECD countries.

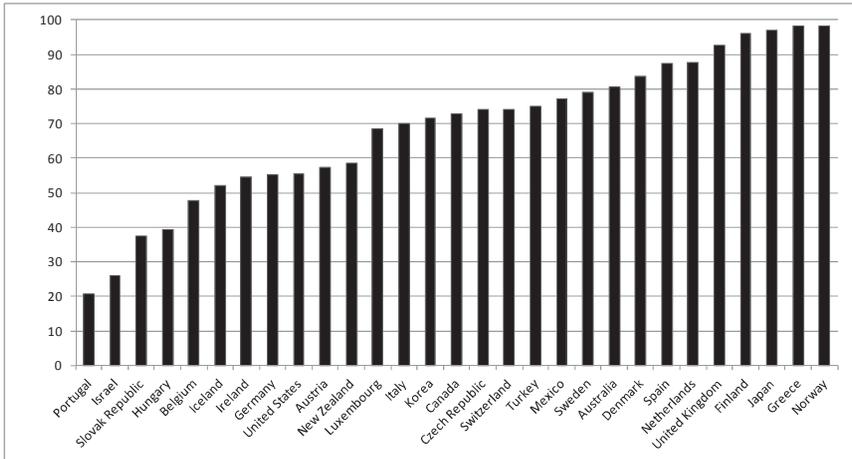
Career guidance has two main elements:

- ***Career education*** in which students learn about the world of work and develop career management skills through classroom teaching, and through other activities such as work experience.
- ***Individual career advice*** on a one-to-one basis, providing specific advice on career decisions; either pro-actively (mandatory interviews for all) or reactively (on demand).

Both elements are underpinned by ***career information*** on courses, occupations and career pathways. Such information is increasingly web-based. It both supports career services in schools and VET institutions and provides information directly to students.

Figure 3.1 Provision of career guidance at secondary school

Percentage of secondary schools where career guidance is formally scheduled into students' time according to interviews with school heads



Source: OECD (2007), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2006 Database, <http://pisa2006.acer.edu.au/>.

Note: These data should be treated with caution. They come from interviews with school heads as part of the PISA exercise, and in some cases they appear to contradict formally promulgated school policies which indicate that guidance is fully mandatory in some countries. This may reflect nuances, or perceived nuances in the meaning of “formally scheduled.”

Why career guidance matters

In nearly all OECD countries, education systems are growing and diversifying, with more courses for different target groups. At the same time, jobs and careers are constantly evolving and job security is diminishing. While these changes are expanding opportunities, they also increase the complexity and difficulty of choices that young people need to make. As argued in Chapter 1, in the field of VET the expectation that initial vocational training would prepare students for one occupation for their entire working life has increasingly been replaced by a sequence of complex choices and changes over a lifetime of learning and work. As a result, career choices, and therefore career guidance, are becoming both more important and more demanding.

Where formal sources of career guidance are not available, students rely on informal sources, such as family and friends. While such sources have their strengths, they may lack reliability and impartiality and confine choices to the known and familiar (OECD, 2004). They may also tend to reinforce existing social disadvantages since, for example, poorly educated parents may not be in a position to advise their children on the full range of career options which might be available to them. If young people choose the wrong career early on the costs of later changes can be high (although these costs may be reduced by flexible pathways to other occupations or educational tracks).

The challenges

In principle, effective guidance services can yield large returns. The evidence shows that good quality career guidance develops the career related skills, self-awareness and self-esteem which lead to rewarding choices (Bowes *et al.* 2005; Hughes *et al.* 2002)¹. But a number of challenges need to be addressed if OECD countries are to realise these outcomes. Staff providing career guidance are sometimes inadequately prepared for dealing with labour market issues, services may be fragmented and under-resourced, advice often lacks objectivity, relevant labour market information is not always available and career guidance initiatives are often not effectively evaluated.

Inadequate preparation of guidance personnel

Career guidance personnel are very often trained in the context of psychological counselling, with a heavy emphasis on psychological dysfunction. While this background may be appropriate for supporting students with personal problems, it does not equip them to deliver advice on types of job, career prospects, and learning opportunities. Labour market information often receives limited attention within psychology-dominated programmes (Watts, 2009).

Combining psychological counselling and career guidance services also has drawbacks. Evidence from different countries shows that professionals who have to deal with both aspects spend much of their time on the learning and behavioural problems of a minority of students; career guidance is then marginalised and tends to focus on immediate educational choices rather than longer term career planning (Fretwell and Watts, 2004; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2002a). Students may be less willing to be seen knocking on a counsellor's door since they may be stigmatised as having personal problems. In the United Kingdom, the integration of careers with personally-

based services targeting young people at risk has decreased the attention paid to labour market issues in the training of career advisors (Colley *et al.*, 2008) and reduced the number of students who receive career guidance (Watts, 2008).

