

1. Introduction

1.1. The field visit, which brought together 23 Work Package 1 participants from 17 countries, together with two ELGPN consultants as well as several French presenters, focused on policies and practices used in different contexts and sectors in order to assess the learning of Career Management Skills. The programme for the field visit consisted in a series of presentations, discussions and workshops on the use of portfolios as a tool to assess learning, with particular attention being given to the elaboration of examples of interesting practice. The programme also included a visit to the Career Guidance services at the University of Toulouse 3, permitting the WP1 members to extend their understanding of the implementation of career programmes within the higher education sector—a concern that had also been addressed during another WP1 field visit in Lisbon, and which has been consistently promoted by the FEDORA representative who also participated in the Toulouse peer learning event. The field visit programme included further development of the WP1 contribution to the ELGPN tool kit, with presentations being made by the two task forces responsible for the development of a CMS Catalogue, as well as of a study of the factors that impact on the successful implementation of career guidance policies.

1.2. This Reflection Note focuses on the insights that were communicated through the presentation of the different portfolio initiatives by representatives from Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, and Germany. The goal is not to provide a summary of each of these initiatives, which are readily available in the presentations made by the different participants, all of which have been uploaded on the ELGPN website. Rather, the goal is to tease out, in a synthetic manner, a number of key issues that relate to assessment of/for learning CMS, and to make a series of reflections that could support the development of both policies and practices in the different Member States.

2. Reflections on the use of Portfolios in assessing Career Learning

2.1. Throughout the two days, there was a broad (if unspoken) consensus around the fact that career learning should be assessed. The need to assess learning was therefore not contested, though there were important discussions around the manner in which such assessment should be conceived, particularly in relation to the problem of reducing CMS to 'mere' competencies. These tend to emphasise 'savoir' and 'savoir faire', but not the 'savoir être' dimension of a rounded education. Some concerns were also expressed that the emphasis on employability tended to shift the focus of education on 'immediacy', what worked in the short-term to enable individuals to enter the world of

work, with other aspects of their formation, such as active citizenry, or competences in creativity and critical analysis, being given second place, if they were considered at all. One way to synthesise such discussions is to note that career learning portfolios can be used in a merely technocratic manner, responding to the needs of employability and immediacy, or can instead become critical tools that support reflexivity, helping to make sense of knowledge and experience. From this perspective, a true *projet de vie* would also engage critical reflections on what it means to be truly human in the current historical conjuncture.

2.2. Portfolios were generally considered by the seminar participants to be an appropriate strategy to assess career learning, in that they facilitate critical reflection on the part of learners (whether young or adult), focused on process rather than merely on outcomes (and where thus superior, in this sense, to EUROPASS, which is a more static instrument), and provided opportunities for learners to interact with others (e.g. peers, career teachers, parents, employers) in order to engage in meaningful career conversations. Furthermore, portfolios helped to centralize information and reflection in one 'physical' space, enabling coherence in the learner's thinking and research relating to employment.

2.3. It should be noted that all presenters described and discussed portfolios, and none of the WP1 members reported the use of any other assessment strategy from the range of assessment modes that are available, and which were covered in some detail in the Briefing Paper distributed prior to the peer learning visit. While all WP1 members focused on portfolios, there was a range of portfolio types presented, differing in terms of level of sophistication, of whether they were paper-based or digital, and in terms of their underlying learning philosophy.

2.4. Particularly in the case of the French *Portfolio d'Expériences et Compétences* (PEC), but also in some of the other career learning portfolios presented in Toulouse, a clear effort has been made to articulate, sometimes in great detail, the career development theories underpinning the construction of the tool, the learning approaches being stimulated and encouraged, and the broader educational purposes that the tool is expected to serve. In the case of PEC, for instance, there is also a sustained effort to reflect on the relationship between the portfolio tool and the broader socio-economic environment. Such systematic engagement with theoretical frameworks helps to give legitimacy to the portfolio, to inscribe it within the broader reflections that are being made within the career guidance field, and to ensure that some of the dangers associated with the tool, as detailed in different sections of this Reflection Note, are in fact avoided.

2.5. Many if not all the portfolio initiatives presented were generally developed by practitioners in individual schools (e.g. Malta), or through a collaboration between practitioners in a small group of institutions (e.g. the PEC in France, the Talent Portfolio in Austria, *Beufswahlpass* and *Profilpass* in Germany). Such practitioner-based

initiatives, however, have the potential of being scaled up and of influencing policy-making, as suggested by the French case. This ‘bottom-up’ approach might very well be one of the key models that the ELGPN needs to consider when it sets out to understand the complex processes of policy-making and policy-implementation in the field of career guidance, and to evaluate which processes are most likely to be successful in policy terms.

