European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network

Work Package 2: Strengthening Representative Structures at National Level

Peer Learning Event held in Vienna, 9-10 April 2008

REFLECTION NOTE

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1.   Context

1.1   This Reflection Note is based on a two-day peer-learning event held in Vienna on 9-10 April. The event was attended by 40 people, including representatives of 23 countries that are members of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN). It included plenary sessions, working-group sessions, and also consultation sessions for those who wished to pose questions to specific country representatives.

1.2   As preparation for the meeting, a questionnaire was sent to all participants, along with a draft of a manual for policy-makers and stakeholders on establishing and developing National Lifelong Guidance Policy Forums, commissioned by CEDEFOP.[1] This Reflection Note incorporates an analysis of the questionnaire responses. It is written as a supplement to the manual.

2.   Why national forums are important

2.1   Lifelong guidance is inherently 'transversal', in the sense that it crosses different sectors, in two main respects:

- In all countries, guidance provision is distributed across many different sectors, under different jurisdictions (schools, tertiary education, public employment services, employers, the voluntary sector, the private sector).

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[1] The manual, entitled *Coming Together: Establishing and Developing Lifelong Guidance Policy Forums*, was written by Søren Kristensen, John McCarthy and Tony Watts. It is to be published by CEDEFOP in advance of the conference on guidance to be held under the French Presidency at Lyon in September 2008.

- One of the key roles of such services is to help individuals to move effectively across sectors in the course of their career development.

Accordingly, effective policies for lifelong guidance need to involve a number of different authorities and stakeholders. A National Lifelong Guidance Forum is a mechanism for bringing these bodies together, in order to produce more effective policy development and more harmonised service provision.

2.2 Developing lifelong guidance policies is likely to be easier and more effective where there is an integrated policy for lifelong learning, linked to sustaining employability. In most countries, however, policy development for education and for employment is divided across two or more ministries. It is accordingly important that all the relevant ministries are involved in National Lifelong Guidance Forum structures.

2.3 National forums are also critical to the success of the ELGPN, in two respects:

- If a critical mass of countries establish national forums, the ELGPN is likely to work much more effectively.
- Conversely, one of the key roles of the ELGPN is to support countries that wish to establish or develop national forums, to enable them to work more effectively.

2.4 It is accordingly significant that 'Strengthening Representatives Structures at National Level' is one of the two Work Packages to which the ELGPN has chosen to give initial priority. It seems likely that it will be a continuing activity within the lifespan of the ELGPN, as experiences of establishing and sustaining such structures grows across the network's member countries.

2.5 This is particularly the case because the task is not an easy one. It is a subtle and complex process, with many dilemmas and potential pitfalls. This is demonstrated by the fact that the three countries with the longest history of such national forums – Denmark, Poland and the UK – have all experienced recent difficulties: Denmark has replaced its previous forum (RUE) with a 'dialogue forum'; the UK currently does not have a forum; and Poland does not have one with an official status.

2.6 Yet the achievements of previous forums have been considerable. And the needs to which national forums can respond are widely recognised. So the prize is great.

3. Key messages

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3.1 The CEDEFOP manual (see 1.2 above) does not include any conclusions and recommendations. It does however identify ten 'key messages', defined as 'propositions that merit consideration in the process of establishing and developing national forums'. These relate to the need:

(a) To make a clear connection to lifelong learning and employability strategies.
(b) To establish shared definitions and terminology.
(c) To be selective in determining those invited to participate.
(d) To have clearly identified tasks and roles.
(e) To have strong champions, and strong commitment from key parties.
(f) To define clearly the relationship with the government.
(g) To have a secretariat which is independent or at least ring-fenced.
(h) To avoid mission drift.
(i) To be aware of the risks of role conflict.
(j) To strive to work from the viewpoint of the individual citizen.

3.2 In the questionnaire circulated in advance of the peer-learning event, participants were asked:

- Which of these messages reflect your experience in your country?
- Which messages do not reflect experience in your country?
- Are there additional messages from your country that seem equally or more important?
- Which messages seem exceptionally relevant / not relevant for you or your country – and why?

During the event, too, the focal point for the workshop sessions on the first day was a critical review of the key messages.

3.3 In general, the ten key messages were endorsed both by the questionnaire responses and by the discussions at the meeting. It was recognised, however, that different key messages were likely to be salient at different stages of development. Thus, for example:

- For those still considering whether or how to establish a national forum, issues (h) and (i) were likely to be unimportant.
- On the other hand, for those with well-established forums, issues (h) and (i) might be very important.
- For those in the early stages of managing a forum, all ten key messages were likely to be important.

3.4 The main issues which, it was suggested, are not adequately reflected in the key messages are:

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- Funding. This is implicit in (f) and (g), but could be made more explicit.
- The need for regular evaluation of the forum's effectiveness. This is implicit in (d), but again could be more explicit.