The educational background of those who provide career advice also counts. If they have spent most of their lives in education (*e.g.* academically trained teachers responsible for career advice) their experience of the wider work environment will be limited and their formal or informal advice to students may be biased towards general education and university pathways. They may be reluctant to recommend vocational courses, particularly to bright students. As one UK study reports, parents, young people and employers all considered apprenticeship as a genuine alternative to academic upper secondary education, whereas very few teachers shared this view (Skills Commission, 2009).

Fragmentation and under-resourcing

Career guidance is often fragmented and/or delivered by multiple agencies to the same target groups. Within the school, it is often delivered by regular teachers with an additional responsibility for career guidance. This function is often under-resourced because the activity competes with the ‘mainstream’ teaching functions of educational institutions which tend to dominate priorities. While there are attractions in integrating career guidance into a broad curriculum, guidance may easily be neglected if only provided as an aspect of another subject. Schools often lack the capacity and expertise to deliver the quite complex demands of an integrated service (National Audit Office, 2005). Sometimes career guidance is delivered through publicly-funded employment services, but such services focus primarily on getting unemployed adults back into work and off benefits – a narrower perspective than desirable to guide the career choices of young people. Sometimes, particularly for adults, guidance is delivered through other agencies such as trade unions, employers, voluntary organisations and private-sector organisations.

When resources for career guidance are lacking, one-to-one guidance may only be offered to students who seek it out, meaning that it is only utilised by those students who are most aware of its value – bypassing the most uncertain and disadvantaged students who often have the greatest needs. Higher achievers tend to be readier to seek advice and information and to have clearer ideas about their progression (Transition Review Group, 2005).

Lack of objectivity due to institutional bias

In many countries schools and other education and training institutions themselves provide information and career guidance to potential students. These career guidance counsellors may not be able to provide an objective view of all the career options or a dispassionate assessment of the labour market outcomes of their study programmes. Furthermore, these institutions commonly have incentives to direct students towards programmes offered at their own institution even where this is not in the students' interest. Such pressures are particularly marked in systems that link school funding to student recruitment (OECD, 2004), and where there is a demographic decline in student numbers.

Absence of relevant labour market information

There are many sources of information on individual courses and occupations, but much of it is biased publicity material. In some countries, government agencies may provide objective occupational forecast information such as the US Bureau of Labor Statistics' annual *Occupational Outlook Handbook*.² Although this information is all available on-line, it may still be a significant challenge for those advising students to use the information effectively.

It is harder to obtain information on optimal (and possible) pathways from education to occupations, the extent to which particular courses of study lead toward desired jobs, and the prevailing wage rates and unemployment risks in different occupational fields. Labour market data are complex and often require careful interpretation. Longitudinal and follow-up data, showing what happens to graduates once they are in the labour market, are a very important guide to the value of courses, but they are often lacking.

Need for further evaluation evidence

Both theoretical and empirical arguments support the view that career guidance has useful outcomes both for the individual and the economy. The empirical literature shows a positive impact of career guidance on short-term learning outcomes like knowledge of opportunities and decision-making skills. There is also some evidence of positive effects on outcomes like educational achievement. But the evidence on longer term impacts is more limited (see OECD, 2004).

Policy responses

A coherent profession

Career guidance responsibilities are demanding and important: the assimilation of the guidance profession into psychological counselling distorts and marginalises this role. In general, therefore, countries should seek to establish a separate profession of career advisors. This was recommended, for example, in the OECD review of vocational education and training in the Czech Republic (Kuczera, 2009).

The competences required for career guidance include:

- Good knowledge of labour markets, careers and learning opportunities, and the capacity to identify and use further relevant sources of information to provide more specific career advice to individuals.
- The capacity to draw out from young people what their interests, aptitudes and objectives are and together to identify career choice solutions which are both realistic and meet their needs.

Box 3.1 Training career advisors in England and Switzerland

The University of East London offers a postgraduate diploma in career guidance that can be pursued by those with a recognised university degree or equivalent. It can be completed either in one year full-time or in two to three years part-time. It trains people to work with a range of client groups. The programme covers: theory and practice of career guidance, strategies to promote equal opportunities in a guidance context, labour market studies, education systems, and organisation of guidance structures (OECD, 2004).

