

# Policy issues relating to the use of ICT in lifelong guidance

A.G. Watts

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## Introduction

This morning's discussions represent an exciting intersection between two important initiatives in supporting the development of lifelong guidance within Europe. One is the series of ad hoc conferences on the use of ICT in guidance, of which the event that started yesterday and will conclude today is the sixth. The other initiative is the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network, whose fifth Plenary Meeting starts today.

I plan to say a little about the origins and nature of both initiatives. I will then outline some of the ways in which ICT has been addressed in ELGPN activities to date. Next, I will explore some of the ways in which the transformational potential of ICT is being addressed in a number of all-age services that I regard as being at the cutting edge of current service-delivery development. Finally, I will discuss a few topical issues emerging from these and other case-studies.

## The European conferences on ICT in guidance

The first European conference on ICT in guidance was held at Brussels in 1985. This was followed by Cambridge in 1989 (with a teleconference link with a simultaneous conference held in the USA), by Nürnberg in 1992, by Dublin in 1996, and by Gothenburg in 2001. Each has been an autonomous event, but with an element of continuity to enhance their quality and impact.

In the course of the six conferences, the focus of our attention has shifted. In the first three, the main focus was on computer-aided guidance systems, developed by publicly-funded projects or by commercial providers, for guidance services to make available to their clients. In the Dublin conference of 1996, the main focus shifted to the Internet, but mainly still with national or even international websites, and how – in comparison with the previous computer-aided systems – they could be made available to end-users much more immediately and accessibly.

Then in Gothenburg in 2001, the focus moved to the digital era, in which the hitherto separate analogue streams of the computer, television and telephone were increasingly merging. This enabled a wider range of

technologies to be considered in a more integrated way. It also meant that attention was now paid to ICT not just as a *resource* for counsellors and clients to use, but also as a *medium* through which direct counsellor-client interactions could be conducted – whether synchronously (e.g. telephone) or asynchronously (e.g. email).

Now, in 2009, this sixth conference needs to shift at least part of its focus once again, to take account of Web 2.0 technology and its potential for social networking. I will make a few brief comments on this later.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that while the focus of attention has changed, the core underlying issue has remained much the same. In a paper I presented at the first conference in Brussels in 1985, I suggested that ICT could be seen in three ways: as a tool, as an alternative, or as an agent of change (Watts, 1986). In my view, this remains the key policy issue. Policy-makers have often tended to view it in one of the first two guises: either as a supplement to existing services or as a potentially cheaper substitute for such services. But the dramatic technological changes I have mentioned greatly increase the potential of ICT for transforming the nature of guidance services and the ways in which they are delivered. I will indicate later in the paper some examples of the ways in which this potential is being addressed, and some issues which this poses.

## The ELGPN

The roots of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) can be traced back to the historic meeting of the European Council at Lisbon in March 2000, which declared the European Union's aspiration to become 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world' by the year 2010. Engagement in lifelong learning was acknowledged as one of the key ways through which this goal could be achieved. The Commission's subsequent Communication on Lifelong Learning (EC, 2001) emphasised the key role of lifelong access to guidance in this respect.

The Communication included a recommendation that a European Guidance Forum be established. In the event, this was deferred, and instead the Commission established an Expert Group on Lifelong Guidance. This group operated from 2002 to 2007, and provided a focal point for a number of significant developments. In particular, it developed common reference tools for use by member-states on the aims and principles of lifelong guidance

provision, criteria for assessing quality, and key features of a lifelong guidance system: these were designed to encourage convergence of guidance delivery systems. The reference tools were included in the policy handbook published jointly with OECD (OECD/EC, 2004).

The Expert Group also played an important role in fostering a Resolution of the EU Council of Education Ministers passed under the Irish Presidency in 2004. Particularly significant was its strong affirmation of a proactive approach, under which use of guidance services was to be positively promoted. The Resolution stated that: 'Services need to be available at times and in forms which will encourage all citizens to continue to develop their skills and competences throughout their lives, linked to changing needs in the labour market.' It added: 'Such services need to be viewed as an active tool, and individuals should be positively encouraged to use them.' This is a crucial statement, which potentially places extending access to services through ICT at the heart of the policy discourse.

