Developing e-guidance competences: the outcomes of a two-year European project to transform the professional development of career guidance practitioners

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Across Europe, career guidance services are being challenged and potentially transformed by the power of information and communication technologies (ICT). Some view ICT as an alternative to such services; some as a tool; some as an agent of change (Watts, 1996). If career practitioners are to sustain support for their work, it is important that they are equipped to harness its potential to the full. Their e-guidance competences are accordingly crucial to their future as a profession.

Over two years, from November 2007 to October 2009, the ICT Skills 2 project has been funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the Education and Cultural DG of the European Union to design, plan, implement and evaluate a new training path for career guidance practitioners in lifelong learning systems, focusing on their use of ICT media and software. This article briefly explains the background to the project, its rationale and underlying conceptual model, the progress of the UK training pilot and what has been achieved so far. It also discusses wider issues relating to the dissemination of the project and the challenge of achieving synergies between related projects at European level.

Rationale for the project

ICT Skills 2 is the continuation of an earlier EU project (ICT Skills) that developed a methodology for analysing the ICT-related guidance competences required by practitioners. This earlier project carried out an initial mapping and definition of competences relevant to the practitioner role. These were reported in a full project report (Cogoi, 2005) and summarised in two NICEC briefings (Offer & Chiru, 2006; Hawthorn, 2006). The ICT Skills project was commended by the EU as one of its top 50 projects in 2006.

Nine partners from four countries (Italy, Romania, Spain, UK) participated in the second project. The project was led by Aster in Italy, and each of the partners took responsibility for particular project roles (see Box 1).

Box 1: Partners in the ICT Skills 2 project and their main project roles

ASTER (Italy)*
Consortium promoting science, technology and business composed of the Emilia-Romagna regional government, five universities, three national research centres and the entrepreneurial associations of the region. Key tasks:
Project leadership
Dissemination and exploitation of results
Financial issues

MELIUS srl (Italy)
Independent consultancy working in the field of educational and vocational guidance and of lifelong learning. Key tasks:
Project co-ordinator
Skills self-assessment tool
E-practitioner profile
E-portfolio

CYBORG (Italy)
Information technology specialists. Key tasks:
Moodle learning platform for the training pilots
Online forum for project management and communication between partners

CRAC/NICEC (UK)*
NICEC is a Cambridge-based independent organisation of Fellows involved in national and international research and development projects across all sectors of career guidance. Key tasks:
Project quality and evaluation
Revision of competency framework
National context paper

INSTITUTE OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES (Romania)*
A national institute for research and development in education. Key tasks:
Analysis of the context
Romanian pilot
National context paper

CENTRO STUDI PLURIVERSUM (Italy)
Private-sector vocational training and guidance centre for young people and unemployed adults. Key tasks:
Siena pilot
National context paper

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON (UK)
The School of Psychology at the University of East London (UEL) is one of the main centres in the UK for training careers advisers.
Key tasks:
Joint leadership of pilots
UK pilot

FOREM Confederal (Spain)
Not-for-profit training organisation set up by the Comisiones Obreras Trade Union Confederation. Key tasks:
National context paper
Joint leadership of pilots

UNIVERSITY OF SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA (Spain)*
The Faculty of Educational Sciences runs a Master's degree course in vocational guidance. Key tasks:
Training path
Joint leadership of pilots
Spanish pilot
National context paper

Note
* = Partners who participated in the earlier ICT Skills project

The key operational stages in the ICT Skills 2 project were seven-fold:

- To update the national context information for each country, publishing the reports on the new project website (http://www.ictskills2.org) and partners' own organisation websites.
- To revise the map of ICT-related guidance competences as a basis for the development of a training path.
- To design a training path based on the map of competences.
- To develop an online platform (Moodle) complete with a self-assessment tool, an e-practitioner profile, an e-portfolio and training resources linked to the modules in the training path.
- To run pilot training programmes based on part or all of the training path.
- To evaluate the pilots and revise the project tools in the light of them.
- To disseminate and exploit the results of the project nationally and internationally.