3.5 A number of other suggestions were made for elaborating particular key messages. For example:

- Message (a) could be extended to include social equity and social inclusion, and also such broad issues as globalisation.
- Message (j) could be extended to emphasise the need to find ways of activating the voice of the citizen, including service users.

3.6 There were also suggestions for grouping the key messages in clusters. For example, it was suggested that:

- Messages (j), (a) and (d) relate to aims and objectives.
- Messages (e)-(g) and (c) relate to organisational issues.
- Messages (b), (h) and (i) relate to operational or management issues.

3.7 These comments can all be taken into account if and when the manual is revised (see 9.1 below).

4. A core issue

4.1 On the basis of the questionnaire responses and meeting discussions, there would seem to be strong case for viewing one issue – the relationship of the national forum to the government – as pivotal, in the sense that the options open for resolving many of the other issues, and the ways in which they are likely to be addressed, stem from it.

4.2 In some countries, the process has been 'top-down', with the national forum being set up by the government, possibly through legislation (e.g. Denmark). It may be established with two different purposes:

- As a dialogue forum only – as in Denmark.
- As having a recognised role in policy formation – as in Austria.

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4.3 In other countries, on the other hand, the process has been 'bottom-up', with the national forum being established on the initiative of a number of non-governmental organisations. Here there is an important distinction between:

- Such a forum which is recognised by the government – as in Germany and Malta.
- Such a forum which is not recognised by the government – as, currently, in Poland.

Where the government actively supports the concept of a forum, but prefers it to be created and managed independently, it may support the forum through sending observers and through project funding.

4.4 Decisions on such matters are likely to be influenced by:

- The traditions of policy-making processes within the country concerned.
- In particular, whether there is a tradition of involving the social partners and other stakeholder bodies in these processes.

Forums can also, of course, be used by governments for other purposes than policy-making: for example, for developing quality-assurance systems.

4.5 Issues that arise include:

- Where the forum is established by one government ministry, the active participation of other government ministries may not be assured.
- Where the forum is established by the government, its relationship to government policy is likely to be clear but possibly constrained. Where it is not, key issues for the forum are: how it can seek to influence government policy; and the extent to which it can criticise the government and still be recognised and (in whatever forms are appropriate) supported by it.
- Where the forum is established by the government, such issues as funding and selective participation are likely to be assured. Where it is not, these issues are likely to be more problematic.

4.6 In any future revision of the manual, it might be useful to identify a number of different models along the lines of the four outlined in 4.2 and 4.3 above, and to use case-studies to indicate the way they influence the resolution of other issues. This would extend the somewhat atomistic treatment of these issues in the current edition.

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5. Developmental models

5.1 Similarly, there is a case to address developmental issues related to building and sustaining a national forum. Such issues include:

- The sequencing of steps in the *initiation* of a forum.
- How to build in *evaluation* strategies to support the forum's evolution.
- Whether it is best for a forum to tackle a wide range of tasks simultaneously, or to *sequence* them.
- Whether forums need periodically to change their shape and nature if they are to be *sustainable*.

5.2 On the first of these (initiation), it is clear that there are a variety of different approaches. Considerations include:

- The first steps that are made may significantly determine what emerges.
- If the first steps are not thought through, they may severely limit the chances of a successful outcome.
- The nature, status and perceived motives of the body/bodies seen as being the initiator/s may strongly influence the response of other bodies to what is proposed.
- In some cases, there may be existing organisational structures which are seen as providing an appropriate base for the forum, and this may influence the options that are likely to be considered as feasible and/or desirable.
- There may be merit in starting with building co-operation around specific tasks with a fixed time-frame (as in Finland), rather than moving immediately to building a new infrastructure.
- In some countries, a forum may be seen as a means of developing a lifelong guidance policy; in others, as a component of such a strategy at the implementation stage.
- In several existing cases, the OECD Career Guidance Policy Review played a significant role in the initiation process. For this and other reasons, there could be merit in encouraging OECD to carry out a further such review in a few years' time.
- The initiation process may be short or long; if the latter, it may have productive spin-off effects in its own right. In other words, the process may be as important as the structure that emerges from it.

5.3 On the second issue (evaluation), there is a strong case for building a learning culture within the forum whereby it regularly and systematically reflects on the effectiveness both of its processes and of its outcomes. The ELGPN could play a useful supportive role here. It might be fruitful at a future event to share information on evaluation and reflection strategies adopted within the forums established to date.

5.4 On the third issue (sequencing), an interesting question is whether it is better:

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- to carry out a wide range of tasks simultaneously, on the grounds that they are closely inter-connected – as in Ireland, for example; or
- to tackle one or two tasks at a time, so as to focus energies and make it possible to build on success.

