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Participants:

Chair: Jennifer WANNAN, DG EAC

Speakers:

- Raimo VUORINEN, Coordinator ELGPN
- Mika LAUNIKARI, CEDEFOP

Rapporteur: Soledad IGLESIAS, Ministry of Education, Spain

CAREER GUIDANCE IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEMS

1. Introduction

In the last few years vocational education and training (VET) has been undergoing major changes to adapt to the European strategy implemented since the Copenhagen Process to improve the performance, quality and desirability of vocational education and training in Europe. Since 2002 the process has contributed signally to improving VET's visibility and profile in Europe. The process is now endeavouring to respond to the new challenges posed by the Knowledge Society, which is characterised by intensive use of new technologies for learning, innovation and knowledge transfer.

A concerted policy is required, one that can improve how human capital is trained, with the following purposes in mind:

- To guarantee *horizontal competences* acquisition, that is, the acquisition of competences that are new but at the same level as the competences the learner already possesses.
- To guarantee *vertical competences* acquisition, that is, competences at a higher level than the competences the learner already possesses.
- To make it easier to capitalise on competences acquired in different national and European contexts, thus guaranteeing competence acknowledgement and accreditation and facilitating citizen mobility.

In this context, VET needs a career guidance system that can guarantee that citizens have everything they need to make an informed decision when choosing training and vocational pathways. While career guidance is indispensable in any situation, in times of crisis it plays a fundamental and strategic role. The slowdown in economic growth is causing a rise in unemployment. A fundamental line of action in response to this situation is to strengthen support mechanisms to increase the opportunities of access to vocational education and training and to jobs. This can be done by means of career guidance, not just for the short term (reintegration into the workplace), but for the medium and long term as well.

Now more than ever, it is evident that all diagnoses of the job opportunities the business world has to offer and all analyses of trainees' capabilities and needs of trainees have got to be closely linked together in vocational education and training, in order to guarantee the success of VET.

At the same time, career guidance must strike a balance between two roles. First, there is the role of career guidance as a vehicle for economic growth; as such, it is harnessed to global socio-economic and socio-

occupational requirements. Second, there is the role of career guidance in living up to the individualistic values of the last few generations of western culture from the standpoint of personal career development theory; these values ask for the achievement of personal fulfilment and happiness.

2. Career Guidance and Vocational Education and Training

Thus far, career guidance has clearly received less attention in vocational education and training than in general academic studies. It is assumed that decisions about training and vocational pathways have already been taken by the time a person embarks on VET.

That assumption is based on an obsolete conception of career guidance and of what is taught in VET:

- Career guidance based on one-off counselling sessions held at critical decision-making moments;
- VET in which the decision to follow a given vocational training pathway necessarily implies the end of the learning period of life and immediate incorporation into the job market, without any possibility of flexibility in training pathways or reintegration into more-academic channels.

The debate must be approached on the initial premises of the following concepts:

The widely accepted concept is that **career guidance** consists of “services and activities intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers” (OECD, 2004). Some thought may be given to three differentiated aspects of these services and activities (Watts, 2009):

1. Individualized counselling for individuals or small groups, to help them take decisions about training pathways (career counselling). So that the individuals receiving counselling continue as real participants in the process, it is vital to ensure that the focuses used are adapted to each individual's skill level, needs and interests.
2. Development of competences enabling an individual to manage his or her own training and career, as part of the curriculum (career education).
3. Information about education, occupations and the job market, increasingly drawn from on-line and web-based resources (career information).

When we talk about **VET**, we mean the term to include, as established by the OECD, “education and training programmes designed for, and typically leading to, a particular job or type of job”. VET therefore includes

1. Initial VET, with curricula designed initially for the profile of a young citizen (under 30 years of age) at the outset of his or her career, usually before entering the job market.
2. Continuing VET, which includes, for example, training given by employers or other providers (in response to job market needs) and retraining in careers in the same or a different occupational sector.

Envisioning VET as such a wide field has consequences for the consolidation of an integrated VET system. In such a system, the education and training on offer depend on diverse stakeholders and institutions, but citizens must be allowed to circulate in any direction within the system.