The Expert Group did much valuable work. Its chief weakness, however, was that it was not representative of all the member-states, and therefore had difficulties in translating its efforts into effective action at member-state level. The Commission, recognising these limitations, indicated its willingness to support the development of a voluntary European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network which would be led by the member-states themselves and would also be open to candidate and European Economic Area countries. The member-states agreed to adopt this suggestion, and the Network was established in 2007.

The ELGPN was given formal recognition in a further Resolution of the Council of Education Ministers passed under the French Presidency in 2008. This set the agenda for the Network's current two-year programme, which includes four major Work Packages:

- Career management skills (WP1). What are the skills and competences which are needed for career development, at different stages? Should the development of these skills and competences be the main goal of lifelong guidance services? How can they best be developed? How can their development be addressed in the training of guidance practitioners and teachers?
- Access (WP2). How can citizens' access to lifelong guidance be extended? What is the role of technology in this respect, and of marketing of services? How can effective balances be struck between universal services available to all and targeted services addressed to those with distinctive and pressing needs?
- Quality (WP4). How is the quality of lifelong guidance services best assured? Could a common EU quality-assurance framework be created? How can a stronger evidence base for such quality assurance be developed, including better impact measures?
- Co-operation and co-ordination mechanisms in guidance practice and policy development (WP3). A number of participating countries have set up national guidance forums and similar co-ordination mechanisms (see CEDEFOP, 2008). What are the key roles of such mechanisms? How can their links with policy development be refined?

The relationship between these four themes is outlined in Figure 1. In brief, WP3 (co-operation and co-ordination mechanisms) addresses the policy process; WP2 (access) and WP4 (quality) examine two key cross-sectoral policy issues; WP1 (career management skills) addresses the sought citizen outcomes; and the other part of WP4 (impact measures) addresses the sought policy outcomes.

In addition, as indicated in Figure 2, there are two Task Groups, which operate transversally across the thematic activities of the Work Packages. The first is concerned with monitoring EU education/training and employment policy development from a lifelong guidance perspective. The second is concerned with promoting synergy between EU-funded projects on lifelong guidance and establishing closer links between these projects and public policy both at EU level and within member countries.

### Attention paid by ELGPN to ICT

The present event is of particular relevance to the work of the second ELGPN Task Group, in two respects. First, the conference on e-guidance has been the result of discussions within an EU-funded project on ICT skills for guidance counsellors, as part of its programme both for dissemination and for building synergies with other projects related to the use of ICT skills in guidance. Second, today's programme is concerned directly with addressing some of the policy issues raised by these projects. Thus the event reflects both parts of the Task Group's brief.

The ICT skills project addresses a key policy issue. If guidance practitioners are to transform their services to take advantage of the potential provided by ICT, it is crucial that they should be trained in ICT skills. The first ICT skills project developed a methodology for analysing the ICT-related guidance competences required by practitioners (Cogoi, 2005). This has been followed by a second project, just being completed, which has developed a training path based on a modification of this methodology. Both projects have been led by Aster in Italy; partners in the second project were from Italy, Romania, Spain and the UK. Synergies have been established with four other European

projects concerned with the training and accreditation of guidance practitioners, including the eGOS project which is a co-organiser of this event. In addition, strong attention has been paid to four aspects of so-called 'exploitation', which the project has helpfully distinguished:

- *Sustainability*: ensuring that the work of the project can be sustained in the partner countries beyond the project's life. This includes:
  - *Maintenance*: sustaining the training provision trialled in the project pilots.
  - *Multiplication*: ensuring that the work of the project is adopted by other training providers within the partner countries.
  - *Mainstreaming*: ensuring that the work of the project is reflected in relevant professional standards, accreditation structures etc. within the partner countries.
- *Transferability*: ensuring that the benefits of the project can be transferred to other European countries.

In all of these respects, the project has positive outcomes to report. It thus provides an example of good practice for ELGPN's Task Group 2 to draw upon.

In addition to this, all four of the ELGPN Work Packages have paid some attention to the role of ICT. In relation to WP1 on career management skills, for example, a Reflection Note on the initial discussions has pointed out that the opportunities being provided by ICT are increasingly being exploited to change the usual delivery paradigm. It refers, as an example, to the way in which Careers Scotland is making good use of webcasts, videoconferencing and social networking (such as Facebook) to ensure 24/7 access (Sultana, 2009a, p.9).

