

MONITORING AND EVALUATING LIFELONG GUIDANCE SYSTEMS ACROSS EUROPE

Gathering evidence on what works best is key to designing **holistic guidance services for individuals and the labour market.**



Traditional learning and career pathways are being replaced by more dynamic, ‘patchier’ routes and shorter job tenures. Fast-changing and more complex learning and working contexts draw more attention to continuous learning and individual mobility, making lifelong guidance pivotal. It improves people’s access to career information, helps them assess it and enables them to develop diverse skills throughout their careers.

Rising to new challenges: a necessity

Quality, responsive and sustainable guidance sys-

tems and services that reach people are paramount. However, considering the cost of high-quality services, allocating adequate financing while striving for cost-effective service delivery is crucial. Evidence shows that countries increasingly use IT tools and novel communication channels for service delivery and optimise service management and cooperation, workplaces and human resource development.

The stakes are high. Users seeking guidance may be unrealistic about their readiness for a career change, training, or the availability of suitable jobs meeting their needs. There are perils and costs of poor or fragmented service provision, career staff lacking access to professional development, or users (re-)entering employment, education or training with-

out being ready. They can plunge people into cycles of being hired and fired, leading to long-term unemployment, risks to mental and physical health and disengagement from learning and work – hence the need for countries to ensure that guidance services, tools and resources really meet user needs.

Providing guidance from a lifelong perspective is a major but worthwhile challenge. It means empowering users to build self-awareness and greater clarity about their long-term learning and working careers. Career management skills strengthen people's capacity to interact with the world of work and education, to anticipate change, overcome systemic barriers ⁽¹⁾, train, plan for, find and remain in suitable employment.

Career guidance is a fundamentally social activity. Its impact is not straightforward. Its effects on people's choices may be incremental or felt over time, reflecting that individual career pathways are not linear, but shaped by many factors, including the socio-economic context.

Box 1. Cedefop's work in the field

Cedefop contributes to building a shared understanding of what it takes to design guidance systems and provision responding to today's requirements. Three volumes of work have been produced and a [dedicated expert workshop was held in March 2022](#). Products include:

- research papers reflecting national challenges and approaches ([Volume I](#));
- analyses of career guidance and support measures and an exploration of quality-related outcome indicators based on these analyses and on literature ([Volume II](#));
- an analysis of the costs of publicly financed career development measures, particularly for adults, to better understand how they are broken down and estimated and to improve service cost-effectiveness ([Volume III](#)).

Why evidence-based policy design?

Monitoring and evaluating guidance provision and measuring its impact based on its expected outcomes for users is a precondition to developing effective services. Combined research and practice evidence on what measures intend, what users need and what works best (including incidental effects) reduces guidance biases and ensures that policies and systems are trustworthy and meet agreed expecta-

tions and quality standards. Stakeholder dialogue and knowledge-sharing about strategies, methods, concepts, tools and policy evaluations help clarify the rationale and expected outcomes of policies, and guide service design. Publicly funded lifelong guidance services can benefit from evidence to demonstrate their added value to taxpayers, and return on investment to governments.

System monitoring and quality assurance: two sides of the same coin

System evaluation is critical to quality. Continuous monitoring and evaluation must cover all fields where guidance is provided and include information on:

- guidance inputs: investments, costs, quality standards and staff training;
- processes: guidance activities and methods;
- outputs: client satisfaction, participation; and
- outcomes: individual/organisational/societal.

To understand the chain leading to potential guidance impact, external factors must also be considered. It is essential to capture positive and negative information on intermediary guidance outcomes. Positive points include clients' increased awareness, hope, confidence, resilience or acquisition of specific skills or attitudes. They can be measured based on an increased share of people with employability skills, in decent jobs or suitable education and training, or on a reduced share of long-term unemployed or social welfare registrants.

Negative or unexpected guidance outcomes, resulting, for example, from insufficient labour market information and non-targeted advice, can lead to poor decision-making and mismatches of skills and expectations, potentially contributing to labour market distortions.

This approach to monitoring, hence quality assurance, facilitates comparability of lifelong guidance support for individuals, regardless of their geographical, social or economic context, within and across sectors. Evidence of well-grounded investments in guidance services helps inform funding bodies, particularly in countries with devolved or market-based guidance provision.

Finally, the contributions of service monitoring and evaluation to policy and system development are many. They help to shape strategic goals, plan services, develop programmes, identify gaps in service delivery, obtain a clearer understanding of practitioner training needs and make optimal use of resources.

⁽¹⁾ See Cedefop's [briefing note on lifelong guidance for persons with disabilities](#). These barriers include discrimination related to disability, age, gender (lower-paid work, lower positions, stereotypes, bias, etc.).

