

Paper given by Ms. Patricia Curtin, Assistant Director General, FAS - National Training & Employment Authority, Ireland at the Lifelong Guidance Policies & Systems Conference in Jyväskylä, Finland – 6th November '06.

Guidance Policy Development Within Public Employment Services in the EU.

In 2004, an OECD Report pointed out that “career guidance is often hard to observe directly, it is very diverse in nature, it is often embedded in other activities, and the outcomes it tries to achieve are diverse, diffuse and to some extent idiosyncratic to the needs of the individual” It is, therefore, with some trepidation that I am speaking to you to-day about guidance from such a perspective. Public Employment Services have been in existence for a very long time and guidance has always been a key component of the services we offer.

The guidance offered in the Public Employment Service is a key and central element of life-long guidance. Career guidance in an educational setting, while overlapping with, will be substantially different from career guidance in a Public Employment Service setting. Both strands, however, have a focus on the individual and his/her needs. There is perhaps more counselling as well as educational guidance in the educational environment whereas, vocational guidance is the main emphasis in the Public Employment Service. The pressure of client numbers, time constraints, hugely varying needs of hugely differing clients and the client’s focus on placement into the active labour market, all require us to be innovative in our approach to delivering life-long guidance.

The Public Employment Services have had to respond, and often to respond very rapidly, to changing labour market situations. For example, in my own country – Ireland, we have moved from high unemployment levels of 18% 15 years ago to low levels of 4% to-day and, as a consequence, deal with a much changed client group.

In addition, the European Employment Strategy has had its impact on the work carried out in Public Employment Services with its emphasis on prevention and activation measures. This includes ensuring that “at an early stage of their unemployment spell, all job-seekers benefit from an early identification of their needs and from services such as advice and guidance, job-search assistance and personalised action plans” – as outlined in this Strategy.

The Public Employment Services deal with all groups of people and engage with them in accordance with their needs. For example, a well educated, well qualified person might only need a less intensive one-to-one service whereas someone who has left school early or who is long-term unemployed will clearly need more in-depth guidance and counselling. The service in many Public Employment Services is therefore differentiated to reflect these considerations.

Public Employment Services have a special remit to target certain groups of people for priority action. These are people who are socially excluded and at a greater distance from the labour market. For example, people who are long-term

unemployed, young early school-leavers, people with a disability, lone parents etc. In other words, people who, without receiving such an intervention, may not be able to access meaningful employment on the open labour market. This role is critical and it is right, in my view, that our resources are prioritised here. This role, however, poses particular challenges in a guidance context – there is the practical emphasis and engagement while also ensuring that the client remains the decision maker of his/her choice.

No matter how well resourced a Public Employment Service is, we cannot and, indeed, do not need to provide intensive one-to-one guidance to all clients who present at our offices. Hence the focus on prioritising the provision of personal face-to-face guidance to those most in need of such a service and the need for the ongoing development of ICT supported guidance for those who are more able to help themselves.

The provision of guidance in Public Employment Services usually takes place in the context of helping clients to enter or re-enter the workforce. Increasingly this is combined with some form of activation process which involves a systematic engagement with clients when they reach certain thresholds of unemployment. This presents a challenge in balancing a client-centered guidance approach while, at the same time, encouraging clients to take up available employment. As you are aware, our second important client group is employers and the matching and filling of vacancies. Thus the Public Employment Services have to meet the needs of both of our major customer groups i.e. the job-seeker and the employer. Studies have shown that a personal engagement with a Guidance practitioner is the most effective and efficient method of assisting clients to re-integrate into the labour market, including, for example, active labour market programmes. Good guidance, in this context, should lead to good outcomes.

Last year, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities published a Report by Sultana and Watts entitled “Career Guidance in Europe’s Public Employment Services; Trends and Challenges” This was carried out in collaboration with the Heads of Public Employment Services. The Report provides a very useful synthesis of career guidance in the Public Employment Services across Europe. It also outlines some key challenges for the Public Employment Services in this area. These will be discussed at one of the workshops this afternoon which is to be led by Prof. Sultana.

The Report also particularly highlighted the challenges for Public Employment Services in implementing life-long career guidance. It suggests that “the Public Employment Service has potentially an important role to play as the gateway to life-long learning, helping people to review the direction of their careers, helping them to determine what learning would benefit them and steering them to appropriate institutions or learning packages.” The Public Employment Service has always had a central role in providing life-long guidance. One of the biggest challenges for all guidance practitioners in the future will be to ensure a seamless framework of life-

long guidance which all stakeholders recognise each other's roles. A challenge for the Public Employment Service will be to ensure that such a framework is in place.

However, this is a challenge which the Public Employment Service is taking seriously. To use an example from my own country – Ireland, we are currently exploring the introduction of a comprehensive Careers Portal. The argument for this has been made convincingly by the recent Report of the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs “Careers and Labour Market Information in Ireland” This envisages the development of a Portal which “would contain careers, course and labour market information, organisational/company profiles, a range of assessment tools and testimonials, a guidance helpline and appropriate linkages to related sites”

In addition to school and third level user groups, this site would also be targeted at other less typical user groups, at different stages in the careers continuum, including those who are most distant from the labour market; for example people who were recently laid off work or who are about to be made redundant, people who wish to return to school/education or who wish to change career, older workers or people who have been absent from the workforce for a long period of time or who wish to become self-employed.

The National Guidance Forum, which has been set up in Ireland and which is composed of representatives from FAS, Education and other relevant Government Departments as well as employers and trade unions, also advocated the development of such a Portal. It envisages that it would be supported by a National Learning Line whereby clients could dial a free-phone telephone number to access basic guidance, information and direction.

