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CAREER GUIDANCE AND POST-SECONDARY VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

A paper prepared for 'Skills Beyond School': the OECD Review of Post-Secondary Vocational Education and Training by A.G. Watts

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by A.G. Watts

Introduction

1. The OECD review of ‘Skills Beyond School’ is concerned with public policies related to:

- **Post-secondary vocational programmes** of one year or more (full-time equivalent) beyond upper secondary school, which lead to recognised qualifications and are vocational in that they are designed for, and typically lead to, a particular job or type of job (though excluding postgraduate programmes requiring a previous qualification at bachelor level).
- **Post-secondary vocational institutions** where the majority of teaching is on these post-secondary vocational programmes. These include, for example, community colleges in the United States, polytechnics in Finland, junior colleges in Korea, technical and further education (TAFE) institutions in Australia, *instituts universitaires de technologie* (IUTs) in France, and Fachhochschulen in the Germanophone countries.

2. The main objective of the review is to help countries make the post-secondary vocational education and training (VET) systems respond better to labour market needs. The role of career guidance is related closely to this objective, as mediated through the career decisions of individuals: helping to ensure that these decisions are well-informed and well-thought-through in relation both to their own aspirations and potential, and in relation to the needs of the labour market.

3. The present paper draws extensively on an earlier paper (Watts, 2009) prepared for the previous OECD review of initial VET, ‘Learning for Jobs’ (OECD, 2010). Some of the current paper focuses specifically on career guidance provision within post-secondary vocational **institutions**; some more generally on post-secondary vocational **programmes** regardless of where they are offered. Attention will also be given to the career guidance needs of different **target-groups** that are to be attended to in the course of the review, including:

- Those coming out of school environments.
- Adults returning to education and training.
- Those in work intending to study part-time.

4. The main purpose of the paper is to inform the country reviews to be carried out as the heart of the ‘Skills Beyond School’ review. It is anticipated that the paper may be revised once some or all of these reviews have been completed.

Common elements

5. In five respects, the framework adopted within the ‘Skills Beyond School’ for considering the role of career guidance can adopt elements from that proposed for the ‘Learning for Jobs’ review (Watts, 2009).

6. The first is the definition of career guidance. The definition adopted in the earlier OECD Career Guidance Policy Review was that it described ‘services intended to assist people, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers’ (OECD, 2004, p.19). This was broken down in the ‘Learning for Jobs’ review into three main components:

- **Career counselling**, conducted on a one-to-one basis or in small groups, in which attention is focused on the distinctive career issues faced by individuals.
- **Career education**, as part of the curriculum, in which attention is paid to helping groups of individuals to develop the competences for managing their career development. This includes exploring the world of work, partly through work experience, work shadowing, work visits, and work simulations such as mini-enterprises; it also includes self-awareness and the development of skills for making decisions and managing transitions, both now and in the future (OECD, 2004, pp.44-46).
- **Career information**, provided in various format (increasingly, web-based), concerned with information on courses, occupations and career paths. This includes labour market information.

7. The second is the policy rationale for attention to career guidance as a public as well as a private good. This falls into three main categories:

- **Learning** goals, including improving the efficiency of the education and training system and managing its interface with the labour market. If individuals make decisions about what they are to learn in a well-informed and well-thought-through way, linked to their interests, their capacities and their aspirations, investments in education and training systems are likely to yield higher returns.
- **Labour market** goals, including improving the match between supply and demand and managing adjustments to change. If people find jobs which utilise their potential and meet their own goals, they are likely to be more motivated and therefore more productive.
- **Social equity** goals, including supporting equal opportunities and promoting social inclusion. Career guidance services can raise the aspirations of disadvantaged groups and support them in gaining access to opportunities that might otherwise have been denied to them.

8. In the case of VET, the first of these is particularly important. In seeking closer articulation between VET programmes and labour markets, it is increasingly recognised that planning approaches based on consultation with employers is rarely effective in itself, but needs to be replaced or at least supplemented by an approach based on responsiveness to student demand. The effectiveness of this approach can be significantly enhanced by effective career guidance, which can help to ensure that students’ decision-making is soundly based.

