



The Relationship of Career Guidance to VET

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Introduction

This paper examines the relationship of career guidance to vocational education and training (VET). Its aim is to provide a base of analysis and evidence to underpin policy recommendations to countries as part of the OECD policy review of VET.

The relationship of career guidance to VET is an under-explored area. Previous policy reviews of career guidance provision (*e.g.* OECD, 2004; Sultana, 2004; Sultana and Watts, 2007; Watts and Fretwell, 2004) have included VET among other sectors, but have tended to pay much less attention to VET than to general education. UNESCO published a collection of papers on guidance and counselling in relation to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) (Hiebert and Borgen, 2002), but most of it was general in nature, and it made remarkably little mention of the distinctive issues related to career guidance within TVET, including links with the labour market. Much the same is true of the section on guidance in a recent report by Cedefop (2009b) on VET in Europe.

The case for closer attention to these issues is particularly strong for two reasons. First, the terminology tends to confuse the relationship between the two concepts. It is not uncommon to find ‘vocational guidance’ being subsumed within, or blurred with, ‘vocational training’, and for ‘career education’ to be confused with ‘vocational education’. Second, there is a tendency to think that career guidance is largely irrelevant to VET, which is based on the supposition that career decisions have already been made. This paper argues that this supposition is flawed, in a number of important respects, and that career guidance is relevant to some of the key policy issues relating to the development of VET.

Within the current OECD review of VET, some attention has been paid to career guidance both within the initial report (Field *et al.*, 2009, Section 5.2) and in some of the country reports – notably those on Hungary (Kis *et al.*, 2008), Norway (Kuczera *et al.*, 2008a) and Switzerland (Hoeckel *et al.*, 2009). The present paper is designed to broaden the coverage. It largely adopts the advice of Grubb (2008, p.31) that the review’s coverage of career guidance should be confined to provision within VET programmes. It does, however, pay some attention to career guidance prior to entry to such programmes: this requires reference to broader areas of provision, though from a VET perspective.

Definitions

The definition of career guidance adopted in the OECD Career Guidance Policy Review was that it described ‘services intended to assist people, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers’ (OECD, 2004, p.19). The same definition was used in a review by the World Bank, though the descriptive label used in its title was ‘career development’ (Watts and Fretwell, 2004): this term is attracting growing favour (though it poses the semantic difficulty of using the same term to describe both interventions and the process in which they are seeking to intervene).

For the purpose of the present paper, an important distinction will be drawn between three aspects of such services:

- **Career counselling**, conducted on a one-to-one basis or in small groups, in which attention is focused on the distinctive career issues faced by individuals.
- **Career education**, as part of the curriculum, in which attention is paid to helping groups of individuals to develop the competences for managing their career development.

- **Career information**, provided in various format (increasingly, web-based), concerned with information on courses, occupations and career paths. This includes labour market information.

The failure to distinguish between these different activities presents problems, for example, in interpreting the PISA data on career guidance (see Kuczera, 2008). Closely linked to these activities are a range of others, including: tutoring, coaching and mentoring; portfolios and individual learning plans; interests inventories, psychometric tests and other online tools and resources; work experience, work shadowing, work simulations and work visits; taster programmes; and enterprise activities.

VET is defined for the purposes of the current OECD review as including ‘education and training programmes designed for, and typically leading to, a particular job or type of job’. The main focus of the review is on ‘initial VET’, which comprises ‘programmes mainly designed for and used by young people (... those under 30) at the beginning of their careers and commonly before entering the labour market’; it largely excludes ‘continuing VET’ (e.g. enterprise training of employees, and retraining provision for the unemployed) (Field *et al.*, 2009, p.18).

This definition of VET includes both education-based programmes (within schools, colleges and universities), and programmes like apprenticeships which are largely work-based. Alongside general education, they represent three different post-compulsory learning pathways linking education and work (Raffe, 2003). OECD countries differ widely both in the proportion of students who are in VET as opposed to academic programmes, and in the balance within VET between education-based and apprenticeship programmes (Field *et al.*, 2009, pp.22-23). The ways in which these arrangements are interwoven with a range of institutional structures and cultural factors explains why transfer of practices is difficult, with the seductive attractions of apprenticeship, in particular, proving to be ‘the Rhein maiden of the policy world, luring the unwary... on to the hard rocks of institutional reality’ (Sweet, 2009, p.2).

