

# Training & Employment

## The quality of guidance services gives rise to debate

*The quality of guidance services has become a crucial public policy-making issue in OECD member-countries. In order to improve this quality, some countries are setting up competence standards, introducing market mechanisms or specific managerial procedures. The highly segmented French system makes it difficult to improve the quality and user-friendliness of services rendered to citizens. Various national and regional initiatives have been launched, based on coherent lifelong vocational guidance policies. However, some debate has been focusing on the questions which arise: is it preferable to develop all-inclusive, cross-sectional quality standards or specialized ones targeting specific groups? Should the system be decentralized for the sake of greater proximity? And what methods of assessment should be adopted?*

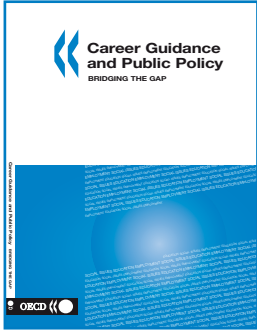
Since the turn of the century, the European Union, in line with the OECD, has been inciting its Member States to develop lifelong guidance policies. Governments are being asked to mobilize guidance as a tool for easing training paths and improving young people's access to employment, as well as facilitating adults' occupational mobility and possible changes of activity during their working lives. Occupational guidance is thus regaining a central role in the quest for greater economic efficiency and social cohesion. With a view to promoting public action on these lines, international debates have been focusing lately on the quality of guidance services. What exactly are these debates about? What is the position of France in this process, and is this country taking these quality improvement objectives to heart? What solutions have been applied so far and what problems have the ongoing reforms left unsolved?

### A source of international concern

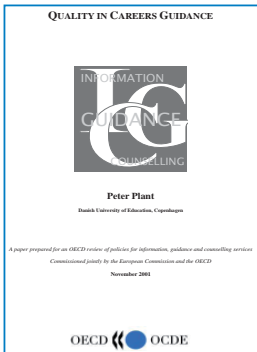
In the early 2000s, the quality of guidance services began to be questioned in various reports published by the European Commission and the OECD, which stressed the existence of a gap between the aims of public action and the ways in which guidance services were being run to meet these aims. It was proposed to re-examine users' modes of access, staff training and qualifications, methods of coordinating and steering the various structures involved, and the criteria and procedures used to assess the quality of the services provided. These diagnoses have had political effects: the European Council Resolution adopted in November 2008 stressed the need to develop coordination between the various national, regional and local actors and to give all citizens access to properly accredited high-quality guidance services.

This European initiative had a particularly noticeable impact in France. Several official reports have been published since 2005 in the same vein as the previous international debates, apart from the fact that they have focused mainly on educational guidance. Their authors have stressed how little control the French authorities have exerted on these services, and how inaccessible they have been. Two suggestions have therefore been put forward for improving the quality of these services: professionalizing guidance advisers and bringing these services closer to their users.

The trouble here is the complexity of the French institutional context. Apart from the segmentation of the system into groups of users (young people, employees, job seekers, etc.), it is variably decentralized, and various national and regional authorities are therefore involved. Public services' past history has left its mark: some of them (such as the CIOs – Centres d'Information et d'Orientation – Information and Guidance Centres) are highly specialized, whereas others provide vocational guidance along with other services. This is so in the case of Pôle Emploi (the Employment Agency), whose guidance activities are part of its broader placement mission. There also exist a number of associative networks targeting specific beneficiaries (young people, the disabled, etc.), which dispense vocational guidance in the framework of broader missions, while others, such as the "Cités des Métiers" (occupational information platforms) focus specifically on vocational guidance and cater for wider audiences. Lastly, it is worth noting that ●●



••• the social partners and private bodies have become more actively involved in vocational guidance: many private providers were created during the last two decades in response to the increasing uptake of various national schemes supporting individuals' occupational projects such as VAE procedures (Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience – Validation of Acquired Experience), competence appraisal procedures (BDC – Bilans de compétences) or redeployment measures in the framework of companies' social (redundancy) plans. For lack of a set of common standards, this well-known state of complexity has resulted in a highly heterogeneous picture in terms of the quality of the services available to French citizens.



## First steps towards implementation in France

In view of this great diversity, one of the main obstacles to implementing European quality recommendations in France is the large number of public decision-making instances and levels responsible for guidance in this country. However, despite the difficulty of setting up a cohesive overall system of lifelong guidance, some changes have been taking place at both regional and national levels.