2.6. Some of the portfolios presented—including the one that was covered in most detail, i.e. the *Portfolio d’Expériences et de Compétences* (PEC)—strive hard to look at career learning from a lifelong perspective. While some of the portfolios presented in Toulouse focus on career learning at a particular stage in a citizen’s development (e.g. at the compulsory school level, at university, or at the job-search phase), others have produced tools that enable a cumulative follow-through of learning achieved throughout an individual’s learning and working pathways. Such portfolios therefore present a comprehensive overview of the learning achieved over a number of years, indicating the knowledge and experiential bases on which specific decisions were made. Such ‘lifelong’ approaches can support career guidance practices that give pride of place to approaches informed by constructivist psychology, an emphasis on meta-cognition and on the co-construction of meaning on the basis of reflection on learning achieved in different life contexts. They also facilitate the use of narrative methods in career guidance, which have become increasingly popular in our field. Such cumulative approaches which prize continuity—and a good example here is the Danish case—present at least two challenges: technical, and ethical. The technical challenge concerns the manner in which the portfolio material can be organised in ways that support learning throughout life—a challenge that could be more easily met when that material is stored and displayed digitally and when, as in the French case, there is an effort to ensure better cross-sectoral collaboration in the provision of services (not least by having an inter-ministerial delegate for career guidance). The ethical challenge concerns issues of access to portfolio material, a matter that is discussed in more detail further on.

2.7. While there was a certain degree of variety in the format of the portfolios presented, most shared the same structural elements, even if these featured in different ways. As such, portfolios often have a section dedicated to an overview or synthesis of the individual’s identity (the ‘bilan’), the projects he or she has taken part in or is planning to engage with in relation to the making of a career plan and in gaining employment (e.g. part-time work, international mobility, etc), and the action and communication part (e.g. one’s c.v., letter of motivation in relation to employment, etc). The main axis of difference between the diverse portfolios presented lie in terms of the extent to which the tool served mainly to ‘display’—and in this sense ‘merely’ functioned as a more elaborate version of the traditional *curriculum vitae*—or mainly to encourage reflection and promote higher degrees of self-efficacy. In the latter types of portfolios, presenters used the following verbs to describe what they expected users to do: ‘discover’, ‘explore’, ‘explain’, ‘use’, ‘value’, ‘promote’, ‘plan’, ‘discuss’, ‘show’,

‘analyse’. In the view of some of the presenters, there was a danger that, in introducing the career learning portfolio in a school environment, it can quickly become co-opted by the logic of the school, and seen only as yet another ‘accessory’ to what goes on in that context.

- 2.8. One of the key additional benefits of portfolio approaches is its use in identifying students who are at risk of early school-leaving, and to support such students in exploring and understanding the underlying problems, and to then take charge of their life in more purposeful ways. Personal action planning and individualised study plans can be mobilised as strategies to motivate students and prevent disengagement from learning, with portfolios being used to support such reflection and action. In France, they seem to have proved particularly useful in tackling the problem of course changers and early course leavers within higher education settings, which end up being costly for both the students themselves, and for the state. A major effect of the portfolio in these contexts is that of building up positive self-esteem, of deepening one’s understanding of the way the University works, and of developing a strategic orientation with regards to one’s life project. In all of this, support from peers and from trained mentors is crucial.
- 2.9. A number of presenters highlighted the fact that despite the proven value of portfolios, they should not be considered as a panacea, but rather as a tool to support deeper career learning. The value of portfolios ultimately depended on the extent to which they enabled and facilitated deeper reflection on one’s career development, and that they therefore needed to be supplemented by career conversations with skilled career advisers (e.g. as in the German *Berufswahlpass* and *Profilpass*, the French *PEC*, and the Guidance Portfolio in Luxembourg). Several participants expressed concern as to the extent to which career staff had been trained, or are being trained to support career learning mediated by entries in clients’ portfolios. The French *PEC* project, for instance, has a carefully thought-through strategy for the training of mentors and coaches and, as in the case of a number of other Member State initiatives, see the portfolio as a *support* to the guidance intervention.
- 2.10. While, in principle, portfolios can also be used with adults in a Public Employment Service and in a wider context of continuous learning and vocational training and the employment sector, only a few examples of these were presented during the Toulouse field visit, suggesting that perhaps portfolios are seen to be more feasible or appropriate for use with students, particularly those in secondary schools and in higher education. Portfolio examples for this wider sector seem to function either as a way to capture and document informal learning (as in Germany’s *Profilpass*), or as ‘display’ documents (as in Finland’s and Italy’s portfolios for adult job-seekers), rather more than as tools for reflection. Similarly, few examples were presented of the use of portfolios with TVET students, even though there is some literature on this, as noted in the Briefing Paper.