The initial OECD report noted that in the USA the term commonly used to describe VET is ‘career and technical education’ (CTE) (Field *et al.*, 2009, p.18). This is a further source of confusion in relation to career guidance, because ‘career education’ is used here in a rather different sense from that outlined earlier in this section. A paper published over 30 years ago noted that whereas ‘careers education’ in the UK focused essentially on career decision-making, ‘career education’ in the USA extended this to include the development of specific vocational skills and of work habits and attitudes necessary for entering and keeping a job (Watts and Herr, 1976). The initial OECD report suggests that the more recent adoption of ‘CTE’ is a response to career flux, questioning the relationship between initial VET training and a single lifetime occupation (Field *et al.*, 2009, p.20).

Such questioning is, as we shall see later, one of the key rationales for including career education, as part of career guidance, in VET (and for dropping the ‘s’ from ‘careers education’). Career education in this more specific and restricted sense is concerned with exploring the world of work but also with self-awareness and with the development of skills for making decisions and managing transitions, both now and in the future (OECD, 2004, p.44). In higher education, the term increasingly being used for this is ‘career development learning’ (Watts, 2006; Smith *et al.*, 2009); the same term is now beginning to be used in non-advanced tertiary education too (LSIS, 2009).

Career education commonly includes experience-based learning about work, in the form of work experience, work shadowing, work visits, and work simulations such as mini-enterprises. Such experiences are included for exploratory reasons, to help individuals to explore areas of work before committing to them. They are paralleled in an educational context by course ‘tasters’, designed to enable students to gain some experience of what the course involves before making a firm decision to enter it (OECD, 2004, p.46).

The use of work placements as part of career education is in principle distinct from their use as part of occupational preparation within mainstream VET (the former are usually much shorter than the latter). This is yet another source of potential confusion. In Australia, for example, there has been a tendency for the growth of structured work placements linked to particular VET pathways to crowd out exploratory work-experience placements for all students earlier in the school (OECD, 2002a).

The various terminological pitfalls identified in this preamble emphasise the importance of conceptual clarity in exploring the relationship between career guidance and VET.

Rationale

The policy rationales for attention to career guidance as a public good as well as a private good fall into three main categories (OECD, 2004):

- **Learning** goals, including improving the efficiency of the education and training system and managing its interface with the labour market. If individuals make decisions about what they are to learn in a well-informed and well-thought-through way, linked to their interests, their capacities and their aspirations, investments in education and training systems are likely to yield higher returns.
- **Labour market** goals, including improving the match between supply and demand and managing adjustments to change. If people find jobs which utilise their potential and meet their own goals, they are likely to be more motivated and therefore more productive.
- **Social equity** goals, including supporting equal opportunities and promoting social inclusion. Career guidance services can raise the aspirations of disadvantaged groups and support them in gaining access to opportunities that might otherwise have been denied to them.

In the case of VET, the first of these rationales is of particular significance. The case for VET is based on preparing students for employment and therefore meeting labour market demands. Grubb (2008) notes ‘the persistent fear ... that VET programs will lose contact with employers, that VET will be “supply-driven” or dominated by the concerns of VET providers, rather than “demand-driven” or dominated by the needs of employers’ (p.30). In seeking closer articulation with labour markets, attention may accordingly be paid to planning approaches based on consultation with employers, but this is rarely effective in itself (Field *et al.*, 2009, Section 2.1). It therefore tends to be replaced or at least supplemented by an approach based on responsiveness to student demand. The rationale for this is two-fold:

- That students have a clearer idea of their own skills and preferences, and that decisions based on these principles may produce beneficial changes in the workplace – *e.g.* adapting technology to remove some unpleasant jobs (Field *et al.*, 2009, pp.33-34, 37).
- That students will want to read the labour market, in order to avoid occupations with declining demand, or poor wages and working conditions, or low status, and will enter programmes with the best prospects of getting them into desirable employment both in the short and long run (Grubb, 2008, p.30).