In the late 1990s, a few pioneer regions (such as Rhône-Alpes, Bourgogne, Limousin, Nord-Pas de Calais, Languedoc-Roussillon, etc.) were already including guidance in their regional vocational training development plans (PRDF – Plan Régional de Développement de la Formation). These efforts focused mainly at that time on coordinating guidance services. The term “quality” appeared only later in several regional programmes relating to the organisation and facilitation of debates between regional actors, the development of a shared culture and professional codes, and the pooling of methods and resources. The Rhône-Alpes region was one of the first to adopt this approach: the “Pôle Rhône-Alpes de l’Orientation” (PRAO), which now provides the members of twenty-one networks and guidance services with a set of common tools and services, was set up in this region in 2004. In 2006, in the framework of a European project, it published a set of standards for improving the quality of vocational guidance services.

At national level, the quality improvement measures recommended in recent educational guidance reports have sparked off a process of change. Recent attempts have been made to set up all-inclusive cross-sectional public policies. A “Délégué interministériel à l’orientation” (DIO – Interministerial Officer for Guidance Policies) was appointed in 2006 in response

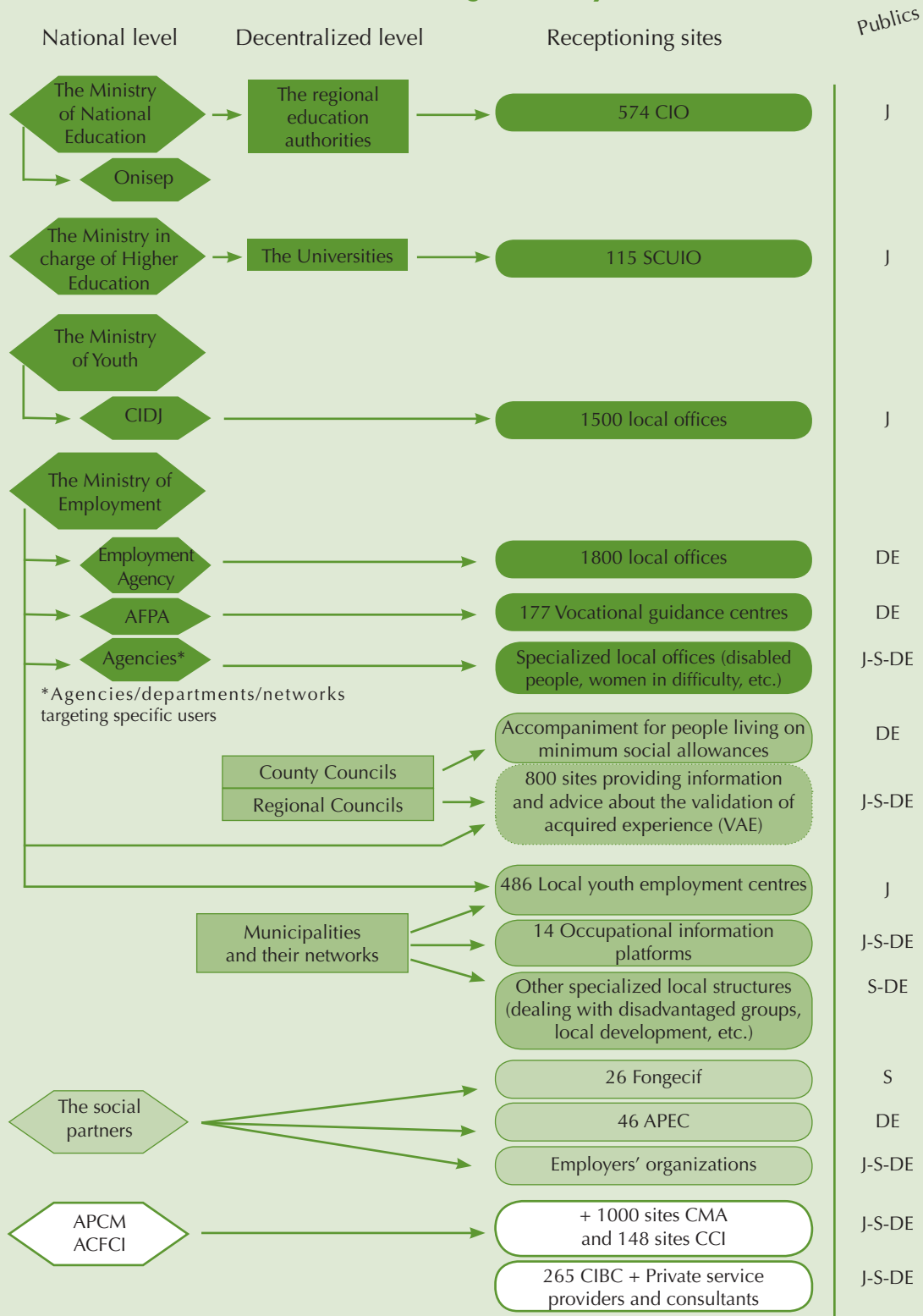
to suburban youths' unrest and student protests against the new “first job contracts” Scheme. The Delegation has taken concrete steps by producing the National youth career guidance and transition-to-work scheme presented in March 2007, which mainly targets school pupils and higher education students. In this Scheme, the question of quality is addressed in a section dealing with methods of assessing service provision: these ideas were subsequently integrated at joint consultations with the “Haut Commissariat à la Jeunesse” (HCJ – High Commission for Youth Policy), which was set up in 2009. One of the possible lines suggested by HCJ is to promote local and regional experiments for developing a comprehensive educational and vocational guidance system: this would involve either defining and monitoring common indicators to the performances and quality of guidance services or developing assessment procedures for judging the quality of services to users. These objectives may mark a turning-point in the French approach to quality assessment: quality is no longer taken to be guaranteed by career advisers' professional skills or by the advantages of geographical proximity, but by examining the results of the services rendered.