The revised map of competences

The original map of competences devised in the earlier ICT Skills project was based on a matrix with three axes:

- Seven guidance tasks, selected from a list of general guidance competences developed by the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (Repetto, 2008). These comprised: assessment; educational guidance; career development; counselling; information management; consultation and co-ordination; research and evaluation; and placement.
- Three sets of competences which guidance practitioners might require for using ICT in guidance: as a *resource* within their direct relationship with the client; as a *medium* for communicating with the client (e.g. email, telephone, videoconferencing); and to *develop* ICT-based guidance materials.
- Eight ICT tools: email, chat, newsgroup, website, SMS, telephone, software, videoconferencing. It was envisaged that as other technologies emerged, they could be added to the matrix.

Competences were defined as being an amalgam of knowledge, skills and attitudes.

In adapting this map for the purposes of designing a training path, the ICT Skills 2 project sought a more parsimonious structure, rationalising and reducing the number of competences in order to minimise repetition and reduce the burden of assessment. In addition, the project introduced a number of further modifications:

- Recognising that the role of the guidance practitioner incorporated activities and tasks related not only to developing but also to managing the use of ICT in guidance.
- Acknowledging that the map needed to encompass new media and software with emerging applications in guidance. Web 2.0 technologies, for instance, have developed rapidly since the earlier project, and individual guidance practitioners are becoming increasingly aware that they need to accommodate the widening expectations of clients who use the social web in their everyday lives.
- Distinguishing four interrelated areas where the use of ICT can enhance the client's career learning and development. The analysis is taken from Lim & Tay (2003) who developed a framework for showing how ICT can be used to engage elementary-school students in higher-order thinking. The four areas are:
  - informing – the use of ICT to help clients access and make use of careers information, e.g. courses and jobs databases;
  - experiencing – the use of ICT to help clients learn from virtual experiences, e.g. online simulations;

- constructing – the use of ICT to help clients understand themselves and their situation, e.g. e-portfolios, online assessment tests;
- communicating – the use of ICT to help clients access their networks of support and make moves, e.g. video calls, emails, online application forms.

A summary of the revised map is presented in Box 2. The map has two units, six elements and 28 sub-elements. The complete training path based on this map consists of 30 training modules, where each module equates to 25 hours work and is rated at 30 ECTS credits (equivalent to 750 hours of study).

Box 2: Summary of the ICT Skills 2 map of ICT-related competences for guidance practitioners

Unit 1: Use ICT to deliver guidance

1.1: Use ICT media and software in the guidance process to meet clients' information needs
1.1.1: Select and use visual, audio and text-based information
1.1.2: Make visual, audio and text-based information for clients
1.1.3: Enable clients to select and use visual, audio and text-based information for themselves
1.1.4: Enable clients to create visual, audio and text-based information
1.1.5: Share information with other partners in clients' networks of support

1.2: Use ICT media and software in the guidance process to meet clients' experiential learning needs
1.2.1: Select and use ICT media and software that will give your clients access to virtual and simulated career experiences and situations
1.2.2: Create experiential learning activities and simulations for your clients using ICT
1.2.3: Enable clients to access virtual and simulated career experiences and situations using ICT media and software

1.3: Use ICT media and software in the guidance process to meet clients' constructivist learning needs
1.3.1: Select and use ICT media and software to assist clients in structuring and managing their career thinking and development
1.3.2: Create activities and resources using ICT media and software that will assist clients in structuring and managing their career thinking and development
1.3.3: Enable clients to use ICT media and software to assist them in structuring and managing their career thinking and development

1.4: Use ICT media and software in the guidance process to meet clients' communication needs
1.4.1: Select and use ICT media and software for establishing and maintaining client communications
1.4.2: Create activities and resources using ICT media and software for establishing and maintaining client communications
1.4.3: Enable clients to use ICT media and software to establish and maintain communications with you and others who can help them in their careers
1.4.4: Select appropriate channels for communicating and consulting with others who can support the client in the guidance process

Unit 2: Develop and manage the use of ICT in guidance

2.1: Develop your use of ICT-related guidance solutions
2.1.1: Use ICT media and software in different combinations to achieve guidance objectives
2.1.2: Integrate ICT and face-to-face approaches, where appropriate, to ensure an effective guidance process for clients
2.1.3: Identify the training and support needs of clients to enable their use of ICT in guidance
2.1.4: Carry out administrative tasks related to the use of ICT media and software
2.1.5: Monitor, review and evaluate ICT-related guidance solutions using ICT
2.1.6: Address your own training and support needs to enable you to use ICT in guidance

