

Moving beyond ‘what works’: Using the evidence base in lifelong guidance to inform policy making

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1 Introduction

Career describes the passage of the individual through life, learning and work. Each individual creates their own career by finding ways to exercise their talents within the constraints offered by the education and employment system. Career is pursued at the intersection of the personal and the social and is at once an individual concern (how can I get on) and a societal concern (how can we ensure that the skills and labour needed in society are available and deployed in the right places).

Career guidance developed in the early part of the twentieth century to help individuals manage their careers and to ensure that they aligned with social and labour market needs. It was a tool of social reform designed to bring about a more equitable, harmonious and rational society (Plant/Kjærgård 2016) and is ‘not only a private good: it is a public good too’ (Watts 1998).

Despite its social rationale, career guidance practitioners operate at the level of the individual. Such practitioners often view their role as primarily focused on helping individuals to manage the challenges which they experience as a result of policy changes or shifts in the labour market without taking any perspective on whether the status quo can be or should be changed.

There is a clear and pragmatic attraction to a focus on the individual. Career guidance practitioners have a far better chance of influencing the behaviour of individuals than of changing policy. However, this perspective ignores the fact that career guidance is dependent on public funding and public policy. Furthermore, it also ignores the fact that policy makers can take a variety of stances with respect to career guidance variously supporting it and cutting its resources.

Despite the importance of policy in career guidance it is unclear as to how best to engage policy makers. This chapter seeks to explore how far the articulation of ‘evi-

dence' can engage policy makers. It draws on *The Evidence Base on Lifelong Guidance* (Hooley 2014) and on my participation in a seminar organised by the National Guidance Forum (*nfb*) and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) in Berlin during 2015.

2 The place of evidence in policy conversations

In pluralist democracies policy emerges out of a multifaceted discussion between a range of stakeholders (Birkland 2011) as well as a process of policy lending and borrowing between states (Sultana 2011). Typically, this includes professionals, service users, employers and providers of education as well as academics, researchers and other forms of expert. It is the job of policy makers, both elected and appointed, to sort through these different perspectives, to balance them and to create and implement policies in the interests of society.

Such negotiations are not politically neutral, nor do they necessarily result in policies which align with evidence. Furthermore, policy makers can often arrive at contradictory conclusions which represent neither the evidence nor demonstrate internal consistency (McCarthy/Hooley 2015). Nonetheless there is a growing movement for evidence based policy making (Lunn 2013).

Within Europe there are a range of initiatives which exist to facilitate the development of career guidance policy and the transfer of policy between countries. The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) served this function between 2007–2015 (ELGPN 2015a). Discussions within the ELGPN identified that both the lack of clarity about the evidence base in career guidance and the difficulty of articulating this evidence in ways that policy makers could engage with acted as barriers to the fields development.

Consequently, the ELGPN resolved to develop a guide to the existing evidence on the impact of lifelong guidance, including its educational, economic and employment, and social outcomes. The guide was prepared for ELGPN and was published as *The Evidence Base on Lifelong Guidance* (Hooley 2014). It drew on inter-disciplinary literatures published in a variety of languages and sourced from countries across Europe and beyond.

3 The policy relevance of career guidance

Politicians view career guidance as a policy instrument, rather than an end in itself. Consequently, any articulation of the evidence base in career guidance requires an awareness of the policy areas that it has relevance to.

The OECD (2004) argued that career guidance could impact on economic and labour market policy, on education policy and on social policy. The ELGPN paper built on this identifying the following policy areas that guidance could impact on:

- active ageing
- active labour markets
- addressing youth transitions and unemployment
- economic development
- effective skills utilisation
- efficient investment in education and training
- employee engagement
- European mobility for learning and work
- labour market efficiency
- labour market flexibility/flexicurity
- lifelong learning
- social inclusion
- participation in vocational and higher education
- reducing early school-leaving
- social equity

It also noted that these impacts could potentially be identified at a range of levels. So guidance may help an individual to reassess their skills and invest in education or training, this may have positive impacts on the company that they work for which in turn may lead to a more prosperous local economy. Ultimately enhanced skills utilisation of this kind may have benefits at the national and international level. But, such impacts rely on career guidance existing on a sufficient scale and on the services that exist making an identifiable impact on the policy areas outlined.

4 What is ‘impact’?

One of the challenges in having conversations with policy makers is reaching an agreed definition of what constitutes impact. In Berlin I presented a model of the impacts of career guidance (set out in more detail in Dodd/Hooley 2016) which draws on Kirkpatrick’ (1994) model of training impacts.

The framework begins by establishing the level of resources that have been expended on any intervention (**investment**) and the level at which the intervention has been engaged with by the target audience (**take-up**).

It then focuses on the participants’ experience and whether they have enjoyed participating and found it useful (**reaction**), whether participants have learnt anything (**learning**) and whether they do anything differently as a result of their participation (**behaviour**).