There are resonances here of Adam Smith’s famous dictum that individuals encouraged to pursue their own interests are led by an ‘invisible hand’ to promote an end that is no part of their intention – the public interest – and to do so more effectually than when they intend to promote it’ (Smith, 1776). In both cases, however, there is a strong policy case for effective career guidance to assure the quality of these processes, by ensuring that students’ decision-making is well-informed – in terms of self awareness and

opportunity awareness respectively – and well-thought-through. In this sense, it has been suggested, career guidance services could represent Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ made flesh (Watts and Sultana, 2004, p.121).

In these terms, career guidance is effectively acting as an additional bridge between VET programmes and the world of work (cf. Field *et al.*, 2009, p.10), viewing the student as an active agent in the relationship. Its role is to make sure that student demand is well-informed in terms of the labour market. This means that it needs to be supported by high-quality information. There is also a strong case, as argued in the initial OECD review report, for some element of market-testing to be included by incorporating work placements into VET provision, so using employers’ willingness to provide such placements as a proxy for labour market demand (*ibid.*, p.34).

Principles and practice

Career guidance is relevant to the quality and effectiveness of VET at two distinct stages:

- Prior to entering a VET programme.
- Within the VET programme.

Prior to entry

Prior to entering a VET programme, two principles are important:

- That all young people should be made aware, within their career education programmes, of VET options alongside the other options available to them.
- That young people interested in VET options should have access to career counselling, supported by high-quality career information, to ensure that their choices are well-informed and well-thought-through.

Career education programmes are well-established in many countries, particularly within lower secondary education (OECD, 2004, pp.44-45, 162-163; Sultana, 2004, pp.45-47; Sultana, in preparation; Watts, 2001). They tend to take one of three main forms:

- **Stand-alone** programmes that are run as a separate course.
- Programmes that are **subsumed** – within, for example, a course in personal, social and health education (*e.g.* Austria, Malta), or social studies.
- Programmes which are **infused** within most or all subjects across the curriculum (*e.g.* Czech Republic, Estonia, Sweden).
- **Extra-curricular** programmes provided outside the formal boundaries of the formal curriculum – often on an intensive basis over a day or longer (*e.g.* France).

In many countries, schools are able to choose which of these models they wish to adopt. Each model has pros and cons. The infusion model is attractive in principle, but difficult to implement in practice: it requires a high level of co-ordination and support to be effective, and in their absence can be ‘a thin veil hiding a bare cupboard’ (OECD, 2002b, p.14).

These career education curricula commonly include some attention to labour market information, though it rarely takes a very systematic form. Sometimes they include work-experience and taster programmes which incorporate attention to VET options (OECD, 2004, p.46; Sultana, 2004, pp.48-49). In Norway, for example, lower secondary students learn about different educational and career options by sitting in on classes in upper secondary school and/or through placements in local companies (Kuczera *et al.*, 2008a, p.18); similarly, short pre-apprenticeships are used in Switzerland to allow students (aged 14, towards the end of their compulsory school period) to try out occupations before they sign an apprenticeship contract (Hoeckel *et al.*, 2009, p.24).

There is evidence in some countries, however, of the content of career guidance favouring general education options at the expense of VET options:

- In Australia, Rainey *et al.* (2008) found that a number of students were critical of the level of information about VET pathways that had been available to them. Again, Misko *et al.* (2007) concluded, on the basis of a survey of South Australian apprentices and school students, that guidance practices acted as a barrier to apprenticeship participation, with specific information on apprenticeships not being widely available and relatively few students being encouraged to pursue apprenticeships by teachers and counsellors. Similarly, Dalley-Trim *et al.* (2007) demonstrated how career advisers, despite claiming favourable views of VET, could reinforce its marginalisation.
- In the UK, a report on apprenticeships stated that witnesses to its inquiry were united in their belief that attention to apprenticeships within current career education and guidance provision was inadequate (Skills Commission, 2009).