2.2: Manage your use of ICT-related guidance solutions in a service context
2.2.1: Identify opportunities and constraints in the service's use of ICT in guidance
2.2.2: Apply safeguards to protect clients using ICT for guidance purposes
2.2.3: Identify ways of ensuring fairness and inclusion in providing a guidance service using ICT
2.2.4: Maintain service records using ICT-based management information systems
2.2.5: Promote community awareness and take-up of the service's ICT-related guidance provision
2.2.6: Collaborate with professional colleagues in the delivery and development of ICT-related guidance
2.2.7: Collaborate with ICT developers in the organisation and development of ICT-supported client services

The role of the career guidance practitioner as envisaged in the map, therefore, is to combine the appropriate ICT media and software (phone, internet, email, etc.) with the appropriate guidance interventions (giving information, holding conversations, running small-group work, etc.) to enable the career learning and development processes of

informing, experiencing, constructing and communicating. This further involves taking into account the characteristics of the clients, the work setting and the nature of the service being offered, all of which have implications for delivery.

The map provided the basis not only for the training programmes but also for some other tools developed to support the programmes. These included an e-practitioner profile, a skills assessment tool to be used before and after the programme (where the 28 sub-elements were broken down further into 140 self-assessment items), and an e-portfolio.

The pilot training programmes

An important feature of the project has been the way in which the *medium* of the project has mirrored its *message*. The working methodology of the project, for example, combined six-monthly face-to-face transnational meetings with an online forum for day-to-day exchanges, supplemented by conferences on Skype as and when required. The forums proved to be an effective way of managing the 'work packages' or tasks of the project. Whichever partner was leading on a particular work package took responsibility for posting documents and messages in the section of the forum created for the purpose.

Similarly, in the training pilots, the choice between face-to-face and distance contact (text-only and/or audio and/or video), and the blending of different formats within the training provision, have in principle provided opportunities for reflecting upon how similar choices/blending might be applied (a) with guidance clients and (b) in professional/organisational practice with colleagues. An example was the view that face-to-face contact was important where possible for building relationships, which could then provide a base for continued distance contact (such issues in a guidance context might provide the basis for a future research project).

The UK pilot, based at the University of East London, was one of five training programmes. Each pilot was set up differently, and varied in terms of the number of participants, the sectors that participants came from, the balance of face-to-face and e-learning elements, and the models of assessment, accreditation and evaluation. Some of the key similarities and differences are summarised in Box 3. These differences of approach accommodated local needs and requirements, demonstrating that the map of competences was flexible and versatile enough to be used internationally.

Box 3: Similarities and differences between local pilot training programmes

Course structure	Most of the pilots adopted a modular structure for the course content based on the 28 sub-elements of the competence framework. The UK pilot opted for a smaller number of topics made up of groupings of sub-elements/modules.
Training content	The pilots in Milan and Santiago followed a training schedule which covered the whole of the framework. The pilot in Siena focused on selected elements of the framework for group training. The UK pilot also selected elements of the framework but personalised participants' learning further by enabling them to identify their own 'focus for development'.
Blended learning	The Romanian pilot was launched with three days of initial face-to-face training followed up by e-learning. The Milan pilot ran for four months with face-to-face training mostly on Saturdays; some practitioners participated in the weekend training by teleconference. The five-week UK pilot started and finished with a face-to-face session.
Assessment model	Several pilots used a competence-based model of assessment. The UK pilot re-framed the competence statements as learning outcomes.
Accreditation model	Milan and Santiago offered participants university accreditation. The UK pilot awarded certificates of participation pending further discussions about setting up an accredited course in the future.
Evaluation model	The Siena pilot used a pre- and post-programme self-assessment questionnaire which used a numerical scale to measure impact. The Santiago pilot opted for a quantitative evaluation based on a post-programme questionnaire with rating scales. The UK pilot adopted a reflective method based on an open-ended questionnaire and focus group.