The model then highlights the importance of establishing the longer term effects. Are people who participated more likely to find a job, succeed in their qualifications

or achieve any other concrete outcomes (**results**)? Ultimately it seeks to establish whether the original investment was effective, whether it represents value for money or whether the same impacts could have been achieved in another (cheaper) way (**return on investment**).

The key purpose of this framework is to recognise that it is valuable to identify impacts at every level in the framework. Even the bottom level (investment) provides critical insights as it helps us to distinguish between rhetoric and interventions that have attracted real investment. However, as we move up the framework it becomes increasingly interesting to policy makers as it provides them with more certainty about the outcome of policy initiatives.

Demonstrating higher levels of impact is difficult for any educational intervention and particularly challenging for career guidance as it is frequently intertwined with a range of other education and labour market interventions. So if you have received excellent career guidance in school and then moved onto a high paying job it is not always easy to decide whether to attribute your career success to the schooling or to the career guidance, or indeed to any of a wide range of other personal, social and policy influences. Of course researchers have a range of techniques which are designed to tease out these different influences and identify their relative impacts, but researchers tend to be cautious while policy makers seek certainty. If the evidence is to make a serious intervention into the policy conversation it will need to offer some kind of clear direction.

5 Does career guidance work?

The task for the ELGPN evidence guide was therefore to make some clear and unambiguous statements about career guidance which were rooted in the evidence and to present them in a way which had the potential to influence policy makers.

The core message that is set out in the paper is that there is a considerable evidence base on career guidance. This evidence base demonstrates repeatedly that career guidance does have a range of policy relevant impacts and that such impacts align with the kinds of policy impacts outlined earlier. The paper highlights that the evidence is multi-disciplinary, international and that it provides evidence of all of the levels of impact outlined.

The paper provides examples of evidence which use quantitative (Frenette et al. 2012) and qualitative (Cardoso et al. 2014) methods. It also presents evidence collected using a range of research methods including longitudinal studies (Bimrose et al. 2008) and control trials (Königstedt 2012). Finally, and critically to an overall assessment of the evidence base in the field, it highlights various studies that have sought to synthesise and evaluate the overall evidence base. These include literature reviews (Hughes/Gratton 2009), systematic literature reviews (Christensen/Søgaard Larsen 2011) and statistical meta-analyses (Whiston 1998).

Career guidance is a lifelong activity which takes place in a large number of contexts within both the education and employment systems. The strength of the evidence base varies across each of these contexts, however within education it is probably strongest with respect to schools where the evidence suggests that it contributes to increasing students' engagement and success in school, supporting transitions from school and helping them to establish successful lives and careers (Christensen/Søgaard Larsen 2011; Hooley et al. 2011; Hooley et al. 2014). Beyond schools there is also evidence that career guidance can provide similar benefits for learners in vocational education (Watts 2009), higher education (Cullen 2013; McClair 2010) and adult education (McNair 2015). Beyond school the importance of building employability skills and making a direct transition into the workforce is increasingly pressing, but the limited number and range of studies outside of school-based guidance provide less clarity about efficacy.

There is also a strong evidence base for the use of guidance outside of the education system. Career guidance can be effective in re-engaging unemployed adults in the labour market (Donohue/Patton 1998; Redekopp et al. 2013). There is also evidence that suggests that guidance can support other groups to reattach to the labour market such as those returning to work following periods of injury, illness, caring responsibilities, or other kinds of career breaks (Wilhelm/Robinson 2013) and young people who have failed to successfully attach to the labour market (Sheehy et al. 2011). It is also clear that guidance can have impacts for those who are actually working, increasing employee satisfaction and engagement, and supporting knowledge transfer and cohesion (Hirsh/Jackson 2004). Guidance also supports the geographical and sectoral mobility of workers (Clayton 2005) and helps older workers to maintain their employability and to manage their retirement (Research New Zealand 2006).

6 Lessons for policy makers

An examination of the evidence base in lifelong guidance suggests a number of areas of action for policy-makers and their partners. It suggests that effective career guidance systems focus on the individual by enabling individuals to develop and be supported across the life course whilst recognising their distinctive experiences and diversity; that they support learning and progression by developing individuals' career management skills through a range of interventions organised in a programmatic way; and that they ensure quality through the use of skilled practitioners and robust quality-assurance processes. The ELGPN evidence guide framed the lessons for policy makers as ten key principles that should inform the design of career guidance systems.

1. **Lifelong and progressive.** Many career guidance services are fragmented and confined to a single life stage (McCarthy/Hooley 2015). This is regrettable as ca-

reer is built across a life, and so guidance services need to support this (OECD 2004).