2.11. Similarly, the discussion about the value and use of career learning portfolios did not focus sufficiently on differences between targeted users. Issues of gender, ethnicity, and social class groups, were not addressed in any great detail, though some references to the challenges in this regard were mentioned, particularly in Workshop 1. The group of potential users who did get special attention during the seminar were those at risk of early school-leaving or of disengagement from learning. Given the overall goals of WP1 to focus policy attention on a range of users of career guidance services, further reflection needs to be carried out on the portfolios in relation to specific groups, including employed and unemployed adults, and citizens with special needs. In the French presentations, for instance, some examples were given of the way the transition from compulsory secondary education to higher education is mediated by portfolios in ways that provide special support to those students who come from backgrounds where there is little or no familiarity with higher education, as well as to students with disabilities. PEC has also been used successfully in order to reinforce the message that disability and university studies were not incompatible.

2.12. Some of the discussions emphasised the way that tools like PEC, the *Webclasseur*, and the *Livret de Compétences* helped non-traditional learners to recognize their competences and skills, gained through informal learning (e.g. through their engagement in part-time work), and to display them in ways that could be recognised by potential employers, and even formally acknowledged. In that sense, portfolio-type tools could function as alternative credentialing instruments, particularly for those students who might have been less successful in gaining formal, paper qualifications. They therefore can contribute to the equity agenda through promoting the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)—an aspect of career guidance which is gaining in importance and which has been considered in some depth by Work Package 2 of the ELGPN. There is increasing consensus that APL deserves to be mainstreamed in the field of career guidance, where in some contexts it still tends to feature only occasionally, and peremptorily.

3. Critical Issues that arise in the use of Portfolios to assess career learning

3.1. Several presenters referred to ethical issues that arise in the use of career learning portfolios. A key one concerned the issue of who has the right to access entries in an individual's portfolio. Some presenters emphasised the value of sharing portfolio material with significant others in a student's life, including peers, parents, other teachers, and prospective employers, besides the career advisers themselves. This, however, opened up issues related to privacy, and the danger of using reflective material in order to come to conclusions about the potential of an individual to perform in a particular job. Digital portfolios permitted individuals to decide levels of access for different material that they included. However, the larger question as to the trusting of such input on servers that were often privately owned by business corporations or by the state was also raised, and indeed some countries—such as Slovenia—have given up on the idea of digital portfolios because they felt they could not guarantee total privacy.

- 3.2. Practically all the career learning portfolio versions presented relied heavily on written material, demanding a great deal of ease and facility with literacy. This raises issues regarding the extent to which portfolios, as a form of assessment, were more suitable for use with students who had a high level of literacy skills. The Austrian example (i.e. the Talent Portfolio), on the other hand, provided a valuable insight into the way visual material could be integrated into portfolios, facilitating its use with younger students, and with lower-achieving students who are generally less happy to engage with writing and reading tasks.
- 3.3. Some of the discussions also revolved around the ‘habitus’ that is required by those working with career learning portfolios. Over and above literacy skills, the very form and nature of a portfolio privileges a style of career planning that is purposeful, long-term in strategic orientation, and rational. This might very well be the preferred career planning style of certain groups of citizens, but it cannot be assumed that it is the only one, or even the ‘best’ one. While this issue was raised, deeper reflection on this matter is warranted.
- 3.4. One of the key ‘selling’ points of career learning portfolios seems to be that it encourages autonomy in young people, increasing levels of purposefulness as they engage with the challenge of negotiating life tasks. However, an unintended consequence of such a process is that it tends to shift the responsibility for learning onto the individual—an issue that has been also highlighted in the shift of terminology from an emphasis on ‘lifelong education’ to ‘lifelong learning’. These subtle yet important ideological shifts signal an increasing ‘responsibilisation’ of individuals for their own learning, development, and ultimately well-being—a trend that is increasingly evident as states find it more and more difficult to cater for citizen needs throughout life. Furthermore, effective portfolio-keeping requires a high degree of self-efficacy, which might be least present in those that career advisers wish to support most of all. It could be argued that while autonomy is well worth fostering, there is an ethical imperative to also ensure solidarity, thus balancing social responsibility.
- 3.5. Several presenters noted the importance of taking a critical stance in relation to the ‘display’ aspect of career learning portfolios, where the emphasis was on presenting oneself in ways that not only made one’s experiences and skills visible, but also related them to the world of work, highlighting their relevance for gaining, keeping, and progressing in employment. While these aspects of self-‘mediatisation’ and communication with others about one’s experiences and skills have value, they also tend to reinforce the notion that one’s inability to get a job depends on one’s ability to present oneself, when in fact the causes of mass unemployment are structural in nature.