

Quality in Career Guidance – Preparing Guidance Practitioners for Quality Assurance

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Abstract

In the article, the development of a Mentoring Programme supporting career guidance practitioner's (CGP) certification is presented, together with specific examples of designed tools and activities including a certification framework and self-assessment tools. A goal of the mentoring programme is to support experienced career guidance practitioners to comply with the requirements of a quality standard and quality assurance systems and to prepare them for an individual certification process as CGP.

The project started with data collection in an analytical paper about quality assurance systems and their implementation in the European partner countries who participated in the project followed by the design of a preliminary version of the programme that underwent two phases of testing. The final version of the Mentoring Programme contains 21 different modules including teaching guidelines together with worksheets for participants and guidelines for mentors. It is designed as a flexible "cafeteria model" in order to best fit the needs of the different target groups. Feedback from Austrian, Czech, German, and Slovak practitioners will be presented.

The Mentoring Programme and the tools for a certification framework were developed within the ERASMUS+ Strategic Partnership "Improving the implementation of quality assurance in career guidance (QUAL-IM-G)". Nine partner organisations from seven European countries were involved in the project (Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia, UK) coordinated by Slovakia. For more details see: <https://www.guidancequality.eu>.

Keywords: quality assurance; mentoring; certification; career guidance practitioner

Introduction - Quality and quality assurance in career guidance

The Resolution of the Council 2008/C 319/02 on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies lead to the development of different quality standards for individual counsellors and organizational providers of career guidance. However, in many countries the implementation of quality assurance in guidance is lacking. To improve the implementation of quality assurance for career guidance the QUAL-IM-G project developed a programme of support for individuals and providers including a mentoring programme for career guidance practitioners and resources for providers to ensure they are working toward or maintaining the award through audit and/or recognised certification procedures. The terms quality label, quality mark and quality award are often used as the recognition of having achieved a recognised quality standard.

What is quality and quality assurance?

For the purpose of this article, we present the definitions of quality developed as part of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN, 2014).

Quality assurance: refers to activities involving planning, implementation, evaluation, reporting, and quality improvement, implemented to ensure that guidance activities (content of programmes, design, assessment and validation of outcomes, etc.) meet the quality requirements expected by stakeholders. The terms quality assurance and quality management are often used interchangeably when discussing quality related activities.

Quality Standard: refers to a defined degree of quality, which an organization or a public authority sets for the service provision they are responsible for. It defines what an organization or the public authority expects of the provider and his employees in delivering these operations or a client can expect when using the service. The ELGPN (2012) recommended that quality assurance should be one of the key features of a lifelong guidance system, recommending that there should be:

- clear professional standards established for guidance practitioners working in a variety of different roles in different sectors;
- standards linked to career progression routes for guidance practitioners; which include progression to and from related occupations;
- organisational quality standards;
- citizen/user involvement in the definition of quality and the design, implementation and evaluation of guidance services;
- a clear and public statement of citizen entitlement to guidance services; and

- the ongoing development of the evidence base in career guidance.

These recommendations build on the experience that in many countries (especially those with little or no tradition of providing career guidance) there is little formal management of quality. However, such recommendations are relevant both for countries which are new to career guidance and to those with a strong tradition of career guidance.

When we think of quality we often think of goods or services delivered to a high standard (Hooley and Rice, 2018). However, Sultana (2018) argues that the term 'quality' is difficult to operationalise because it is a complex and contested concept. A definition of quality in general and abstract terms without context is difficult. Sultana (2018) suggests that quality is subjective and means different things to different people. Individual differences exist in the *expectation* of career guidance services as well as individual differences in the *experience* of career guidance services.

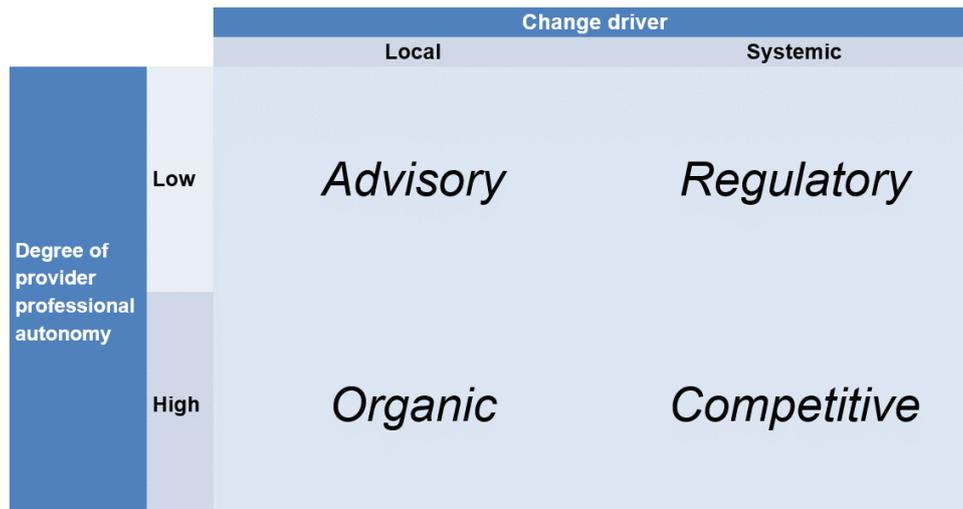
Sultana suggests that quality concepts have both political and power dimensions. Community and societal values are influential in determining expectations and experiences of career guidance services. What we think of as high-quality products and services depend heavily on our values which may vary at the macro level from society to society or at the group level within society. As a result, it is important to be mindful of who is defining and constructing quality as well as considering for whose benefit different approaches to quality work.