9. The third is the role of career guidance prior to entering a VET programme. Two principles are important here:

- That all who might benefit from such programmes should be made aware, within career education programmes or in other ways, of VET options alongside the other options available to them.
- That those interested in VET options should have access to career counselling, to support the quality of their decision-making.

10. The fourth is the important role of career and labour market information within such pre-entry provision. In order for career guidance to perform its role in supporting informed student demand, it needs to be supported by high-quality information. In relation to those considering entering VET programmes, this should include information on:

- The available VET options.
- The qualifications to which they lead, and the further qualifications to which these give access.
- The occupations to which these qualifications provide access, and the extent to which the qualifications are sufficient for entry.
- The salary/wage levels offered by these occupations.
- The projected demand for these occupations.
- The labour market outcomes achieved by those successfully completing the programmes, including the nature of their jobs, their salary/wage levels, whether or not the jobs are in an occupational sector directly related to their VET programme, and the extent to which they are using the skills and competences acquired in the programme.

11. The fifth is the role of career guidance within VET programmes themselves. Two principles are salient here:

- That career guidance should be available at all relevant decision points, and on exit.
- That career education programmes have an important role to play both in preparing students for future career decisions and in supporting the transferability of their learning.

Both need to be built as core strategies into curriculum design.

Distinctive elements

12. There are, however, two major respects in which consideration of career guidance within the 'Skills Beyond School' needs to differ substantially from that adopted in the 'Learning for Jobs' review.

13. The first is that the range of services which need to be addressed prior to entering a VET programme is much wider. In addition to provision within schools, consideration needs to be given to:

- Provision within other educational institutions, to encourage progression into post-secondary VET programmes. This includes provision within adult education.

- Provision within workplaces, to encourage employees to improve their skills. This includes career development provision as part of human resource strategies: such provision varies from sophisticated formal provision in some large organisations to totally informal provision in many small and medium-sized organisations (Cedefop, 2008). It also includes, in some countries, a role for trade unions (Alexandrou, 2009).
- Provision within Public Employment Services. These may include career information and career counselling services, though often they are significantly focused around job placement. Such services tend to be confined mainly to unemployed job-seekers, but some are accessible to all citizens (Sultana & Watts, 2006).
- Provision within other public careers services – *e.g.* the all-age careers services developed in New Zealand, Scotland and Wales (Watts, 2010).
- Provision within the voluntary and community sector. In some countries, the growth of these services has been stimulated by the contracting out of some public employment services to these kinds of organisations (OECD, 2004, pp.64-66). Such organisations sometimes play a particularly important role in relation to disadvantaged adults returning to education and training (Hawthorn & Alloway, 2009).
- Provision within the private sector. In all countries, career counselling services based on fees paid by individuals tends to be limited, and confined to restricted niche markets. There is however a market in career information, in outplacement services and in employment agencies (OECD, 2004, pp.116-122). Some private-sector services are based not on ‘user pays’ but on ‘opportunity provider pays’ models. New web technologies, including social networking and user-generated information, are resulting in significant new developments what can now be conceived as a ‘career support market’, including enhanced access to ‘career informants’ (people with personal experience in the occupation or course being considered) (Hooley, Hutchinson & Watts, in press).

The balance between these sectors varies across countries. Each has its distinctive strengths and limitations.

14. The second distinctive element is that the range of institutions which need to be addressed in relation to the provision of career guidance within VET programmes themselves is quite different. The main focus of the ‘Skills Beyond School’ review is, as already noted, post-secondary vocational institutions where the majority of teaching is on post-secondary vocational programmes. Career guidance in such institutions has not been extensively covered in previous international reviews. For example, the discussion of career guidance in tertiary education in the OECD (2004) review was confined mainly to universities, with only brief references to post-secondary vocational institutions.