Career guidance counsellors in Switzerland hold a specialised diploma from universities or other publicly recognised institutions. Their training programme covers five broad areas: individual development (learning and developmental psychology); the individual in society (sociology, law and economics); the individual and the world of work (the education system, education and professional career choice, occupational psychology, the labour market); work methods (diagnostics, career guidance, monitoring, documentation and public relations); and professional ethics, professional identity and quality. In addition, the programme includes a 12-months traineeship (Schweizer Bundesrat, 2009).

Training for career advisors should be designed to provide these competences among others (see for example Box 3.1). This might involve a modest programme for a teacher who will be a part-time careers teacher, and a much more substantial programme for those who will become full-time career guidance professionals. Ideally, a qualification system for career advisors would cover not only those in schools but also other career guidance professionals, working in tertiary education and in employment offices and other services for adults. This would facilitate recognition and transferability of career advisor skills across these institutions. A competence framework for career advisors also helps to develop both vertical and horizontal progression opportunities and thus to improve the status of the profession (OECD, 2004).

Career success depends heavily on the capacity to manage and deploy one's own skills, alongside narrower capacities such as numeracy and literacy (see OECD, 2002b). It follows that career guidance has a very important role to play not only in advising individuals about specific choices, but also in helping to develop the capacity to manage one's own career. Pursuing this logic, the Australian Blueprint for Career Development, which was rolled out in 2008, is designed to help identify the skills, attitudes and knowledge that individuals need to make sound career choices. The Blueprint can be used by teachers, parents, career development practitioners and others to support individuals careers (MCEETYA, n.d.).

Adequate resources and pro-active delivery

Wrong career decisions are costly, both to the student, and to society. Guidance services need to be adequate and protected against the risk of being continuously squeezed at the margins of an activity such as regular teaching. Key elements of guidance should be delivered pro-actively to all students, so that students can be supported by one-to-one guidance by professionals when they make key career decisions. This means, for example, that when students are choosing a school track, or a particular school or vocational programme, there should be a compulsory one-to-one interview with a career guidance professional.

An independent base

While it makes sense to deliver guidance in schools in order to ensure access to all students, it is important that guidance professionals preserve their independence from the school. This could involve, for example, a professional career guidance service managed from outside schools, but with a roving function in the schools (see Box 3.2). It could also involve teachers

trained as guidance professionals who are accountable to standards agreed with the external guidance service in respect of their guidance responsibilities, and with a fixed time commitment to guidance work.

Box 3.2 Career guidance in Switzerland

In Switzerland career guidance and information sessions are mandatory in secondary education. All teachers receive some training on labour market opportunities. In grades 7, 8, and 9 students learn in their own schools about different career options and the main institutions for guidance and counselling (*Berufsinformationszentren*, BIZ). The BIZ centres are free-standing institutions providing information and counselling for all levels of education and training. Students can meet with generalist career counsellors, and may then be directed to specialists in different fields. BIZ centres work closely with schools, and sometimes provide some services at the school rather than at the BIZ site.

Good sources of information

Typically career information will be web-based but can usefully be supported by a range of printed material, and contact persons who can help with particular queries about individual occupations. Information sources need to be regularly updated, to identify emerging occupations and areas of skills shortage, as well as current and potential areas of skills oversupply and redundancy. An important function of guidance personnel will be to guide individuals in their use of all these information sources (see Box 3.3).

Box 3.3 Career information in different countries

In the **Czech Republic**, a website provides information on educational options and their labour market outcomes. Website users can learn about the range of programmes provided by secondary and tertiary institutions, their entry requirements, and the qualifications and jobs these programmes lead to. Information is presented about employment conditions and employee satisfaction in different occupations. This is supported by data on employment/unemployment rates and salaries by educational attainment and field. Web users can also learn about various occupations by watching video material available on the web site, and read about employer needs and their expectations in terms of the skills and competences sought in potential recruits.

Source: Národní ústav odborného vzdělávání (2010), Informační systém o uplatnění absolventů škol na trhu práce, www.infoabsolvent.cz/, accessed June 2010

In **Mexico**, the Ministry for Education has developed a career guidance tool available on USB sticks and online. It includes tools that help students to identify their strengths and interests, information on institutions and programmes, and data on the labour market outcomes in several (though not yet all) occupations and levels. Students can compare different career options, exploring whether graduates work in an occupation related to their training, how much they earn and their average working hours.

Source: SEP (Secretaría de Educación Pública) (Secretariat for Public Education) (2008), Orientación Vocacional en mi memoria website, www.orientacionvocacional.sems.gob.mx, accessed October 2008.

In **South Carolina** the College and Career Planning System offers detailed online information to students, parents and educators on a wide range of topics. The career planning section includes an overview of nearly 1000 occupations, describing the occupation, important interests, skills and abilities, education requirements and income. Students can obtain information on programmes after high school, ranging from 3-months training to doctoral programmes. They can also learn about preparing for different programmes and financing their studies.