The FAS Statement of Strategy 2006-2009 also recognises the challenge to explore ways of providing guidance to people in employment, in particular, to those who are in low pay low skill employment. Such people are more vulnerable in an economic down-turn or company re-location and need guidance and information to plan for such an eventuality. We are all well aware that the concept of a “job for life” is long gone. Most people will change jobs and careers many times during their working life. We are filling jobs to-day that we never heard of ten years ago. It will be the same in ten years time. In this context, the need for on-going access to guidance and information and the providers of life-long learning will be key to making these changes and choices. A guidance service for people in employment may become an increasingly important service within the Public Employment Service. This, of course, will have implications for service delivery, opening hours, resources etc.

Over the years, and to help maximise scarce resources, the Public Employment Services have fully embraced the ICT revolution. Large investments have been made, in this area, which have both impacted on the way we deliver our services and, inter-alia, guidance. These developments have included Job-matching facilities, C.V. facilities, Call Service centres, Interactive Guidance tools, Internet access and Case-management systems

This innovative use of ICT has facilitated a wider dispersal of services and even the development of “virtual offices” in some cases. Public Employment Services have, as a result, become more widely dispersed and accessible through the use of modern ICT and interactive tools. Access to a wide range of self-service facilities has also allowed our staff to spend more time with our more vulnerable clients, in a guidance and counselling context.

Many of these ICT innovations have been developed and disseminated on an EU wide basis, thus helping to ensure uniformity of standards and improve access to other labour markets. The development of EUROPASS and the EU Job Mobility Portal are cases in point. For instance, the latter has information on living and working conditions and labour market information in all EU/EEA countries and, in conjunction with the EURES network, is of considerable assistance to worker mobility and the possibility of finding employment and/or training opportunities in another European country. It currently displays all the vacancies available in EU/EEA Public Employment Services with access to over one million vacancies on a daily basis. The European Qualifications Framework, for Life-long Learning, which was adopted by the Commission in September 2006, will provide a common language to describe qualifications and enable individuals and employers to compare qualifications across the EU's diverse education and training system. It also provides an interesting shift in focus from the traditional approach, which emphasises learning inputs, to learning outcomes.

The future is also in the area of further ICT developments. For example, open access to multi-channelled resources, where clients can interact on a virtual basis with guidance practitioners, and linkages between the Public Employment Services and other life-long learning/guidance practitioners.

We also need to keep responding to the training and development needs of our staff, who are operating in a constantly changing labour market and which is essential to providing more effective guidance interventions for our clients. Many countries have developed excellent training programmes to meet these needs. For example, In Ireland we have developed a phased/tiered approach to professional development through externally validated Certificate, Diploma and Higher Diploma in Adult Guidance and Counselling in conjunction with our national university sector. The Diplomas are recognised as full professional qualifications in guidance and counselling. Appropriate training and ongoing professional development of staff should be informed by, inter alia, the specific context within which the guidance service is delivered i.e. the client groups, the nature and range of services delivered etc. A set of core competencies should also be developed in this context. The National Guidance Forum in Ireland has completed some work in this area and it has produced a set of Quality Guidelines for Providers. I am sure that this could also be shared on an EU wide basis.

Guidance is often seen in the context of a one-to-one personal interaction. Another area which the Public Employment Services have developed is group guidance. This

will need careful consideration and is probably best used following an initial one-to-one discussion and/or with targeted client groups. Some of the benefits, apart from the obvious one of more economic use of resources, include peer support, sharing of experience, mutual learning and the potential to motivate clients.

Best Practice Guidelines for Guidance Providers are also essential in ensuring that the client receives an appropriate service. Our staff in the Public Employment Services are under increasing pressure to provide a variety of services, including guidance, to an expanding client group. This was also highlighted in the Report by Sultana and Watts. They need appropriate supports from Managers and others in the context of their guidance role. Case Conferencing/Peer Support may have a beneficial and key role to play in this regard.

Professional external support and supervision in the guidance context is, I believe, also essential in further supporting our staff. The funding of an emergency “support-line” could also be part of this external and professional technical guidance support service. In Ireland, we are currently in the process of developing this support service for our staff.

All guidance service providers, including the Public Employment Services, need to develop Quality Assurance Guidelines as part of a commitment to providing a quality service to clients. I suggest that this is best done in conjunction with appropriate external bodies and as part of an overall Quality Management System.

An integral part of such a system is the development of a systematic way of obtaining client feed-back through questionnaires/comment cards or by external surveys, or a combination of both. Some Public Employment Services are already doing this. The key point is that real client feed-back is obtained; the results analysed and acted upon in the interest of improving our services.

In conclusion, Public Employment Services are central to the provision of life-long guidance in a very specific context. It is important, therefore, that we recognise the limits and the positioning of our service in life-long guidance. There will be a clear need for on-going development of ICT systems to both improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our services and to help to free up our staff resources to spend more time with those clients who need our assistance to help them find suitable employment. It is important that our staff are aware of all other relevant services and have the connections to make an appropriate referral. As primarily labour market organisations, the Public Employment Services cannot be expected to solve all issues and problems on their own. There is a need for ongoing and greater collaboration across all relevant providers of guidance and other relevant services. Such collaboration is essential if we are to deliver a meaningful client-centred life-long guidance service in the future.

We also need to consider further how we provide life-long guidance services which parallel a life-long learning cycle which, in time, supports a life-long working

environment of job/career changes, to meet the needs of a continually evolving labour market.