

Career guidance for Vocational Education and Training (VET)

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This paper has been inspired by Tony Watts' pioneering work which explored the relationship between VET and career guidance. This relationship features traditionally ambiguous and not very clear-cut definitions. His helpful distinction between career guidance 'prior to' and 'within' VET opened new perspectives for analysis. Career guidance cannot only serve as an 'eye opener' to stimulate VET demand, but also as a 'change agent' to improve VET supply. However, career guidance has come under attack for being 'VET-blind' and has been criticised for being inadequately sensitive to VET. Similarly VET needs to consider the relevance of career guidance. It is this potential for a reciprocal interaction between VET and career guidance that this paper focuses on.



Historical linkages between career guidance and VET

From a policy perspective, in particular from the European Union (EU), career guidance and VET have a long history of linkages, dating back to the Treaty of Rome in 1975, to the founding of the EU agencies European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) in 1975 and the European Training Foundation (ETF) in 1994, up to the EU Copenhagen Process in VET launched in 2002; and subsequent processes in which career guidance has been a key strand. However, these linkages seem to have largely remained at a generic level. Academic research on these linkages as well as lead practice examples that could demonstrate a positive and effective relationship between career guidance and VET, have been rare or

even missing in the past.

It is to the credit of Professor Tony Watts who in the last decade continuously insisted on further research into this topic, also calling upon international agencies (i.e., OECD) to pay more attention to the 'underexplored' relationship between career guidance and VET. His two background papers for the OECD reviews on initial and post-secondary VET (Watts, 2009 and 2011; OECD, 2010), and his contribution to the UNESCO World Report on TVET (Watts, 2013) are milestones in the further exploration of this relationship and a key contribution to move this topic higher on the international agenda. Moreover, the useful distinction between 'career guidance prior to VET' and 'career guidance within VET', introduced by him opened up new perspectives to analyse this relationship. It also inspired the author of this paper to elaborate on various dimensions of the interface between VET and career guidance (Zelloth, 2014a) and to draw practical recommendations for policymakers, project designers and implementers in VET and career guidance (Zelloth, 2014b). This current paper builds largely upon the findings of the latter two publications.

Another credit goes to the VET policy making community in some countries, as well as to various international donors (surprisingly less so to the career guidance community) that started to pay more attention to career guidance in relation to VET in recent years. This is true for both developed and developing countries as the selected examples in following sections show. The starting point for this increased attention to career guidance frequently was triggered by policy challenges to tackle significant skills gaps in the labour market and to increase attractiveness and participation in VET at national levels. At times such endeavours have been driven by

the desire that career guidance is part of a 'promotion' package for VET.

'Natural' linkages between career guidance and VET

If we look at the functions and principles of VET many of these are closely related to inherent features of career guidance, some are almost like positive, 'natural linkages', others appear like negative 'artificial disconnects'. Overall a strong interface can be observed which provides good arguments for strengthening career guidance in relation to VET. The various dimensions of the interface between career guidance and VET include the following:

The neglected relationship.

The a-priori assumption that the career guidance concept of 'choices' is less relevant for VET (because choices have been already made, or because there are no choices as students are 'streamed' into VET due to lower academic performance) is probably the main reason why the overall relationship has never fully developed or even a 'negative relationship' exists. As a result, in many countries students from VET pathways receive significantly less career guidance than students in general education pathways. This is the case for many OECD countries (OECD, 2004a) as well as EU neighbouring countries (Zelloth, 2009a). Moreover, career guidance practitioners often spend substantial time in preparing students to choose and compete for higher education (OECD, 2004a), which tends to crowd-out potential activities related to VET pathways and careers. This 'color blindness' of career guidance practice may impute to career guidance the tendency of a bias that favors general/academic pathways over vocational education.

The 'avoidance' relationship.