It must be made clear that guidance must be incorporated as a part of VET with the same guarantee of service quality as found in the guidance given to students in general education pathways.

3. The Role of Career Guidance in Vocational Education and Training

Career guidance, seen as a social asset, affords public as well as private benefits:

- Educational benefits: Linked with enhancement of the education and training system's efficiency and better management of the VET system's relationship with the job market. If individuals were to decide what they ought to learn on the basis of quality information plus their own interests, capabilities and aspirations, investments in VET systems would be more profitable.
- Job-related benefits: Linked to closer accommodation between supply and demand and to management adjustments for change. If people are helped to find jobs that take advantage of their full potential and satisfy their expectations and goals, they will be more motivated and are likely to be more productive. In addition, the difficulties stemming from overqualification would be avoided.
- Equity benefits: Linked to support for equal opportunities and social inclusion. Guidance must work to accompany disadvantaged or at-risk groups in their aspirations and to support them in their access to educational, training and employment opportunities, from the standpoint of the principles of inclusive education.

In the case of VET, the first point, educational benefits, is particularly important. If VET is to prepare students for employment, students must have:

- A clear idea of their own skills and preferences.

- Information about the job market, so they can avoid occupations that will not meet their expectations (e.g., jobs whose demand is dwindling, low-wage jobs, working conditions different from what students expect) and so they can adjust their training preferences optimally to the true short- and long-term outlooks of the working world.

Students must be supported by quality job market information. Career guidance thus underwrites the quality of the processes whereby students are enabled to choose and take well-informed decisions, as an additional bridge between education and training (VET) and the world of work.

Besides, vocational education and training must bring into its curricula not only the development of certain vocational competences (skills), but also work habits and attitudes necessary for getting and keeping a job.

In that sense, both facets of career guidance –helping students explore the world of work, and helping them develop career management skills, become self aware, develop decision-making skills and manage transitions– must form part of the planning of VET curricula.

The relationship between career guidance and VET ought to be two-way. Career guidance's capability to furnish statistical data and to extract quantitative and qualitative information ought to be used to feed into the VET system and enable improvements to be made in guidance management as well as the design of the training on offer.

4. Key Points and Contents of Career Guidance in Vocational Education and Training Systems

When placed in the framework of VET, career guidance must act as a “continuum” made up of actions linked to preventive objectives, corrective objectives and coping objectives to deal with the many different transitions that people undergo.

The points at which career guidance is important for the quality and efficacy of VET can be defined. Each of the stages of guidance action can be differentiated from the rest.

We will attempt to give a brief description of the rules, the types of transitions and the key contents in guidance at each point along the continuum.

4.1. Before the vocational education and training option is chosen

This phase is linked to guidance provided as an ongoing service. In this phase, it is very important to provide preventive guidance, making resources available to respond to difficulties as soon as they appear.

If guidance services are already set up as a normal link in the chain of any decision-making stage, guidance will have more effective results, because a climate of trust will have been created beforehand.

When the person to be counselled is not coming to VET from the education system, guidance must begin by establishing the desired personalised relationship. It can do so by finding the person's needs and aspirations and by conducting a continuing process of reviewing the person's progress in learning and subsequent career integration/reintegration.

This is the point at which guidance must facilitate transitions from two different spheres:

- a) When the person comes from the education system:
 - from compulsory education to VET
 - from general post-compulsory education (baccalaureate) to VET
- b) When the person comes from the working world:
 - from the employed working world to VET
 - from the unemployed working world to VET

In each of these cases, the guidance practitioners involved are also set in different spheres. Coordination between counsellors in the educational sphere and counsellors in the employment sphere is essential in order to provide quality service regardless of who provides the service.

Several rules should be applied:

- Before taking this decision, all young people and/or adults must be made aware of all the training and educational options available to them.
- Young people and/or adults interested in VET options must be given access to professional counselling, with high-quality information about professions and occupations, in order to guarantee that their decisions are based on full, objective information. Account must be taken of the fact that a great many of the VET options are closely linked to certain occupations, so career guidance is more important for VET students than for students who are continuing in general education, because VET students' decisions can have more-telling consequences for their career.