2. **Connected to wider experience.** Career guidance needs to relate to the wider contexts of people's lives. In learning, this includes building a meaningful connection to the curriculum (Christensen/Søgaard Larsen 2011); in work, to wider human resource management processes (Hirsh 2007).
3. **Recognising the diversity of individuals and their needs.** Career is an individual experience and the recognition that individuals bring a range of resources, interests, barriers and concerns to guidance processes needs to be built into the design of the career guidance system (e. g. Hawley et al. 2012).
4. **Involving employers and working people, and providing active experiences of workplaces.** The involvement of employers and working people helps to inform programmes and inspire clients (Kashefpakdel/Percy 2016). Work experience and work-related learning are also critical for individuals' career learning (Gambboa et al. 2013).
5. **Not one intervention, but many.** A diverse range of strategies can be used to support individuals to develop their careers including one-to-one and group work approaches as well as face-to-face, telephone and online approaches (OECD 2004; Hooley et al. 2015). There are also benefits where these interventions are combined and sequenced in a programmatic fashion and are well integrated into wider provision (Gatsby 2014).
6. **Developing career management skills.** Career guidance should empower individuals and to provide them with the personal resources, skills and abilities with which to develop their own careers (Neary et al. 2016).
7. **Holistic and well-integrated into other services.** A wide range of life issues have the potential to impact on individuals' capacity to build effective careers (Patton/McMahon 2014). Thus it is important that individuals' problems are identified holistically and that lifelong guidance services are able where appropriate to refer clients to services where their other needs can be met.
8. **Ensuring professionalism.** The success of guidance processes is influenced by the initial training, continuing professional development, competencies and personal capacities of the professionals that deliver it (Soresi et al. 2004).
9. **Making use of career information.** The capacity to make meaningful decisions about participation in learning and the labour market requires a reliable information base to allow judgements to be made about the outcomes of different actions (Kumar/Arulmani 2014).
10. **Assuring quality and evaluating provision.** Effective services can learn from customer feedback, the observation of outcomes and the wider evidence base.

7 A work in progress

The 10 lessons outlined above provide a coherent and evidence based proposal for policy makers. However, in the drive to offer actionable and clear lessons from the

evidence it is important not to overstate the evidence or to suggest that this is the last word. There is a considerable need to extend the evidence base in a range of ways. In particular, there is a need to broaden the disciplinary and methodological basis of the field. At present it remains too strongly dominated by psychology and there is a need to involve economists, sociologists and education researchers more regularly, as well as value in learning from the health research field. Methodologically there is a need for deeper analysis of administrative data, the greater use of longitudinal studies, randomisation and controls and an exploration of what online data sources might offer. The field also suffers from a lack of statistical meta-analyses which could be useful in drawing together research and establishing more definitive consensus about efficacy.

Policy makers need to view evidence as a cycle of continuous improvement which they have a key role in funding and contributing to as part of service development. To address this the ELGPN paper proposed The Lifelong Guidance Policy Cycle to support a logical process of service improvement based on the best evidence available. Policy makers are encouraged to: (1) understand what is known about the efficacy of lifelong guidance; (2) develop new policies and services; (3) implement new policies and services; and (4) monitor implementation and check quality and efficacy. It moves beyond a conception of evidence as simply being about the evaluation of policy, and encourages policy-makers to use evidence in the development of policy as well as in making summative judgements about its success.

The career guidance evidence base should be understood as useful for informing policy development and implementation, but it is far from definitive. There is a need to address a number of its weaknesses through further research. Critical areas for development include: exploring the optimum timing, duration and mode of delivery of career guidance interventions, the increased use of randomised control trials, further longitudinal work, more use of administrative datasets and (online) big data in the evaluation of interventions and more regular use of statistical meta-analyses as a way of synthesising the literature (Christensen/Søgaard Larsen 2011; Hooley et al. 2011). There is also a need to think more about how the evidence interfaces with practice and particularly to think about practitioner competence in utilising and producing evidence (Neary/Hutchinson 2009).

8 Conclusions

There is an extensive evidence base that can be used to support policy development in career guidance. This evidence base is international, multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral and includes the use of a wide range of research methods. The construction of the ELGPN evidence guide was an attempt to bring this evidence base to the attention of policy makers and to encourage them to utilise it in policy development.

Engaging with policy makers is a complex process. It is important to recognise that the presentation of evidence is only one factor in a complex policy formation process.

When policy makers come to evidence it is likely that they are looking for more definitive answers than evidence can typically provide. There would therefore be value in trying to educate policy makers on not only what the evidence says, but also on how this evidence is created, how it can be usefully used in the policy development process, what its limitations are and how such limitations can be addressed.

I have argued that evidence should be viewed alongside policy rather than prior to it. The two should be viewed as part of the same process of exploration, testing, and development. At present the use of evidence is often episodic and inconsistent which is ultimately to the detriment of all. Policy makers need to use evidence in a more consistent and ongoing way and to take responsibility for the creation of evidence where does not exist. Conversely researchers need to get better at articulating evidence in a way that is accessible to policy makers. The ELGPN evidence guide offers some models which could usefully be built on and developed to support the growth of evidence based career guidance in Europe and beyond.

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