15. In general, it would seem that formal and explicit attention to career guidance is less strong in vocational institutions than in universities. In Australia, for example, a review of career development services in both types of institutions concluded that VET students had fewer opportunities than those in universities to benefit from career guidance in their institutions. Whereas almost all universities had dedicated career services units with an institution-wide responsibility for providing career services to students, such services in the VET sector were more likely to be provided as part of general student services such as student counselling (PhillipsKPA, 2008). The latter tended to be staffed by professional counsellors, often psychologists, who might offer some career counselling alongside personal/welfare counselling; in addition, some TAFE institutes had placement officers to help students gain access to jobs. Student outcomes surveys consistently showed student counselling services and career/job information to

receive lower satisfaction ratings from graduates than any other aspects of their TAFE experience (OECD, 2002a). Progress in improving pathways and VET had not been accompanied by corresponding progress in the provision of career support to facilitate these pathways (Harris, Rainey & Sumner, 2006).

16. The inclusion of career services within generic counselling services or within integrated student services is also evident in post-secondary vocational institutions in other countries. In Germany, for example, some Fachhochschulen have established central student counselling services, which include attention to students who are wanting to change direction along with those who are experiencing difficulties with their courses, or have personal problems (OECD, 2002b). In other words, career guidance is viewed as a reactive service for those with problems, rather than as a proactive support for all students.

17. The position may be stronger in some other countries. In the UK, for instance, surveys conducted in the 1990s showed a considerable range of provision for careers education and guidance in colleges of further education (FEFC, 1997; Sadler & Reisenberger, 1997). It is important to note, however, that such colleges include substantial numbers of non-vocational as well as general courses (this is true of TAFE in Australia too). No further surveys appear to have been conducted since then, but recently the Learning and Skills Improvement Service has undertaken a number of projects to support the development of 'career learning, information, advice and guidance' in the learning and skills sector, including further education colleges. These have included a trialling of the Australian Blueprint for Career Development, which defines the career development competences appropriate at different life stages (LSIS, 2009).

18. The Australian Blueprint (www.blueprint.edu.au) was based on earlier work in the USA and Canada. A more extensive adaptation of the Blueprint is being undertaken in Scotland (Hooley, Watts, Sultana & Neary, in press), and consideration has also been given to developing a European Blueprint – though with some scepticism about the feasibility and desirability of such a step, given the different cultural and philosophical bases of the education systems in European countries (Sultana, in press). An Australian study suggested that the competences defined by the Australian Blueprint were associated with more realistic expectations of course outcomes by VET students (though it indicated that such realistic expectations could also be developed through accurate information from a trusted source) (Kennedy & Haines, 2008).

19. A possible rationale for the reduced attention to career guidance in post-secondary vocational institutions as compared with universities is that attention to career pathways related to particular vocational courses is embedded within the courses themselves and within the arrangements made for work-experience placements, for tutorial support, and for making use of the experiences and contacts of staff (especially, in some cases, part-time staff) in the relevant occupational sector. Three issues need to be raised in relation to such provision:

- Whether it introduces students to the full range of opportunities within the sector.
- Whether it covers career pathways within the sector rather being confined to entry-level jobs.
- Whether it covers the needs of students who might be interested in changing career direction (including making them aware of other occupational sectors to which some of the competences they have acquired might be transferable).

It is also important to identify whether such provision is subject to systematic institutional policy and quality standards, or is left to individual course teams to determine.

Conclusion

20. In conducting the country reviews in the ‘Skills Beyond School’ review, it is recommended that attention should be paid both to the five common elements from the ‘Learning for Jobs’ review and to the two distinctive elements outlined above. In addition, consideration should continue to be given to the challenges identified in the earlier review, including: the professional preparation of guidance personnel; the risks of fragmentation and under-resourcing; the need to ensure that career guidance is impartial and free from institutional bias; the importance of relevant labour market information; and the need for evaluation evidence on the impact of services (OECD, 2010).

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