This may be exacerbated by the tendency for career guidance provision within schools to be biased towards programmes offered by their own institution, especially where school funding is linked to the recruitment and retention of students (OECD, 2004, p.42). There is some evidence of this in Hungary (Kis *et al.*, 2008, p.26) and Norway (Kuczera *et al.*, 2008a, p.18), for example. In the UK, too, there is strong evidence of guidance within schools that extend beyond the age of 16 favouring their own provision post-16 at the expense of other options, including apprenticeships (Foskett *et al.*, 2004).

Such tendencies emphasise the desirability of career guidance provision within schools being complemented by provision from an independent external agency, as in the case of such countries as Germany (Field *et al.*, 2009, pp.81-82) and Switzerland (Hoeckel *et al.*, 2009, p.23). PISA data indicate that other countries where such external provision is relatively common are Denmark and the UK (Sweet, 2009).

It is also important that career education and career counselling provision should be supported by high-quality career information. This should include information on:

- The available VET options.
- The qualifications to which they lead, and the further qualifications to which these give access.
- The occupations to which these qualifications provide access, and the extent to which the qualifications are sufficient for entry.
- The salary/wage levels offered by these occupations.

- The projected demand for these occupations. While there are questions about the predictive validity of such forecasts (Hoeckel *et al.*, 2008, pp.25-26; Field *et al.*, 2009, p.32), individuals should have access to the best such information that can be made available. A strong exemplar here is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* published by the Department of Labor in the USA.
- The labour market outcomes achieved by those successfully completing the programmes, including the nature of their jobs, their salary/wage levels, whether or not the jobs are in an occupational sector directly related to their VET programme, and the extent to which they are using the skills and competences acquired in the programme. This information can be collected through routine follow-up studies, of the kind carried out in higher education in Australia and the UK, or through broader tracking studies (Field *et al.*, 2009, pp.88-93). In the former case, it needs to be quality-assured to ensure that it is not massaged to serve the promotional interests of the provider. Such studies should be extended to cover not only immediate outcomes but also longer-term outcomes, which are more effective indicators of the career effects of programmes.

On the third of these points, it is important to note that some VET options are tightly linked to particular occupations, and provide entry to them; whereas others are more loosely linked to broader sectors of the labour market, and may need to be supplemented by more specific qualifications. This latter is linked to the fact that the rationale for VET programmes is often based not on labour-market demand but on the motivation they provide for some students to remain in formal learning – what a report in Scotland termed ‘the vocational impulse’ (SED, 1963, p.24). This can produce some confusion, with which providers may be tempted to collude, regarding the labour-market relevance of the qualifications to which they lead. One of the roles of career information is to make the extent and limitations of such relevance transparent to the learner.

All this information, including the labour market information, needs to be available in forms and in terms which individuals can understand, related to their needs. In general, however, information on labour market outcomes is complicated and is likely to benefit from expert interpretation if it is to make sense to a young person choosing a career pathway: this is, as noted by Field *et al.* (2009, p.94), the task of career guidance – and especially of career counselling.

In some respects, career guidance is more important for students considering VET options than for those entering general education options, because their choices can carry tighter career implications. However, general education choices have career implications too; and both groups should have access to the full range of choices. This is particularly important where efforts are being made to secure greater parity of esteem between academic/general and VET pathways, including greater flexibility between them. Accordingly, career guidance provision for those considering VET should be integrated into provision for all.

Within VET programmes

Within VET programmes, two further principles are important:

- That career guidance should be available at all relevant decision points, and on exit.
- That career education programmes have an important role to play both in preparing students for future career decisions and in supporting the transferability of their learning.

Both need to be built as core strategies into curriculum design.

Some VET programmes adopt structures of progressive specialisation, which mean that further decisions carrying career consequences need to be made. In Norway, for example, the standard model for upper secondary VET is a 2+2 system, in which two years of school are followed by two years of apprenticeship training in a company; some students choose after the second year to enter, instead of an apprenticeship, a general third-year course which gives direct access to tertiary education (Kuczera *et al.*, 2008a, pp.10, 14). There is accordingly a need for career guidance to help students with these choices, including the choice of apprenticeship placements. Yet upper secondary VET students in Norway are less likely to receive career guidance than their peers in general programmes (*ibid*, p.15).