Debates have been re-kindled on similar lines since 2003 on the subject of adult guidance, in a series of negotiations on continuing vocational training reforms and the unemployment insurance system. The latest agreement on vocational training signed in January 2009 was followed by a Bill on lifelong vocational guidance and training. Article 3 of this Bill focuses on improving the quality of the information and vocational guidance dispensed to young school-leavers and adults. The suggestion here, although quite modestly expressed, is that lifelong guidance should be made available to various categories of public. At the juridical level, the previous divide between services to employees and job-seekers can be expected to disappear. This will naturally have structural and financial effects, especially since it means that the AFPA guidance department (Association pour la Formation Professionnelle des Adultes – Association for Adults' Vocational Training) will be integrated into “Pôle Emploi” (the Employment Agency). In addition, the quality issue focuses mainly in this Bill on the national accreditation of organizations liable to contribute to the general mission of providing youths and adults with information and vocational guidance. How this two-fold move towards decartmentalization and accreditation is likely to affect the present state of balance and the governance of the guidance supply still remains to be analysed. In particular, what the accreditation criteria and procedures will consist of still remains to be defined.

OECD • Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

ICT • Information and Communication Technologies

## Main actors in the French vocational guidance system



J - Young people • S - Employees • DE - Job seekers

**ACFCI** • Union of French Chambers of Commerce and Industry

**AFPA** • National association for adult vocational training

**Centres d'orientation AFPA** • Vocational guidance centres

**APEC** • Association for the employment of executives

**APCM** • Union of craftsmen's associations

**CCI** • Union of French Chambers of Commerce and Industry

**CIBC** • Inter-institutional competence appraisal Centres

**CIDJ** • Youth information and documentation centre

**CIO** • Information and guidance centres

**Cités des métiers** • Occupational information platforms

**CMA** • Union of craftsmen's associations

**Fongecif** • Individual vocational training leave fund

**Missions locales** • Youth advisory centres

**Onisep** • National information bureau on education and occupations

**Pôle Emploi** • Employment Agency

**Rectorats** • The regional education authorities

**SCUIO** • Universities' general information and guidance department

**VAE** • Validation of acquired experience

For further details, see the figure and the accompanying list in the original French version of this issue: "La qualité de l'orientation en débat", *Bref* n°264, May 2009.

## Ensuring quality: some lines for action and some unanswered questions

Recent international lines for action have undeniably had an impact on French guidance policies. Present practices in various other countries point to the coexistence of three possible approaches to improving the quality of guidance services.

The first approach involves defining "quality control", in terms of deontological codes and competence standards. It is worth noting that these codes and standards are jointly defined in this case by professional guidance advisers. Canada is a good example of a country using this approach, since the occupational competence standards drawn up in this country were indeed based on the concerted efforts of all those

involved. This has led to the publication of "Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners". These guidelines served as a basis for the international standards published by the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG).