Service evaluation and improvement

A lack of systematic data collection on the effects and costs of guidance is still an issue. Existing evidence on what works is not always used methodically to improve services and develop policy. The challenges to pinpointing the effects and impacts of guidance interventions remain. Quantitative counterfactual studies (with control groups) can show that the full benefits of guidance may appear over time, such as the acquisition of career management skills) and can be influenced by additional factors.

Box 2. Quality assurance in Greece

In Greece, great efforts have been made towards quality assurance and standard-setting. The National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP) carried out a number of studies with the aim of establishing a national quality assurance system for career guidance services, based on which the relevant service operation and performance will be continuously monitored and evaluated. The studies were also used for the development of a [National quality assurance framework in lifelong learning](#) developed by the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports, including:

- a mapping of quality assurance and management in career guidance and a proposal for a [National quality assurance model of guidance services](#) (EKEP, 2007);
- research on the quality criteria used in career guidance settings in general education and IVET (EOPPEP, 2012);
- a 2013 [Code of ethics for guidance provision](#) (EOPPEP);
- a guidance practitioner occupational profile and a framework for the certification of guidance staff qualifications.

Source: [Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices – Greece \(2023\)](#). CareersNet national records.

Calculating the costs of guidance

Little is known across Europe about the cost-benefit ratio of public and private guidance and counselling services. In part, this is understandable. Many factors influence people's career development. Guidance, by nature, is integrative, networked and increasingly dispersed. It comprises not only various services and activities which need to meet specific requirements of individuals or groups of users, but is often combined with other support services. With the proliferation of new guidance tools and approaches via self-help and different collaborative and/or online services, guid-

ance provision responds to many labour market and individual needs. Hence the difficulties of measuring career outcomes as a direct result of guidance alone and of measuring the cost of guidance.

Cedefop research shows that, in many instances, the costs of guidance are not clearly broken down by activity and identifiable as such – for example, when guidance services are outsourced to external providers and information on related staff and other costs are not captured in centralised systems. Many guidance providers are reluctant or unable to provide detailed data on the costs of different guidance activities versus other services they offer. This could be attributed to the need for (and recent policy interest in) more holistic and integrated service provision. However, to ensure service comparability and sustainability and to plan investment in evolving technologies, such as artificial intelligence, it is important that public providers make the costs of the different career support activities transparent as to their expected outcomes.

Collecting reliable and comparable data

Most countries collect some data on guidance and other career development services, for example through user surveys, and feed them into the evaluation of activities. Results are rarely brought together, though, either across sectors (education, training, youth, labour market, etc.) or against standards set by those involved.

Box 3. Evaluation of career services in France

Several bodies engage in the evaluation of French career services: [France Compétences](#), [INETOP](#) and [OPPIO](#) are responsible for monitoring and evaluating the impact of career guidance services. The [Centre d'Etudes et de Recherche sur les Qualifications \(CEREQ\)](#) carries out labour market, skills, and career guidance studies, while the French Institute for Education (IFE) develops studies on education and training, including guidance.

Source: [Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices – France \(2023\)](#). CareersNet national records.

Cedefop analysis shows that countries use service monitoring and evaluation results for accountability, short-term user feedback, tracking of client progress, service improvement, policy design, and tool development. There is little evidence however that those data systematically support ongoing service improvement, practitioners' professional development, or national and regional skills strategies. Persistent service fragmentation and lack of comparability tell the same story.

Systematic monitoring – how to overcome obstacles

Despite these shortcomings, decades of research, cooperation and development in lifelong learning and VET and on policies that connect the different stages and settings of learning to the world of work, have resulted in some similarities of countries' guidance system features. Also, the evidence base on guidance outcomes and cost effectiveness is growing, especially concerning its benefits for individuals.

Nonetheless, countries' guidance monitoring and evaluation practices differ widely with respect to outcome-oriented methodologies, systematic evidence collection and use across sectors or for stakeholder and provider engagement throughout the process. This is due to data protection requirements, lack of shared understanding of the guidance process and shared expectations regarding it, scarce resources for research and evaluation, weak coordination and synergy between actors and systems, and loss of information due to outsourcing, to name just a few.

Reaching consensus in the EU on minimum standards for guidance monitoring and evaluation still meets with some resistance. However, cooperation over many years has improved understanding of the options for evaluating the role of lifelong guidance for individuals and others, such as providers, employers and societies. Continuing dialogue and cooperation will likely further strengthen mutual learning and trigger innovation.