A further common pattern is for there to be an initial year or two where students may try out different trades or crafts, before choosing the area in which they wish to specialise. Here, too, there is a strong case for career guidance, incorporating the core principles outlined in the preceding section.

Where VET courses include placements, this not infrequently leads to job offers which provide initial employment at the end of the course. Sometimes, however, it may not. Sometimes, too, students may prefer to look at alternative jobs or even alternative occupations: in Hungary, for example, over a quarter of vocational secondary students and over a third of vocational training students indicate that they would choose a different occupation if they could start again (Kis *et al.*, 2008, p.26). It is accordingly important for career guidance and placement services to be available towards the end of courses, to help students to review their career plans and to find jobs that meet their interests and goals. Such services needs also to be available earlier in courses for any students that are thinking of, or at risk of, dropping out, to ensure that they are able to transfer as easily as possible to a more appropriate programme (Field *et al.*, 2009; Kuczera *et al.*, 2008a, pp.19-23).

Access to career guidance services is especially desirable where flexible pathways have been introduced into programmes to allow upward mobility and avoid dead-ends (Grubb, 2008, pp.8-9), as in Switzerland for example (Hoeckel *et al.*, 2009, p.19). Provision of career guidance is necessary to lubricate such reforms and enable students to take advantage of them.

In general, however, there is evidence that, in many countries, career guidance tends to be more extensively provided in academic than in vocational programmes (OECD, 2004, pp.40-41). On the other hand, there is also evidence in some countries of students being more likely to receive career education in vocational than in academic tracks (Sultana, 2004, p.45).

Career education elements within VET programmes need to pay attention to career paths within the occupations to which the programme is designed to lead. This should include, for example, opportunities for self-employment and entrepreneurship. Some of this can be integrated into the mainstream programme; some might be provided as a separate element within the programme.

More broadly, there is a strong case for career education within VET programmes to support transferability of learning. The initial OECD review report notes that VET graduates need not only occupationally specific skills which will allow for a smooth transition into the labour market, but also generic transferable skills to carry them through their working career, allowing for mobility between firms and between occupations. It notes that while individual employers may not want their apprentices, for example, to have strong transferable skills, employers have a collective interest in a flexible and adaptable labour force (Field *et al.*, 2009, pp.37, 40-41). This includes flexibility between occupations, to take account of changes in labour supply and demand as well as in individuals' preferences and goals. Such flexibility can be enhanced by a competence-based approach, as in Australia (Hoeckel *et al.*, 2008, pp.32-

33), and by national qualification frameworks (Field *et al.*, 2009, p.77; Bjørnåvold and Coles, 2008; Young, 2007).¹

The effectiveness of attention to generic transferable skills is likely to be more effective if career education elements within VET programmes include explicit attention to other occupations to which the skills and competences being acquired within the programme are transferable, so making the concept of transfer more transparent and tangible. This can include experience-based elements, such as additional work placements in other sectors, to demonstrate their transferability in action.

In a few countries, the issues addressed by career guidance have been adopted more broadly by the institution as a whole. Thus in Denmark, for example, as part of reforms in the VET system, some of the large technical colleges have recognised that the skills and concerns of the guidance counsellors are now at the heart of the teaching and learning process. They have accordingly sought to use their guidance counsellors not only for delivering services to students but also for working with teachers as consultants. This is replacing the guidance counsellors' own teaching commitments: it seems possible that the guidance counsellors now spend around half of their time on guidance work and the rest on consultancy work, and do no direct teaching apart from careers education (OECD, 2004, p.49).

Other issues

If career guidance services are to play a strong role in relation to VET, this has implications for the **training of career guidance practitioners**. This is a complex area, because such practitioners cover a range of roles, with different professional affiliations. In some cases they define themselves primarily as psychologists, as teachers, or as labour market administrators, with any career guidance training being subsumed within, or added to, their core professional training; in other cases they represent a distinctive professional group of their own, with their own professional training (Watts *et al.*, 1994; Cedefop, 2009a).