In the case of WP4, ICT has not been given specific attention in the papers that have emerged so far. But important issues for WP4 include how quality-assurance systems need to be adapted to apply to ICT-based services, and how evidence of their relative impact in relation to more conventional face-to-face services can be collected.

The issue of ICT is perhaps of particular importance in relation to the work of WP2 on access. In the Briefing Note based on a SWOT analysis carried out by some of the WP2 participants, ICT-based approaches were listed by all respondents as the key tools for extending access (Akkök, 2009a). The Reflection Note on WP2's first meeting (Akkök, 2009b) indicated that new technology – in the form of web-based services, telephone services, databases and e-guidance – had great potential for making access both more possible and cheaper, generating innovative and flexible service delivery linked to self-access and self-help

modes. But it also noted that care was needed not to reduce everything to self-help. Qualified staff were required to support access to information and making good use of it. Also, it pointed out, excessive use of ICT could reinforce access problems for some groups in society that were already at risk of social exclusion.

Finally, ICT has also emerged, perhaps more unexpectedly, as a significant theme in relation to the work of WP3 on co-operation and co-ordination mechanisms. The Reflection Note on WP3's first meeting (Watts, 2009b) indicated that an important issue arising from the Slovenian case-study (which provided one of the focal points of the meeting) was the integrative potential of ICT. This case-study is of particular relevance to our discussions here, and therefore merits more detailed attention.

### The integrative potential of ICT

In Slovenia, a common web portal is being developed by a number of partner organisations representing different sectors of education, training and employment. Entitled 'My Choice', it brings together a number of different databases, with a 'front end' constructed from the viewpoint of the user. This is based on an acknowledgement that much of the information that users seek in constructing their careers is about pathways across these different sectors. Sector-based provision does not therefore address their needs.

The web portal is jointly funded and jointly owned by the partner organisations. Their formal agreement includes attention to updating and sustainability. Some of the development funding has been provided by the EU, through DG Employment. The portal is being designed initially to address the needs of young people, but within a lifelong context. It includes a personal portfolio, which is password-protected. Attention is being given to strengthening cross-paths across the databases (on, for example, the vocational implications of educational choices).

The main merits of this approach are three-fold:

- That it shares costs.
- That it places the needs of the user at the centre of service design, and is therefore more likely to attract users.
- That in both of these respects, each partner gains added value from the involvement of the others.

There might be three levels at which such a system could be developed:

- Boundary-drawing: avoiding overlaps.
- Co-ordinated: with a common front-end.

- Integrated: designed on the basis of common principles, with strong cross-paths across the databases.

The potential implications of such a system could however be much more extensive, especially if:

- All pupils were introduced to, and encouraged to use, the web portal as part of their school curriculum, including setting up their e-portfolio.
- Training was provided to all career guidance staff on how to make effective use of the web portal and incorporate it in their service provision.
- The websites included 'hot links' to interactive e-counselling support through telephone, web chat or email (in the Slovenian case, this is currently limited to a few opportunities for email contact).
- They also included strong references to supportive face-to-face career counselling resources wherever they existed, thus making the lifelong guidance system transparent to the user.
- This was linked to jointly agreed quality standards (only provision meeting these standards was listed).
- The quality standards were linked to a brand which provided a basis for joint marketing.

If such steps were taken, ICT would be acting not just as a tool but also as a powerful agent of change in the development of a more integrated lifelong guidance system. It could thus be the means through which service providers could transform their separate, sector-based and provider-centred provision into a user-centred lifelong guidance system, with the website (including the user's e-portfolio) conceptually at the centre, supported by co-ordinated sectoral provision. A national forum or other co-ordination mechanism could help to realise its potential in this respect.

The integrative potential of ICT is also being explored, for example, in Turkey. Here a web-based all-age career information system has been in the process of development, based on close co-operation between a number of governmental and social partners plus other stakeholders. A memorandum of understanding has been signed defining the roles of different parties in sharing their databases and contributing to the updating and sustainability of the system. This memorandum could provide the seeds for a national forum. Funding for the system has so far, however, been provided by a donor initiative: a key issue is how to sustain it once this funding ceases.