Box 4: UK pilot topics	
Topic	Related training path modules
1. The range of ICT media and software relevant to organisation and client needs	1.1.1, 1.2.1, 1.3.1, 1.4.1
2. Supporting clients' use of selected media and software (mediated) and enabling clients' independent use of resources (non-mediated within the guidance process)	1.1.2, 1.1.3, 1.1.4, 1.1.5, 1.2.1, 1.2.2, 1.2.3, 1.3.1, 1.3.2, 1.3.3, 1.4.1, 1.4.2, 1.4.3, 1.4.4
3. Fairness and inclusion in access to media and software	2.2.3
4. Current and future developments in the use of ICT in guidance	2.2.6, 2.2.7
5. Methods for monitoring, reviewing and evaluating the use of ICT in guidance	1.1.1, 1.1.5, 2.1.1,

The UK pilot comprised ten participants working mainly in the 14-19 sector (Connexions) but also in higher education and with adults. The aim was to offer a five-week course, equivalent to 25 study hours, based on a selection of modules in the training path (see Box 4).

Participants would have liked more time and several said that they would continue to use the platform after the pilot. They also made helpful suggestions about how the platform and the tools could be improved. They readily acknowledged the value and relevance of the learning and felt that ICT was an area that needed to be further addressed within the guidance community. The comments of one participant reflect this general feeling:

'Once I got into the project I really enjoyed it. I was not quite sure what to expect from the project when I volunteered to be involved and was secretly hoping for something new and wonderful as an ICT tool to help my in my work. The realisation as I undertook various tasks was that the idea was to become aware of what I already knew and the huge amount that I did not, to gain a better understanding of the range of ICT related things out there that I was aware of only in name (like wikis and blogs) and how much these were being used by some of the clients I could be working with and the potential effectiveness if I could incorporate these into my work which will be much more necessary as time moves on and technologies continue to move on at a pace.'

Issues arising from the UK pilot and from the project

The professional formation of guidance practitioners

A key issue for the project has been how to ensure that the ideas and resources created by the project have an influence on the professional formation of career guidance practitioners at both national and European levels.
In the UK, for example, the two units created by the ICT Skills 2 project lend themselves to being incorporated into an initial professional development framework for guidance practitioners or to being used in continuing professional development contexts in various ways. They could, for instance, be used to create a specialist, stand-alone qualification in the use of ICT in guidance; or they could be used in the design of a postgraduate module as part of a wider qualification such as a Master's degree in career guidance.

Until now, professional development frameworks and occupational standards for career guidance practitioners have regarded the acquisition of ICT skills as a discrete area of technical competence. Separating it out as a core or foundation competence allows ICT to be marginalised as a bolted-on skill rather than one which permeates and is an integral part of all other competences. Arguably it should be viewed as a transversal competence.

Far from being an occasionally relevant tool, ICT is a powerful medium through which career guidance practice can be transformed. Some advisers are still ambivalent about this. Issues of motivation, confidence and vision affect the take-up by individuals of new technologies in guidance, as does lack of clarity about what effective practice in ICT-mediated career guidance looks like in guidance services. Recognition of the strategic role of ICT in powering change in the career guidance field is beginning to be recognised in a number of countries (Watts, in preparation), but it must also be reflected in the provision of wider training in ICT-related skills for practitioners.

From 'provider-led' to 'user-led' guidance services

Discussions with participants in the UK pilot highlighted the tension between 'provider-led' and 'user-led' guidance service design (see Box 5). Young people, in particular, have a fluency in using the 'social web' which is not matched by guidance practitioners at large. Not only are individual practitioners involved in a game of 'catch up' but some services are lagging behind in adopting innovative service delivery models. This is partly linked to uncertain policy-making at different levels but also to a lack of evidence-based practice about the relative effectiveness of different e-guidance approaches.

Box 5: 'Provider-led' and 'user-led' services

	Provider-led services	User-led services
Accessibility of the service	Opening hours that are convenient for the provider, typically Monday-Friday, 9.00-5.00	Extended opening hours, into evenings and weekends
Location of the service	In provider-owned spaces, e.g. careers centre	In shared spaces, e.g. on the Web, in shopping centres
Use of ICT	Supportive, e.g. e-mail, information databases, matching programmes, record-keeping and tracking	Transformative, e.g. instant messaging and texting, user-generated content, networking, paperless

Return on investment

The use of ICT in guidance raises important issues about impact, productivity and return on investment. The cost of training staff and providing ICT-based services has to be set against the comparative cost of providing traditional services as well as any additional benefits related to access. This is a relatively little-addressed area in the UK and one which would benefit from further research (Watts & Dent, 2007; Barnes, 2008; Sampson, 2009).