5.5 On the fourth issue (sustainability), the evidence of the countries with the longest history of lifelong guidance forums (see 2.5 above) suggests that such forums are unlikely to prove permanent. It would be useful to learn from what happened to the forums in these countries, and the developmental stages through which they progressed. It may be that in terms of the development of lifelong guidance systems, forums are more necessary at some stages than at others, and need to take different forms at different stages. Changes of government may also require organisational changes to be made.

6.   Other issues

6.1 A number of other issues arose in the course of the questionnaire responses and meeting discussions.

6.2 One is the issue of conflict and consensus. There may on some issues be conflicting views:

- Between government departments.
- Between government and social partners.
- Between educational organisations and employer organisations.
- Between guidance professional associations and other stakeholders.
- Between guidance professionals in different sectors.

One of the roles of a national forum is to develop mutual understanding, on the basis of which consensus can be extended. An independent chair can be helpful in managing conflicts and building consensus.

6.3 A second is the importance of cultural differences. In some cultures, clear objectives are viewed as desirable, to achieve results; in others, they may be viewed as unduly confining, and ambiguity seen as creative (or at least potentially so).

6.4 A third is that in addition to the formal structures and measured outcomes, one of the benefits of national forums may be the informal contacts that it fosters (the 'discussions in the corridor').

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6.5 A fourth is the potential value in some cases of 'nested structures' as a way of resolving dilemmas. An example is Germany, where the concept of a separate but linked 'Kuratorium' was established as a means of involving one of the ministries and one of the social partners, neither of which were willing to join the national forum itself.

6.6 A fifth is the relationship of national forums to regional and local forums. This is an issue of particular significance in countries in which substantial powers in relation to education and/or employment are devolved to regional or local authorities. In some such cases, it may be easier to start at regional/local level, and then explore what complementary national mechanism might be needed.

7. Essential components of a national forum

7.1 Towards the end of the peer-learning meeting, it was unanimously agreed that for a National Lifelong Guidance Policy Forum to be recognised as such by the ELGPN, it should satisfy four requirements:

- It should involve, or at least be recognised by, the government.
- Its membership should not be confined to government departments but should include other key stakeholders.
- It should embrace the fields of education and employment.
- It should cover both guidance for young people and guidance for adults.[2]

8. Implications for the ELGPN

8.1 It was agreed that WP3 should be a continuing theme within the ELGPN work programme.

8.2 Consideration should be given to a further peer-learning event on this theme during 2009 or 2010. Issues which might be addressed included:

- Further sharing of experience.

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[2] It was noted that in some cases 'lifelong learning' is used as a synonym for 'adult learning'. This should not suffice.

- The role of regional and local forums, and their relationship with national forums.
- Other co-ordination mechanisms that can be adopted in place of a national forum (e.g. the inter-ministerial delegation in France).
- Evaluation and reflection strategies adopted by national forums.

It was suggested that it might be helpful for each participating country to conduct a SWOT analysis in relation to its provision, in advance of the meeting.

8.3 It was suggested by one working group that consideration should be given to making the existence of a national forum a precondition of receiving EU funding for guidance-related activities. But others objected that a national forum should be viewed as a means, not an end. It was pointed out that a country could have a lifelong guidance strategy without a forum, and a forum without a strategy. It was the strategy that mattered.

8.4 It was proposed that the four principles outlined in 7.1 as essential components of a national forum should also be used to define the essential requirements for a country's participation in the ELGPN (regardless of whether it had a national forum or not):

- Its representation in the ELGPN should involve, or at least be recognised by, the government.
- Its representation should not be confined to government departments but should include other key stakeholders.
- Its representation should embrace the fields of education and employment.
- Its representation should cover both guidance for young people and guidance for adults.

8.5 It was noted that one of the key roles of the ELGPN should be to ensure that lifelong guidance is fully reflected in relevant EU policy processes and policy documents. This role was played by the previous Expert Group on Lifelong Guidance, particularly in relation to EU education and training policies. In line with the principles adopted for national forums (see 3.1a and 3.5 above), it should be extended to cover EU employment and social-inclusion strategies too.

9. Implications for CEDEFOP

9.1 To support the activities of the ELGPN and its member countries, it was suggested that CEDEFOP should give consideration to updating the manual, perhaps every two years. Some of the issues discussed in Sections 3-7 above could be incorporated in future editions. In the meantime, if the current edition could be made available in a web-based version alongside the print version, the

ELGPN website might be used to enable ELGPN members to insert comments and additional examples of interesting practice.

9.2 Linked to this, CEDEFOP might also give consideration to a research project to evaluate national forums in a more systematic way. Such a project might include:

- Detailed case-studies of countries selected to exemplify a number of different models, e.g. those suggested in 4.2-4.3 above.
- Detailed case-histories of countries with long experience of national lifelong guidance forums (see 5.5 above).
- Measurement of impact.

It might also include attention to other areas of public policy where cross-sectoral forums have been adopted at national level, supported by international organisations.

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