Executive **SUMMARY**

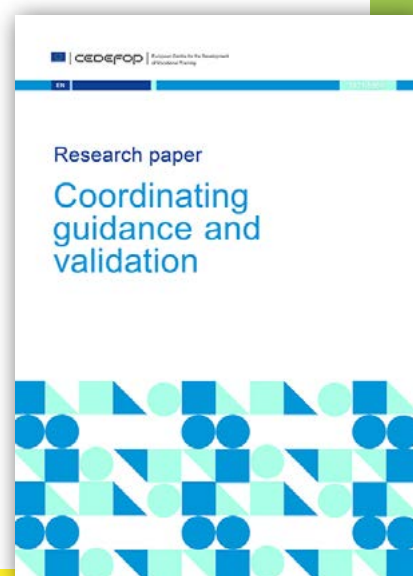# Coordinating guidance and validation

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Research paper
Coordinating guidance and validation

How can career guidance and validation of non-formal and informal learning be better coordinated, so ensuring the most appropriate support to individuals' career decisions and personal development? What conditions will support successful coordination between validation and guidance? How can output coherence between these two services be developed? What are the benefits and the challenges of increased coordination between validation and guidance?

These questions guided the 2017 Cedefop study aiming to explore how to connect validation of non-formal and informal learning and career guidance.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The study featured 13 practices (case studies) of how validation and career guidance are linked in various contexts and institutional settings across Europe. The practices, selected from 12 countries ([1]), aimed to capture different approaches and the extent of coordination between the two services.

A research framework addressed the main research questions and considered macro, meso and micro factors that may shape the relationship between validation and guidance. There were three main components: background/context (for each of the practices selected); practical operation (how things happen on the ground); and overall assessment (organisational and individual benefits, as well as challenges and successes in different forms of relationship between validation and guidance). The research framework was updated during the study to reflect inputs from the successive research phases:

(a) desk research (literature review): gathering information on guidance and validation practices across the selected countries. Theoretical literature (academic and commissioned research, government and technical reports) was also considered;

(b) field research (site visits): elaboration of 13 case studies through individual interviews, focus group discussions and, where possible, observations. The case studies also included beneficiary and practitioner stories, brief testimonials illustrating different aspects of how practices were carried out. They did not aim to describe national approaches to guidance or validation, but to focus on how validation and guidance are connected within a practice.

FORMS OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VALIDATION AND GUIDANCE

The main analytical concepts used in the study were 'coordination' and 'coherence'. 'Coordination' relates to governance mechanisms determined by the institution(s) shaping the relationship between validation and guidance, including:

(a) types of actor involved (public employment services (PES), chambers, trade unions, employers, education institutions, munici-palities, NGOs) and division of tasks and responsibilities among them;

(b) degree of centralisation: either centralised (initiated, managed, monitored and mainly financed by the State) or driven by regional/ local/sectoral partnerships (and part funded by the State, EU, the respective region or sector). Centralised practices may enshrine the connection between validation and guidance in national legislation, policy or strategy;

(c) degree of formalisation of the validation and guidance relationship. Coordination can be achieved in at least three ways:

  (i) formal cooperation between independent services, usually via a shared framework and/or systematic referrals (signposting between services) including standardised procedures;

  (ii) informal cooperation between inde-pendent services; without frameworks to ensure institutional cooperation, personal cooperation between guidance practitioners and validation provider staff plays an important role;

  (iii) integration of services; a single organi-sation usually provides validation and guidance, offering guidance at each stage of the practice.

Such mechanisms determine how and to what extent coherence is achieved. In this study, coherence reflects how well guidance and validation services exchange information with one another (degree of harmonisation of procedures), and how well the two services mutually enable support to individuals. As an example, guidance outputs, such as skills identification, can support certification if they share competence standards and if relevant information is properly documented and transmitted, so that it can be used and further developed.

FACTORS FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICES COORDINATION

The case study analysis found several factors for consideration in assessing coordination between validation and guidance:

([1]) Austria, Czechia, Finland (two practices), France, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and UK-Scotland.