The European impulse and the dissemination and exploitation of results

A number of European policies and initiatives have provided a strong measure of support for enhancing career guidance based in part on developing the potential of ICT both as a medium and as a resource for guidance. These include the establishment of a Lifelong Guidance Expert Group (2000), the issuing of two Council of Ministers resolutions (2004 and 2008) and the setting up of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (2007). These developments have raised the policy profile of career guidance and have made it more important that projects such as ICT Skills 2 disseminate and exploit their results.

The ICT Skills 2 partners are actively pursuing the idea of creating new partnerships among themselves and with new partners to disseminate and exploit the results of the project at both national and European levels. Added impetus for this came from participants in the pilots who indicated that they would have liked to extend the use of the international room on the Moodle platform and to meet participants and trainers from other countries face-to-face. Such collaboration over training has become more feasible since the introduction of the European Training Credits Framework.

In the UK, national actions taken so far have included initial contacts with ENTO, the body which develops individuals in the workplace through the use of national occupational standards, and with Lifelong Learning UK, which is reviewing the qualifications for career guidance practitioners.

The ICT Skills 2 project has overlapped at least partially with a number of related European projects (see Box 6). Concerted efforts have been made to achieve synergies with these projects. Various factors have helped to support these links including personnel and organisations common to more than one project, the use of existing international professional networks and the enhanced emphasis of national and European policy-makers on achieving improved dissemination and exploitation of results.

Box 6: Some related European projects

European Accreditation Scheme (EAS) (EAS, 2008). This EU-funded project (2006-08) involved 40 organisations/associations with the aim of improving professional qualifications and identifying minimum occupational standards for guidance practitioners. The project identified a number of competences for assessment that were common to all tasks that a practitioner might be expected to undertake, one of which was 'use ICT for guidance purposes'. This approach to embedding the use of ICT in all guidance activities is consistent with the ICT Skills 2 methodology. The additional detail provided by the ICT Skills 2 competence framework enables training providers to plan a comprehensive programme of professional learning and development activities for guidance practitioners.

European Career Guidance Certificate (ECGC). This EU-funded project (2007-09) has ten partners and is led by Melius, the co-ordinator of the ICT Skills 2 project. The aim is to develop a standardised and internationally transferable certification system for career guidance practitioners. The ECGC partners have built on the MEVOC project and on ICT Skills 1 and 2 in carrying out their project.

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Professionalising career guidance – practitioner competences and qualification routes in Europe (CEDEFOP, 2009). This survey of the variability of training provision for career guidance staff across Europe proposes a competence framework which could be used flexibly to achieve greater consistency in training provision for such staff. Consistent with the EAS approach, this report identifies the ability to use 'information and communication technologies' as one of six foundation competences. Trainees and their trainers and assessors are able to identify ways in which ICT could be used to demonstrate the performance of other client interaction and supporting competences. The ICT Skills 2 framework complements this approach very well. In a sense, it reverses the perspective by offering a more explicit focus on the applied ICT skills needed to transform career guidance practice. It foregrounds the use of ICT to support the development of e-guidance and blended guidance solutions.

eguidance and egovernment services (egos). This project (2008-11) is co-funded by the European Commission and involves 22 partner organisations from four countries. It aims to provide e-guidance to all-age clients in their homes over the internet and from indoor and outdoor kiosks in public centres and remote areas. E-guidance practitioners will be trained using the ICT Skills 2 competence framework, self-assessment tool, e-portfolio and e-learning platform.

What next?

The transformation of the professional development of career guidance practitioners is far from complete. Several options have been considered at the end of the ICT Skills 2 project for continuing the developments that are under way. The project's open-source platform will continue to be hosted by one of the partners, making it accessible to partners and guests. It is also likely in the case of the UK pilot that the content will be transferred to the University of East London's own e-learning platform as and when an accredited course is developed in the future. Several partners are interested in establishing multi-lateral agreements with each other and to collaborate on a new project (ICT Skills 3?) which would enhance training and accreditation, ideally including the involvement of some new partners.

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