### ICT as an agent of strategic change

For further case-studies, I want to draw upon three all-age careers services which I have reviewed over the last few years, in Scotland (Watts, 2005), Wales (Watts, 2009) and

New Zealand (Watts, 2007). These three services represent, in my view, the three leading examples of such all-age services in the world. They are of particular interest in relation to strategic change because one of their strengths is that they are able to think more broadly and more systematically about the nature and applicability of their professionalism, the allocation of their resources across the whole population, and the links between career guidance and public policy, than is the case with age-segmented services, particularly those that are embedded in particular service sectors (e.g. schools and colleges). Working in close partnership with other guidance providers (including schools, colleges, universities, public employment services, employers, the voluntary and community sector, and the private sector), they can provide a professional spine for a lifelong guidance system (Watts, in press). In my reviews, all emerged very strongly in relation to the benchmarks provided by the OECD Career Guidance Policy Review (OECD, 2004), suggesting that such all-age services may make it easier to develop a strong a coherent lifelong guidance system than in countries which do not have a spine of this kind. In all three cases, the use of ICT as an agent of strategic change is currently being given significant attention.

Careers Wales indicates an existing example of some of the ways in which services might develop if ICT is used strategically, along the lines I have suggested in relation to Slovenia. From an early stage it viewed its web-based services, Careers Wales On-Line (CWOL), as being core to its service delivery. This includes a variety of databases and career planning tools. The databases cover educational, occupational and labour market information. At the heart of the site is an e-portfolio, designed to enable users to record, review and reflect on their career and learning journey. The vision, as declared in the CWOL brochure, is 'to enable everyone in Wales to develop their career and learning skills through their own e-portfolio and supporting site content'.

Of particular significance is the fact that while CWOL has been designed as a guidance tool, it is currently being adopted as the key administrative tool for supporting the structure of Learning Pathways that is being introduced for all 14-19-year-olds. Learners will have to make their choices through the system; schools and networks will then be able to download these choices into their management information systems, where they can use the data to support their timetabling.

This potentially places CWOL in particular and Careers Wales in general in a pivotal position. The vast majority of young people are likely in future to be using CWOL continuously between the ages of 14 and 19. Because it has been designed initially as a guidance tool rather than an administrative tool, it is learner-centred and user-friendly. Since their e-portfolio is housed there, potentially as the basis for sustaining their curriculum vitae, and including the individual's personal bank of relevant information resources, there is a chance that they will

continue to use it. In which case, it could genuinely become the basis for their lifelong career development, with their e-portfolio surrounded by other resources – including signposts to other Careers Wales services – that they can access for support. The key will be whether they regard their e-portfolio as something they own, and therefore want to maintain; or as something they associate with school and with obligation, and accordingly want to leave behind. In principle, however, it provides a strong base on which to build, especially if further ‘hooks’ can be developed to encourage them to use it post-19 (Watts, 2009a).

In the case of Scotland, the all-age service provided by Careers Scotland is currently being integrated with some other organisations into a new body called Skills Development Scotland. The new organisation is seeking to transform its services through investment in innovative technology. For individuals, the key goal is defined as being to foster career agility and career self-management skills. The route into self-management of lifelong learning is to be through a web-based resource entitled My Learning Space. This will include a variety of self-diagnostic tools and other resources, including an e-portfolio and access to a section termed My Learning Account, which will ultimately provide a single entry point to skills and learning funding across the skills and learning system – a further example of an administrative usage which can incentivise the use of a guidance resource. My Learning Space will be complemented by a resource to be called My Coach which will provide live, 24/7, person-to-person access to information, advice and guidance through a range of channels that will include the telephone, live internet, and face-to-face contact in learning centres and careers centres (Skills Development Scotland, 2009). The two resources are seen as being mutually supportive.

Broadly similar changes are under way in New Zealand. The aim is to extend the services to many more New Zealanders, and to do so on the basis of being cost-effective and providing value for money. The core goal is defined as being building or supporting ‘career literacy’, defined as ‘the ability for people to self-manage their careers in the future’. Effective use of ICT is seen as crucial to the strategy. The proposed delivery model is based on a shift in resource allocation over time from regional face-to-face activity to centralised web- and telephone-based personal services. The regional face-to-face activity will focus more strongly on building the career-development skills of others and providing guidance to those most in need.