The second approach involves setting up market mechanisms for either developing fee-paying services or organizing State-controlled competition between public and private operators. This creates a special type of market, since it is still regulated by the State, which sets the terms and conditions imposed on private contractors. In theory, competition between contractors is expected to increase the range of services provided and individuals' freedom of choice. The question arises, however, as to whether the market will really have beneficial effects on quality. With a few years' hindsight, the relevance of this option seems to be doubtful, as it is being challenged even at the OECD itself. On the other hand, as far as fee-paying services are concerned, few individuals are prepared to pay for services which, in their opinion, are a public responsibility.

The third approach to improving quality consists in adopting managerial standards which are directly linked to the funding of services and open the way to an accreditation process. These standards include guidance counsellors' qualifications and provide for more specific indicators targeted at measuring results. The public authorities play a central role in setting the norms, mainly for financial control reasons. A typical example of this approach is provided by the United Kingdom, where the Guidance Council – an institution representing the country's career guidance organizations – initiated a process of quality standards definition in 1990. Responsibility for these matters was later taken over by the British public employment office. The standard known as the *Matrix-Quality-Standard* relates mainly to 1) the content of these services and the conditions of access; and 2) the modes of management, especially as regards staff qualifications. To be entitled to state funding, both public and private guidance organizations must be duly accredited by the Guidance Accreditation Board to prove that they comply with current standards.

The introduction of standards certainly seems to be improving the quality of guidance services, if only by imposing regulation of the supply. Some questions still remain to be answered, however, about which option to choose. The quest for the "most appropriate formula" for standardizing the quality of guidance is reflected in the wide range of terms (standards, norms, labels, reference lists or charts) used to qualify the tools involved. The main problem ahead is that of deciding whether the emphasis should be placed on cross-sectional generic quality standards which apply to all existing services, or whether specific

standards should be drawn up for the various segments of the guidance supply, depending in particular on the type of public targeted.

Whichever pathway to reform is eventually chosen, the assessment problems involved in ensuring quality are rather overwhelming. Should assessments bear on specific components of guidance services (receptioning, informing, advising, accompanying, etc.) or on a comprehensive set of interlinked services, structures or networks? On what criteria should these assessments be based: meeting users' needs, applying acceptable conditions of access, providing efficient services? At what decision-making level and under what institutional control should guidance quality be assessed: self-assessment, or assessment by users, fund-providers, etc.?

The existence of these unresolved issues probably explains why so few systematic quality assessments have been regularly carried out so far. This makes it difficult to weigh up public action objectively, especially when the aim is to promote the modes of organization adopted by the most efficient services. The organizational problems involved are equally difficult to solve. The example of France shows that it is difficult to improve the quality of services to citizens in highly segmented systems. In this context, some long-standing assumptions tend to be taken for granted. Less segmented systems are thought to yield a more legible supply and easier and more equitable access, and therefore to generate a higher level of overall satisfaction; and secondly, more decentralized services are thought to increase efficiency because they provide greater proximity. These preconceptions need to be re-examined, however.

It is not easy at present to determine whether decompartmentalizing guidance segments will improve the quality of services, although the financial impact is fairly predictable, since rationalizing the present structures is bound to reduce the overall costs. In addition, geographical proximity is no longer essential, since long-distance services such as telephone platforms and internet portals are now available. In view of the development of ICT and the present knowledge society's increasing need for information, quality no longer seems to depend on geographical proximity, which suggests that it may be worth re-centralizing and unifying this whole network of services. However, guidance is not just a matter of giving people access to information. The need for personal counselling and accompaniment, especially among those who are unable to handle their own informational needs, will continue to involve differentiating between services catering for highly diverse groups of users.

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## Further reading

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- *Quality in careers guidance*, P. Plant, Oecd, 2001. <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/35/47/2698228.pdf>
- "From policy to practice, a systemic change to lifelong guidance in Europe", R. Sultana, Cedefop, *Panorama series*, 149, 2008.
- "Lifelong guidance policies in France and in Europe : where reforms are heading?" Borrás I., Lepii-Centre associé Céreq, Berthet T., Campens E., Romani C., contributors, *NEF* n° 29, 2008.

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