In this sense, there is a growing idea of the need to give students some introduction to the world of work before students take any decisions. This exposure to the occupational world is envisaged with

intentions other than those of preparation for an occupation. Some European countries have already taken initiatives to furnish their compulsory education programmes with modules that give an approach or exposure to the working world.

- When dealing with adults from the working world, it is important to consider what skills they have that can be transferred to other sectors. It is also important to help them analyse their situation and run a diagnostic procedure to find professional competences they have gained through work experience and could have accredited and recognised through public procedures.

At this point, career guidance has to help students define their occupational objectives according to their own interests, skills and preferences, selecting the type of occupation that interests them and the education and training associated with that occupation. Career guidance programmes have to include the following elements:

- Quality information on the job market: job market information, approaches to the vocational world, occupational forums, etc.
- Quality information about educational and training options: Education and VET programmes available, access requirements and possible subsequent training pathways, qualifications earned, occupations open to those who have completed the programme (including the nature of the work, the wages/pay level, jobs in the activity sector directly related with the person's VET option, possibilities for moving into other activity sectors using the skills and competences acquired in the option in question, etc.), projected demand for the occupations at issue, etc.

The development of these programmes must be backed up by advanced tools in new technologies, which increase accessibility and preserve the homogeneity of programme processes no matter where they are performed. The programmes must also have real-time job market information and medium-term projections.

4.2. After the VET option has been chosen (whether initial or continuing VET)

Career guidance must be available and present throughout the entire course of training and at the end of training as well. This final point will be all the more important when the design of VET studies allows progressive specialisation.

4.2.1. During VET studies

At this point, career guidance has to address transitions:

- between different VET studies (changing VET pathways)
- from VET studies in a general job family to specialised studies within the chosen branch
- from unfinished VET studies to the working world

Firstly, career guidance placed throughout VET studies has to incorporate everything related with three elements:

- Careers linked to the occupations associated with each type of training, including self-employment opportunities and entrepreneurial initiative, as well as opportunities for mobility;
- Decision-making and career management programmes, including support for transferring learning within the same sector and/or between sectors.
- Attention to the learning process of each student, in order to propose preventive measures to prevent potential drop-outs from quitting.

One of the challenges facing VET systems is how to combine its offer of the specific vocational competences (skills) that meet employers' immediate needs with a series of transferable competences that make their holder employable and facilitate continuing training and mobility between jobs.

It is in that set of transferable competences where lies the terrain that VET and career guidance share; and it is there where a way must be found to work on skills related with employability and career management. Career management competences are increasingly becoming a key factor for lifelong training, because they enable a person to identify and define the objectives the person has decided to pursue throughout his or her career. Career management competences must enable each person to know him- or herself, his or her skills, competences and aspirations, and get the most out of them. Career management competences must enable people to identify the information that is of interest to them and to determine, throughout their working life, when to turn to guidance practitioners in search of extra help. The skill set involved is a telling one for citizens' personal and career maturity, a skill set that enables people to take decisions in order to gain access to and operate in the job market, often shortening the transition from education to work.

Career guidance services must guarantee that each trainee considers all the possible options, both in his or her initial pathway and in other pathways more conducive to personal expectations and interests at a given time. Career guidance must make it easier for students to grasp the implications of changing their mind and help students get the most out of the training they have already received.

Some studies in the European environment (Hungary) indicate that more than one-third of the students of initial VET would choose a different occupation if they could start all over again. That is why it is important for career guidance in VET to enable students to gain information and contact with alternative jobs.

Often (and this is the case in Spain) compulsory VET curricula include internships. Career guidance should be especially ready at hand in this period, to enable students to put their knowledge of the job market and training opportunities into action by mapping out their own training and occupational pathways and putting into practice and developing career management skills.