One of the problems in securing adequate attention to VET in careers programmes prior to entry to VET is that most career practitioners have been trained not within the VET system but within academic programmes, often within psychology (Field *et al.*, 2009, p.96). The move towards more competence-based approaches to training of career practitioners (Cedefop, 2009a; Hiebert, 2009; for a critical analysis, see Sultana, 2009) may be helpful in this respect. In the UK, such practitioners may now be trained through National Vocational Qualifications instead of, or alongside, academic qualifications (Cedefop, 2009a, p.67).

It is also important that training of career practitioners should include significant attention to the gathering, interpretation and use of labour market information. It is their access to LMI that makes career practitioners credible to clients (Bimrose *et al.*, 2006). Yet within psychology-based programmes, this area has often been neglected. In the UK, the move in recent years to integrate careers service into more personally-based services addressed to 'at risk' young people has led to reduced attention to labour market expertise in both initial training and continuing professional development (Colley *et al.*, 2008): a recent report by the Skills Commission (2009) noted that this had had a particular adverse effect on career professionals' ability to offer effective career guidance on apprenticeships, and recommended that they should be required to undertake a minimum number of visits to employers each year (p. 22).

1 It is interesting to note that in South Africa, the South African Qualifications Authority has decided to offer leadership in developing a national strategy for career development services across all sectors, based on the notion that while the qualifications framework provides a potential climbing-frame for lifelong career development, it needs to be supported by career guidance in order to activate citizens to use the framework and to navigate their way through it (Walters *et al.*, 2009).

Steps have been taken to strengthen attention to labour market issues in several other countries (Cedefop, 2009a, pp.42-44). In Switzerland, for example, guidance counsellors are trained in special programmes to make sure that they are well-informed about VET courses and their associated labour markets, rather than simply qualified in psychology and counselling; and all teachers in lower secondary schools also receive some training so that they are knowledgeable about the labour market (Hoeckel *et al.*, 2009, p.23). In Norway, steps have been taken within schools to split career guidance from personal and social counselling by allocating them to different roles, partly on the basis that career guidance requires regular updating to keep in touch with changes in the education system and the labour market, and that this may not be given sufficient attention within an integrated model of delivery (OECD, 2002b).

Within VET, many teachers (and indeed, where they exist, counsellors) have substantial previous experience of the world of work, usually linked to the nature of the VET programme. This needs to be harnessed in career education elements within such programmes, and also in designing supplementary training to prepare them for their roles in delivering these elements.

Alongside training of career practitioners, attention is also needed to **quality standards** for career guidance practice. A variety of models have been developed for the quality assurance of career guidance provision. Some, for example, focus on student feedback; others identify a set of pre-determined indicators, on which data is collected in a systematic way to measure performance (Plant, 2004). In the USA, the National Center for Research in Vocational Education developed research-based criteria to evaluate the guidance offer of vocational schools: the elements are rated and weighted to produce a total score, enabling one institution to be compared with another (Maddy-Bernstein, 1996). Such approaches need to be examined in relation to broader approaches to quality assurance within VET (cf. Kis, 2005).

There are a number of **further issues** which it has not been possible to address within the constraints of this paper. These include:

- The relevance of the principles proposed here to VET programmes within higher education.
- Their relevance to VET programmes run by Public Employment Services, mainly for unemployed young people, and often with enrolment effectively mandated in order to retain access to welfare benefits. Career guidance in such contexts has to address distinctive challenges (Sultana and Watts, 2006).
- Specific issues related to social class, gender and ethnicity. VET programmes often tend to ‘attract’ — through a mix of what Gambetta (1996) terms ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors — students from particular groups, in all three of these respects. Career guidance can either reinforce these tendencies, or seek to challenge them (Watts, 1996).

Conclusions

The current initial report of the OECD VET review (Field *et al.*, 2009) makes one recommendation relating to career guidance:

- ‘Provide career guidance accessible to all, informed by knowledge of labour market outcomes’ (p.104).

This could helpfully be extended to distinguish, as above, between career guidance prior to entry to VET programmes, and career guidance within such programmes.

In addition, the report makes a further relevant recommendation:

- ‘Through VET systems, provide young people with the generic, transferable skills to support occupational mobility and lifelong learning, and with the occupationally-specific skills that meet employers’ immediate needs’ (p.43).

A specific reference to career guidance (and more specifically to career education) could fruitfully be added to this recommendation.

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