VET, like career guidance, has a problem of growth, but for different reasons. VET mainly because of low image and prestige, career guidance, in particular in relation to VET, rather due to questionable relevance and unstable policy priorities. This can be true in a context where there is a need to expand, for example from a low level to a higher level of provision, but also in a

context in which a high level of provision should be at least maintained. Moreover, VET often attracts (or channels) students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, which exacerbates the image problem of VET. The negative image of VET coupled with the class issue may have led career guidance, psychologically speaking, to a conscious attempt or unconscious behaviour, to avoid getting in touch or identifying with VET too closely. At the very least leading perhaps to not doing enough to tackle stereotypes and wrong perceptions that exist about VET. This is a personal view worthy of further exploration, as well as examining why more attention is being paid to VET recently. Sultana (2006), for example, has argued that career guidance as a language or form of socially constructed interaction is fundamentally a white and middle-class practice that needs to be re-conceptualised if it is to be meaningful for VET.

The underexplored relationship.

Even in research, international policy reviews and related tools the potential and nature of the relationship between career guidance and VET has remained underexplored. The examples range from the OECD and World Bank reviews on career guidance (2004b), the Handbook for policy makers (OECD and European Commission, 2004b) and an international literature review (Hughes and Gratton, 2009) on the impact of career guidance; which all miss the opportunity to sufficiently refer to or to elaborate on the subject of VET. This evident omission, for whatever reasons, mirrors the above mentioned negligence, as well as reveals a blind spot in global research and analysis and the possibility of institutional bias.

The linguistic relationship.

Both career guidance and VET are characterised by a pluralism of terms that describe their areas, but often have in common a semantic denominator (e.g., 'vocational'), as in many countries the predominant term for career guidance is still 'vocational guidance'; or 'career', (in the USA, for example, VET was changed to 'Career and technical education'). Watts (2013) even notes that the relationship has been 'obfuscated by semantic confusion'. Paradoxically, this confirms the linguistic linkages between the two.

The vocational, occupational and qualifications interface.

Ultimately, occupations and 'vocational development' (Super, 1957) are at the heart of both career guidance and VET. While VET pathways lead to many (if not most) but not all occupations and qualifications, career guidance is supposed to be able to provide information and guidance on all occupations and related qualifications. This substantial overlap in scope is proof and reason enough for a close and enhanced relationship between the two.

The labour market and world of work interface.

Both career guidance and VET are called to be oriented towards the world of work and to take into account the needs of the labour market. Both, however, are imperfect in doing so. VET is constantly criticised and challenged by employers to meet ever-changing labour market demands. And career guidance too is dealing with moving targets. It is permanently challenged to find a difficult balance between individual demands and the available career options in the labour market, and the realities of the world of work. Therefore, a stronger 'alliance' between the two could help both sides to become more effective.

The policy relationship.

The good news is that both topics have undoubtedly moved up the international (i.e., EU, OECD, UNESCO, ILO) and national policy agendas in the last decade (Zelloth, 2012). Career guidance and VET have in common a certain policy rhetoric on their respective importance which appears to be increasingly interconnected. The EU Communication on VET (European Commission, 2010) recommends that career guidance needs to be redirected from a testing, to a (work) tasting approach, and therefore should provide young people with an opportunity to get acquainted with different vocational trades and career possibilities. Although implementation challenges remain and the relationship remains underdeveloped, there are clear signs of increasing mutual attention between VET and career guidance. This is true for a number of developed as well as developing countries around the world as demonstrated by emerging policies and practices described in the following section.

A trend towards career guidance for VET?

While a few countries with well-developed career guidance systems already include career guidance in VET (e.g., Finland, the Netherlands, Austria) or are strengthening such relationships (e.g. UK, Hungary on apprenticeships) a similar trend to support learners in relation to VET (both prior and within) can be witnessed also in countries with less developed career guidance services.

One approach to achieve this is to strengthen the policy framework and governance of career guidance. Under this category falls Jordan which adopted in 2011 a career guidance strategy specifically targeting the VET sector (Zelloth, 2011). Among the activities that aim to make a difference are the piloting of career centres in vocational training institutions and community colleges, establishing a career guidance unit in the VET Council, building education-industry partnerships and a VET image campaign for parents and teachers. Similarly in Sri Lanka, the draft National Human Resources and Employment Strategy recommends to establish a National Career Guidance Council linked to all VET institutes. It states that effective career guidance is needed for VET programmes to become preferred options for youth. Current career guidance services and capacities at schools are judged as inadequate due to the lack of understanding of the world of work by career guidance teachers (Government of Sri Lanka, 2011).