Box 4. Effectiveness assessment – quality standards in Slovakia

Monitoring and assessment of the effectiveness is included in the quality standards of the [Slovak Association for Career Guidance and Development](#). These standards are an incentive for guidance providers to clarify the objectives and monitor the outcomes of their services. The newly adopted [Strategy of lifelong learning and counselling 2021-2030](#) seeks to introduce new evaluation mechanisms based on tracking clients' progress over time.

Source: [Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices - Slovakia](#). CareersNet national records.

Common indicators for better reference and effectiveness

To help develop common indicators to measure progress towards higher-quality and cost-effectiveness of guidance provision in the EU, Cedefop examined indicators used by Member States or found in key

studies ⁽²⁾. These include input, output, outcome and impact indicators and target elements such as:

- practitioner competence;
- client satisfaction;
- individual wellbeing;
- clients' increased knowledge and skills;
- changes in career-related behaviour;
- increased share of people with higher qualifications or skills;
- participation in adult learning;
- increased employability;
- improved employment rates;
- reduction of social welfare costs;
- individual income increases.

Such common indicators and the data collected in reference to them can be used separately – to monitor specific elements such as investment in practitioner training – or together, to evaluate outcomes such as the share of people with increased employability.

These or similar outcome-focused indicators and updated methods for capturing outcomes of guidance measures could provide a basis for countries to monitor and evaluate their systems and services thoroughly and to clarify individual user and stakeholder expectations of guidance. They would also help countries examine their service structures and resources from an outcome perspective and consider the level of their investment in labour market information, skills intelligence, artificial intelligence or practitioner training, as compared to other countries.

Box 5. Quality assurance of guidance in Finland

In Finland, public employment services must offer a wide range of support measures, including guidance.

The quality assurance of services covers two aspects:

- a comprehensive assessment of a client's needs, which must be translated into an employment plan including pre-employment measures depending on the person's needs, in cooperation with other services;
- the speed of service delivery: the assessment of service needs must be carried out within 2 weeks.

A national coordination unit, [Kohtaamo](#), helps municipalities set up one-stop-shop service delivery, starting with (web-based) guidance. Each town or district must have such a body coordinating the required services. The quality of their service delivery is monitored and forms an integral part of the annual reports of the government submitted to the Parliament.

Source: [Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices – Finland \(2021\)](#). CareersNet national records.

⁽²⁾ The detailed list of these indicators is presented in [Volume II of Cedefop's research project](#). The list was submitted for [discussion to stakeholders](#) from all participating countries in 2022. It is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive, but rather meant as a tool facilitating policy dialogue about the next steps towards gaining common ground at European level.

Towards a common vision of guidance

It is time to take the next steps and put the growing body of evidence on guidance outcomes, gathered through existing monitoring and evaluation structures, into action.

Better policy integration

Stakeholder cooperation on collecting data and sharing findings on guidance processes and their expected versus measured outcomes is key. It stimulates mutual learning on how guidance can be better coordinated, coherent or integrated with other policies supporting lifelong learning and skill development (namely education and training, employment, youth, social inclusion and health policies). It also supports the development of national strategies, including on wellbeing and citizenship.

Transition to user-driven guidance

Service cooperation focused on quality, as shown by data collected using common indicators, can help countries move towards user-centred approaches. Such approaches help avoid provision of services that users do not need, do not try or cannot access, while increasing flexible provision of joint services and resources, thus improving their cost effectiveness and, ultimately, user experience ⁽³⁾.

Towards an ‘outcomes first’ focus

An outcomes-first approach is centred on service user needs. It builds on best use of local resources, data collection to develop policy, and strategic leadership to ensure high levels of service coordination and collaboration. Adopting such an approach can help countries optimise the organisation, funding and impact of their services and to develop their systems continuously.

Development of national quality frameworks

Cedefop’s research highlights the links between service monitoring/evaluation and quality. If European

countries agree on common indicators to monitor and evaluate their guidance services and systems, they could develop a common reference framework for quality assurance at EU level. This could serve as a basis for countries to create national quality frameworks. Such a common European framework, which would allow for cross-country cooperation and mutual learning, can facilitate identification and upscaling of good practices, harness national guidance systems’ potential for innovation, and yield better results for users.



CEDEFOP

European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

Briefing note – 9196 EN

Cat. No: TI-BB-24-002-EN-N

ISBN 978-92-896-3770-1, doi:10.2801/489472



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⁽³⁾ Recent Cedefop results in this field will feed into the next stage of its work on monitoring and evaluation of guidance and into new proposals for a revised framework for lifelong guidance policies and systems development, together with CareersNet experts.