### Some issues

Five issues related to these various examples are worth noting.

First, the focus on what in Scotland is called ‘career agility’ and in New Zealand ‘career literacy’ has a clear link to the focus of ELGPN’s Work Package 1 on career management skills. Such skills need to be significantly developed in schools, and enhanced thereafter. Some policy-makers may be tempted to think that if this approach is adopted, it will obviate the need for personal one-to-one services. Experience suggests, however, that the reverse is the case: that one of the key career management skills is to know when and how to access such services – including ICT-mediated services. The result should be not the replacement of such services but enabling their usage to be more effective and more client-driven.

Second, ICT is clearly seen as critical to scaling up the supply of services on a cost-effective basis. This requires attention to productivity: achieving greater outputs from inputs (Watts & Dent, 2006). In these terms, an important distinction needs to be drawn between ICT-mediated counsellor-client interactions, through such media as the telephone, email and online chat, and standardised ICT-based resources like websites which can be repeatedly used by different users without additional resource costs (Watts, 2002).

Evidence from the UK suggests that well-designed websites may have the effect both of substantially increasing levels of usage, and of enabling use of counsellor time to be more selective and sophisticated. The impressive user volumes of the Careers Advice Service (formerly LearnDirect Advice) represent a particularly strong response to the EU Resolution’s injunction on access. It is interesting to note, however, that over recent years its numbers of web sessions have increased massively (to over 12 million web sessions a year), that its number of telephone sessions has reduced a little (from over a million a year to a little under a million), and that its telephone sessions are increasingly used for in-depth guidance rather than relatively straightforward information and advice (Watts & Dent, 2008).

Third, the telephone supported by callcentre technology remains an important and, in some countries, still significantly underdeveloped resource. A number of European countries are currently developing career guidance callcentres, or considering their development: these include Finland, France and Germany. A non-European country which is also exploring this at present is South Africa. One of the key arguments there has been that, while many people in disadvantaged communities do not have access to the web, most of them do have telephone access through the pervasive use of mobile phones (Walters *et al.*, 2009). For the same reason, some Public Employment Services in European countries (e.g. Spain) are giving or lending mobile phones to the unemployed in order to facilitate the dissemination of relevant information, and to help them to keep linked both

to their PES adviser and to potential employers (Sultana, 2009b). As mobile phones become multimedia devices able to transport not just voice but text, pictures, software programs, access to the internet, and anything else coded in digital format, they are increasingly taking over from stationary PCs and mobile laptops.

Fourth, the issue of whether the service structure for ICT-based services should be centralised or localised remains an important policy question. The trend seems to be towards centralisation, chiefly on grounds of cost and efficiency. This is the case in New Zealand, as noted earlier. It is also true in Wales, where four regional callcentres have been merged into one, on the basis that the cost-efficiency arguments outweighed those in favour of local knowledge. Nonetheless, in Wales some calls are transferred to locally-based services, thus building a sense of collective ownership of an integrated service (Watts, 2009).

Finally, a key issue for all services is how to utilise the new opportunities offered by Web 2.0 technology and social networking. The Scottish plan includes reference to using this technology to capture and make available up-to-date user-generated information. A number of sites in the UK and elsewhere already offer opportunities for people to converse with others in a similar situation to themselves, and/or those with experience of particular courses or occupations that they want to consider (Skills Commission, 2008). Good career guidance services have always seen part of their role as being to place their clients in contact with such resources. But the new technology enables such practices to be massively increased. More fundamentally, it challenges the power elements built into the traditional expert-client relationship, and – extended by the next generation of technological changes, beginning to be discussed as Web 3.0 technology – could significantly reshape this relationship in career guidance as in other fields.

## Conclusions

The potential of ICT to act as an agent of transformational change is greater than ever before. Sampson (2009) has recently suggested that the two aspects of guidance service delivery with which the ELGPN is concerned – access and quality – might at times be in some tension with one another. He has argued that extending access is a social-justice issue, and that careers practitioners need to remodel their practices and their concepts of quality to take account of the needs not only of clients who come through the door, but of all citizens who need help with career choices, at whatever points through their lives. If the concept of lifelong guidance is to be converted into effective practice through public policy, ICT has a pivotal role to play.

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