(a) a framework improving coordination between the two. This is defined or driven by national/regional legislation, a strategy, or a network of regional/sectoral partnerships between different stakeholders (including employers and employee organisations). It sets up clear principles, rules or procedures and systematically helps transitions and feedback between guidance and validation. Cooperation between independent services would not be based on goodwill, and/or the contacts/networks of a few practitioners, but institutionalised, with fixed principles common to all parties/stakeholders. However, the existence of a framework does not necessarily guarantee that practitioners will use it;

(b) flexible and free-of-charge guidance provided through all stages of a practice; individualised support when the client needs it, through a combination of delivery forms. This guidance ensures that needs can be updated or readjusted through the stages of the practice. Practitioners must share a common understanding of the aims of the practice, their related roles and responsibilities. Particularly during formal/informal cooperation between independent services, practitioner roles and responsibilities must be clearly assigned: this supports smoother and quicker referrals between the services. Fragmented guidance, with unclear roles and responsibilities, may have a negative effect, with clients feeling they have insufficient support;

(c) coherence of outputs at different stages: using outputs from the early stages of a practice as inputs for subsequent stages ensures consistent application of standards, brings continuity in the delivery of services, and saves practitioner time and effort. More coherent outputs can simplify operation of a shared system, ensure structured interaction among practitioners and deliver more effective information exchange. This is typically the case with individual portfolios: built from early screening stages, updated and aligned, with shared standards and clearly targeted at supporting referrals, further training or certification leading to qualification;

(d) practitioner competences: skilled practitioners are essential to successful coordination, which must accommodate both the specific technical requirements of each activity and the existence of overlaps between them. The roles and competences of practitioners working in guidance and validation may overlap to different degrees, especially in what concerns provision of information screening/profiling of clients and skills assessments. These overlaps create an opportunity for more efficient organisation of activities, which should nevertheless not be made at the expense of service quality. All practitioners need to be adequately trained in their specific relevant roles, while having an understanding of the overall process and practice. In addition to specialised technical competences, all practitioners should have equally important soft skills: empathy for clients, ability to motivate them, communication skills, ability to work in teams, and commitment;

(e) monitoring and evaluation arrangements: collecting data on participant transitions into employment or further education (after validation) can provide evidence of the need for follow-up guidance as well as indicating the quality of the services provided.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

(a) The recommendations are based on the main factors ensuring coordination between guidance and validation: comprehensiveness: provide adequate information and guidance before the decision to undergo validation, through the entire validation process and also after it;

(b) coherence: use common qualifications or competence standards, occupational standards or other reference frameworks through all the stages of the practice to identify, document and assess skills;

(c) ensure quality of staff resources and competences, as well as tools used.

Achieving comprehensiveness requires mechanisms for coordinating and setting up clear links between validation and guidance. This requires political will, agreement between political partners and broad societal support; the latter may come from involving practitioners in developing an appropriate overarching policy or a single legal

framework, which clearly defines objectives, roles and responsibilities. The allocation of necessary human and financial resources (including joint funding through the ESF) should also be considered.

Adequate financial and human resources can help develop comprehensive, systematised and coordinated processes, from outreach to potential candidates and identifying their skills to validating/ certifying their competences. Services coordinating career guidance and validation also add to active labour market policies, including measures for upskilling of low-qualified/skilled adults.

Coherence means developing a common policy strategy or a single legal framework linking guidance and validation across all occupation and education sectors. It requires extensive dialogue and cooperation between a wide range of stakeholders, from policy-makers to teachers/trainers and business associations. Consensus is required on what is to be achieved and how services, roles and functions of practitioners should be defined. Without this, stakeholders will apply different interpretations to guidance and validation and what they are meant to achieve.

A common reference framework for qualifications or competence standards is also needed. Adherence to such a framework ensures that the different tools used to identify, document and assess skills are 'coherent', with continuity between the outputs produced as each builds on the previous one. It guarantees information traceability and prevents the duplication of work, as well as ensuring systematic coordination between different services supplied by separate entities.

Any common qualifications or competence standards framework should be relatable to individuals' non-formal and informal learning experiences to ensure coherence between outputs and continuity in the interpretation of career development needs and goals.

Uniform common standards help in delivering consistent quality guidance and validation services. The quality of services can be improved by focusing on individuals, by responding flexibly to needs, and by considering the readiness of individuals to get engaged in validation and guidance.

The specific roles/functions of guidance and validation practitioners, both in respect of technical and soft skills, should be subject to specialised training throughout all stages. Common training can generate shared understanding of the process and its outputs, and improve the coherence and overall quality of services; it can create balanced teams that cooperate and exchange information well. Elaboration of common guidelines and quality criteria for services develops healthy communication within the team and with clients.

While these recommendations should help improve how validation and guidance services work together, it will be necessary to check that the desired effects are being achieved. Data collection and monitoring will help demonstrate the quality and performance of guidance and validation services and show the effects of any steps taken in support. In turn, coherence between outputs can enable systematic monitoring throughout all stages of guidance and validation, providing feedback to suggest further means of improving the services and their coordinated actions.

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