Other countries opted for an approach focused on piloting and up-scaling of career guidance initiatives in VET, coupled with methodological development support. For example, for the first time in 2013, Armenia started to gradually introduce career centres in VET schools and is evaluating this experience for potential expansion to other schools. A methodological guide for career guidance staff was developed, aiming to support teaching staff in their new function as career guidance practitioners.

In Egypt, where a strategic approach to career guidance as well as basic guidance services in the country have been traditionally missing, different bottom-up or donor-supported initiatives emerged

as a result and started to mushroom in the field of VET. These can be found in various types and levels of VET programmes, for example in school-based VET, in alternance¹ training as well as in apprenticeships (see table 1). The main policy challenge is to integrate these initiatives into the VET system and to make a strategic decision based on which approach of career guidance works best in the local context. This could tackle fragmentation as well as avoid the proliferation of contradicting approaches to career guidance which might confuse the 'clients' and are less effective at the end.

Table 1 – Examples of emerging career guidance initiatives in VET settings in Egypt

Career guidance in apprenticeship (dual system)

Career guidance became an integrated activity to support a major pilot and innovation in the Egyptian VET system in the frame of a German funded VET project on 'dual system'. Career guidance supporting the dual system involves each year, an awareness campaign in the community and preparatory schools, special meetings with parents to explain the new approach in training, an exploratory interview with applicants, presentation of three or four different trades, visits to companies of the trainees' choice as well as a final assessment and decision on a target job, a qualification path and a training contract. These stages involve career advisors, training providers, companies' representatives, Ministry of Education, local apprenticeship offices (RUDS – Regional Units for the Dual System), applicants and parents.

Career guidance in alternance training

The EU supported VET reform programme in Egypt (2008-2013, second phase starting in 2014) has among other activities, piloting an alternance model in selected occupations in VET schools and vocational training centres. During the project it has added a career guidance dimension due to some difficulties in recruitment of trainees. The principles and activities in career guidance are quite similar to the MKI project mentioned above. In addition, local teams for career guidance were established and trained in each location where the pilot took place, a co-operation protocol on career guidance was signed with the Ministry of Manpower and Migration and manuals for career guidance in several sectors (i.e., ready-made garments, industrial engineering, food processing industries, woodworking and furniture industries, building and construction materials) were developed to support the work of those involved in career guidance (Zelloth, 2009b).

Career Centres in VET schools

Following a survey undertaken by the ILO (International Labour Organisation) survey on 'school-to-work transition', Egyptian youth expressed the need to have improved access to better information on job opportunities, including career guidance, job search techniques and better understanding of the requirements in the private sector. To achieve a more effective and quicker school-to-work transition, the 'Career guidance for youth employment' project was set up, supported by the Italian Cooperation for Development and the ILO. Apart from career guidance staff in public employment services, the ongoing project targets VET teachers in selected schools and technical institutions who have been trained in career guidance and counselling. The initiative 'TAWGIH – Your guide to the future' brings together VET schools with employers and workers' organisations, youth associations and civil society working with youth (ILO, 2011).

Despite the promising developments of increased mutual attention between VET and career guidance, it needs to be said that career guidance services remain weakly developed in relation to VET overall, and that various barriers and stereotypes concerning VET careers continue to have an impact on the educational and occupational choices and pathways in both developed and developing countries.

¹ Alternance is an established term in VET and means alternating learning periods in school and an enterprise; the period spent in the enterprise is usually much shorter than in apprenticeships; for example a 2+1 VET system (first two years in school and last one in enterprise as China introduced recently) is not an apprenticeship but alternance.

Career guidance 'prior to VET' and 'within VET'

This distinction introduced by Tony Watts helps to shed further light on the relationship between VET and career guidance and the different functions career guidance can have towards VET. Although career guidance 'prior to VET' and 'within VET' may be considered equally important, the provision prior to VET is more vital as it can influence uptake and access to VET at a major cross road in the individual's life ('to be or not to be *in* VET'). Career guidance at the early stages of schooling that pays better attention to VET careers and also does more to counteract VET stereotypes, can contribute to raise the social attractiveness of VET. In short: serving as an 'eye-opener', career guidance could stimulate VET demand. In turn, career guidance within VET can be a change agent to improve VET supply. If available, it can help to improve the internal and external efficiency of VET, in terms of better matching specialisations within VET pathways, improving quality of learning and mobility in VET and supporting a smoother transition from VET to work. Watts (2009, 2013) stressed that career guidance is relevant to quality and effectiveness of VET. He also added the dimension of occupational flexibility and transferability of learning. In this context, even a third perspective may be introduced to the discussion, namely 'post-VET' career guidance, which could have the function to facilitate return to VET learning for several reasons (e.g., upgrading skills, gaining new qualifications, increasing employability, preparing for new jobs, tackling unemployment).