4.2.2. After finishing VET studies

It seems essential at this point for career guidance to help graduates cope with the multiple possible transitions:

- from VET to the job market as an employee
- from VET to the job market/self-employment
- from VET to other studies (to other VET studies of the same level; from intermediate-level VET to advanced-level VET; from VET to baccalaureate; from VET to university)

We must bear in mind that, at these times of crisis, the number of people who fail to make a successful transition to employment may rise. Accordingly, special attention must be paid to this issue.

It seems important for career guidance to be available at the end of vocational training to help students review their training pathways and find jobs that fit their interests and goals.

This includes flexibility between occupations, where account must be taken of changes in job supply and demand as well as changes in individuals' goals and preferences.

Access to career guidance services is especially desirable in flexible pathways, where there are ways of transferring horizontally and vertically between training paths, whether in occupational education or more-academic education. Any improvement of vocational training systems that involves greater flexibility in this sense will not have the anticipated results unless it is guaranteed that these pathways are not perceived as roads from which there is no return.

In addition, according to the first revision of the OECD report, graduates of continuing VET need not only the specific skills enabling them to make a seamless transition into the job market, but also transferable skills applicable to their career, to give them mobility between employers and between occupations.

Both individual and social benefits are involved, since the profiles in demand in production markets call for flexible, adaptable employees.

It seems essential for there to be a guidance service that guarantees easy access and information quality.

5. Implications for Career Guidance Practitioners

Career guidance in the realm of VET must allow for the fact that most guidance practitioners have not been educated in the VET system themselves, but have instead followed academic pathways whose initial training closely resembles the training for a degree in psychology.

To guarantee that quality guidance is provided in VET, account must be taken of the fact that initial and ongoing guidance counsellor training must include a significant focus on gathering, interpreting and using job market information. More attention must therefore be paid to market-related employment issues. Perhaps this realm should be addressed by the institutional authorities in charge of designing continuing training for guidance practitioners.

Today the multitude and complexity of the information to be considered in order to provide quality counselling in VET requires interdisciplinary work with a team of professionals specialising in different facets. If career guidance is really going to incorporate everything citizens have to take into account, it is essential to make progress in coordinating guidance practitioners in the educational and job-related realms. In addition, many VET teachers have some previous experience in the business sector related with the subjects they teach, or they combine teaching with work in the same sector. Such teachers can therefore be used in a complementary way to work with guidance practitioners on career guidance issues that are linked with the production side of each sector. This perspective must be incorporated as a matter of course into the way curricula address each area of training.

Furthermore, it behoves us to reflect on the synergies that guidance practitioners in public services can establish with other initiatives in this field, such as NGOs, youth associations and trade unions. Initiatives such as these may be able more easily to reach people who are reticent to seek aid of a more institutional nature.

Consideration must also be given to the role families ought to play (in the case of youth) and the relationship counsellors ought to establish with families. Families are among the structures with the most influence in two areas: motivation and support to avoid premature quitting of school, and the training and career choices young people make.

6. Issues for Reflection

- *It would be useful to conduct a study of data on the students who choose vocational education channels after compulsory schooling as opposed to those who choose further general education. What are their profiles? What factors go into their choice? What part do institutional educational structures, inter alia counselling systems, play in the decision? Do counselling practices implemented at that point in time (individualized counselling for individuals or small groups, to help them take decisions about training pathways) uphold the criteria of equity, objectivity and equal opportunities, or do they help assign students to pathways according to narrow criteria and reinforce the marginalisation of vocational options?*
- *How can career guidance help students choose which area to specialise in, within the production sector for which they have trained?*
- *What is the “rightful place” of career education in connection with vocational and educational training? What advantages are there in incorporating career education right into the curriculum as another curricular component, instead of providing career guidance as something “parallel” to training?*
- *What contents should career guidance focus on at different points in the process (before VET studies are chosen, during VET studies, at the end of vocational training)?*
- *What can career guidance do to improve the quality of VET and help it play a central role in the training of human capital?*
- *What are the initial and/or continuing education and training needs of guidance practitioners in order to provide quality in the realm of VET?*
- *How can career guidance work to make incorporation into the job market as easy as possible for VET graduates? Can any specific guidance action be identified that can shorten the transitions between training and work?*
- *What role should the action of guidance services play with employers?*

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