Source: Personal Pathways to Success. (2010), www.scpathways.org/Masterweb/content/SC/dispatch.aspx?category=career&page=main&major=guest&minor=career, accessed June 2010.

In **Sweden**, the National Agency for Education maintains a website with descriptions of programmes in upper secondary schools, the occupations to which those programmes lead, and information on what former students on the different programmes do five years after finishing school – for example the type of further education, occupation, and the percentage outside the workforce.

Source: Skolverket (2010), Utbildningsinfo.se website, www.utbildningsinfo.se, accessed June 2010.

A comprehensive framework

Individual career guidance should be a part of a comprehensive career guidance framework, including a systematic career education programme to inform students about the world of work and career opportunities. This means that schools should encourage an understanding of the world of work from the earliest years, backed by visits to workplaces and workplace experience. Partnerships between schools and local firms allow both teachers and students to spend time in workplaces. Research studies suggest that young people particularly value information on jobs and careers if obtained in a real workplace and through contacts with working people (Transition Review Group, 2005) (see Box 3.4). Through such experience young people can be introduced to some of the choices they will face in their professional and learning pathways.

In the United States, for example, many of the high school vocational (or Career and Technical Education as it is commonly described in the US) courses are seen as ‘career exploration’. Such courses are often intended to provide the student with the flavour of a career, without going so far as to fully prepare the student for jobs in the field (see Box 1.4). Many countries use work experience as a means of career education and guidance (see Box 3.4).

Box 3.4 Work experience

In **Austria, Germany and Switzerland** students in lower secondary programmes leading to apprenticeships pursue short work placements in companies. Their purpose is to provide young people with work experience, which can help them to choose a career path and find an apprenticeship place. Students participate in such placements mostly during the school holidays. A survey of around 1000 students in Switzerland found that these short work placements are an important information source for career choices and 61% of students were offered an apprenticeship place after completing the workplace experience (Herzog *et al.* 2004).

In **Denmark**, most lower-secondary students also have an opportunity to get the flavour of a real work environment. Between the age of 14 and 16 they usually undertake at least two different one-week work placements (OECD, 2002c).

In **Norway**, nearly all students in lower secondary education, regardless of whether they are or are not intending to enter a vocational programme, have one week of work experience in their 9th grade and some further work placement in grade 10. Schools often establish partnerships with local companies to facilitate exchanges between students and employers (OECD, 2002c).

Better evidence on what works

Career guidance initiatives need to be properly evaluated, to make the case for effective resourcing, and identify how best to employ those resources. Immediate impacts might be explored through follow-up surveys of those receiving guidance (and those who do not), while longer term impacts over several years also need to be measured. Randomised controlled trials can assess the impacts of (additional) intensive career guidance on randomly selected young people and compare them with control groups who do not receive the intervention.

Career guidance: conclusion

Arguments and evidence

- Given that student preference is an important element in determining the mix of provision, good guidance in support of those preferences is a very important way of matching provision to labour market needs. Such guidance is becoming more important as the range of career and educational choices open to individuals rises.
- Staff providing career guidance are sometimes inadequately prepared for dealing with labour market issues, with career guidance sometimes playing a subsidiary role to psychological counselling.
- Guidance services may be fragmented, under-resourced and reactive, so that those who need guidance most may fail to obtain it.
- Advice sometimes lacks objectivity because guidance personnel are based in education institutions with a pro-academic bias.
- Relevant labour market information is not always available or readily digestible and comprehensible.

Career guidance: OECD recommendations

- Develop a coherent career guidance profession, independent from psychological counselling and well-informed by labour market information.
- Provide adequate resources for guidance and pro-active delivery.
- Ensure an independent base to support objective career guidance.
- Provide good sources of information about careers and courses.
- Build a comprehensive framework of guidance through partnership with employers.
- Ensure that career guidance initiatives are properly evaluated.

Notes

1. For more information on difficulties in evaluation of career guidance impact see, for example, Maguire and Killeen (2003).
2. The Occupational Outlook Handbook has information on 250 different occupations covering 90% of jobs in the US economy. For each occupation, it provides information on: the training and education needed; earnings; expected job prospects; what workers do on the job; and working conditions. See: www.bls.gov/OCO/.

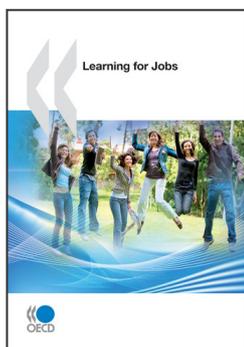
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