In summary, career guidance could have at least a triple role vis-à-vis VET (Zelloth, 2010): (a) a turning point role (mainly prior to VET); (b) a supporting role (mainly within VET); and (c) an empowerment role (prior, within and post-TVET). And there are multiple key transition points related to VET that call for career guidance support and justify a closer relationship.

Can career guidance be 'for VET' or not?

Career guidance may be trapped in a kind of prisoner dilemma when it comes to conflicting tensions between specific public policy demand on the one

hand and the holy impartiality principle on the other. If public policy suggests career guidance services should pay more attention to VET pathways and VET careers, a key question is, can such services still be considered 'impartial' or if the 'Rubicon' has been crossed? Would career guidance lose its innocence (if there was any), neutrality and credibility by deliberately supporting VET career options? Such questions may be best responded to by other questions. Can it be taken for granted that career guidance practice has always been impartial, and that it always takes into account the full range of opportunities and all information that exists when assisting individuals? Though a good training programme for practitioners might help to reflect upon potential bias, can users of career guidance services trust that practitioners are not biased themselves? For example, towards certain opportunities that are current mainstream thinking or trendy in society or that are closer to their educational background, which for most practitioners might not be VET? For example, general education and higher education instead of VET, white collar instead of blue collar jobs, or desk work instead of manual work (Zelloth, 2014a)? If this were the case – and Watts confirms that there is evidence of such bias in favour of general education options at the expense of VET options in a number of countries – would then a correction or 'counter-bias' be necessary or even justified? Lately also the impartiality principle has been contested by some guidance researchers in relation to 'green guidance' and sustainability issues (Barham, Irving, Manley and Plant, 2014).

7 'Golden Rules' for renewing the relationship

Concluding, it is safe to say that VET and career guidance necessarily need each other and both entities could gain important benefits from enhanced cooperation. Policymakers and policy designers in both VET and career guidance are well advised to look at the manifold interfaces between the two areas and to pay special attention to the following 'golden rules', which may contribute to renewing and making the relationship more effective:

Rule 1: Healthy relationships are never one-way streets and are always based on proper dialogue.

Mutual efforts are needed to improve the current situation.

Rule 2: Career guidance needs to become more 'VET-sensitive' or 'VET-friendly' and to do a better job regarding information and advice on VET opportunities. This requires career guidance to cross its comfort zone and to be strong enough to 'swim' and advise against societal mainstream options, perceptions and stereotypes.

Rule 3: VET systems need to better consider, involve and integrate career guidance. VET should also choose the right mix among the possible career guidance models and intervention modalities. Awareness raising on the key functions career guidance can have for VET attractiveness, efficiency and effectiveness is critical for VET policy makers and implementers.

Rule 4: The move from the old to the new paradigms of career guidance (pedagogical instead of psychological approach) and VET (demand instead of supply driven) will support convergence between the two areas. At the point where both new paradigms will meet, career guidance could make an important contribution to VET.

Rule 5: Future national and international reviews on VET, as well as on career guidance, need to improve ways of taking into account respective needs and links between the two areas in their analytical frameworks and survey questionnaires.

Rule 6: Career guidance professionals should come from different backgrounds. In particular a better balance between academic and vocational backgrounds is needed and in any case they should have experience of the world of work.

Rule 7: Practical support and related tools are needed for both policymakers and practitioners to be able to capitalise on the potentials of the relationship. One option is to develop guidelines on policies for career guidance and VET. Another option could be a Resource Kit for career guidance staff in order to increase awareness of VET pathways and careers, and to provide methodological support how to counteract societal stereotypes about VET.

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