Quality assurance as policy

When career guidance is part of national or international policy there are often differences between the initial policy directive and how it is delivered in practice (Hooley and Rice, 2018). Quality assurance processes can help to provide checks that career guidance services are delivered consistently and that they fulfil the original policy aims.

Hooley and Rice (2018) present a model to distinguish between frameworks and systems that offer greater and lesser amounts of professional autonomy and models which place the responsibility for quality locally in contrast to those that view it at a higher level e.g. nationally. Their approach parses out the nuances of systems where it is compulsory to have a quality assurance label in order to deliver versus systems where quality assurance labels are voluntary certification. The model is also useful in understanding the mechanisms of standard certification.

Figure 1. Hooley and Rice model of QA certification.



The **regulatory approach** typically sets out clear legal requirements and formal standards and polices them through inspection regimes. Practitioners may be required to be qualified or registered and there may also be regulations around tools, resources, facilities and outputs (e.g., a requirement that a school or career guidance facility must provide a certain number of individual counselling sessions per year).

The **advisory approach** typically focuses on practice improvement around clearly articulated, but non-binding, standards. As such it will often include models, benchmarks and exemplars of good practice and advice and support for providers and professionals. Such an approach will make use of moral rather than legal pressure.

The **organic approach** is where quality is defined by the provider and the professional and driven by professional values and the desire to do a good job. Mechanisms associated with organic quality assurance approaches include quality circles, supervisory arrangements, peer observation and mentoring, the use of professional networks and communities of practice, local self-evaluation processes and the involvement of users as co-producers.

The **competitive approach** seeks to drive quality based on performance and the provision of information about performance to customers. Typical mechanisms that are used include consumer feedback, the development of league tables, a strong focus on outcomes and the use of payment by results approaches.

Implementation of quality assurance systems in Europe

Quality development and quality assurance in Career Guidance and Counselling (CGC) occurs at two levels – at the level of the individual guidance professional and at the level of the organization that provides career guidance services. Furthermore, governments and other policy makers are responsible for creating

appropriate legal and institutional regulations and a political environment, which support the quality development for “good guidance”.

However, what does “good guidance” mean: How can you observe, identify and measure “good guidance”? There are many terms and expressions being used in the context of quality assurance and implementation, not only in the career guidance sector but also in any other area where quality matters. So, for the purpose of this project we had to be clear about what we mean when we talk about quality in guidance, quality standard and quality assurance and define some essential issues.

As mentioned earlier, **Quality** is a “contested concept” (Sultana 2018) because the different parties involved in the provision and use of guidance services may have different ideas and expectations regarding the quality of service:

Figure 2: Defining Quality – multiple actors and stakeholders; Source: Schiersmann/Weber, 2013, p. 45



In everyday language the word is mostly used in the sense of “good quality” and refers to an implicit or explicit measurement on a scale from “bad” to “good”. However, quality is not an objectively defined normative issue which is irrevocable or unalterable. It is a *relational* term, which refers to the expectations, values, interests, and resources of the involved actors who have to agree on a common understanding of what they define as “quality” (Sultana 2018). The concrete definition of quality in career guidance therefore is the result of a *negotiation process* between the involved actors and stakeholders (see Figure 2): the professionals, policy makers, the providers and the wider society (Schiersmann/Weber 2013, p. 45).

Quality Standard refers to a defined *degree* of quality, which an organization or a public authority sets for the service provision they are responsible for. It defines what an organization or the public authority expects from the provider and his employees in delivering these services or that a client can expect when using the service (Hooley/Rice 2018). The quality standard also should reflect the opinion and beliefs of the professional guidance community (Career Guidance Practitioners

and Researchers) about quality in career guidance. A Quality Standard usually is described by a number of dimensions, criteria, and (measurable) indicators. The quality standard can be defined by law or other normative regulations or it is the result of a common process of understanding by the actors and stakeholders involved. Depending on its legal status a quality standard can be binding (e.g. for members of an association or for service providers and professionals receiving public funding) or it can be just a recommendation to the professional community (practitioners and/or providers) that is supported by voluntary self-commitment.

Quality Framework is a comprehensive concept that describes the characteristics and requirements, the structures and processes of career guidance provision in a country, in a certain guidance sector, a region or a professional association. A quality framework also addresses the different roles and responsibilities of the involved actors, stakeholders, and policy makers. It also includes an agreed Quality Standard with defined quality dimensions, criteria and measurable indicators.

Quality Development describes means and processes that help individuals or organizations to improve their services towards a (self-)defined quality standard. This process can be based on a formal or an informal agreement between guidance professionals and the provider organization. Quality Development can also be initiated and established in a broader context, e.g. on a national, regional or sectoral basis. It can be initiated and carried out on a bottom-up basis as well as in a top-down manner, by law or other compulsory mechanisms (e.g. public funding). Quality Development usually refers to a systematic **Quality Development Framework**. Quality development in a career guidance organization always implies *organizational development* because it affects the organization as a whole, its culture, structure and processes, the communication and collaboration patterns.

A **Quality Development Framework** is a *tool* to support the process of quality development within an organization. It describes the phases of a quality development process and helps the organization to identify strengths and weaknesses, to define the roles of the involved partners (practitioners, management) in the process, and to define the goals and expected outcomes of the quality development process as well as the steps and activities to be taken. A quality development framework is independent from the specific content of a certain quality standard. But when it is implemented in an organization it has to be connected to an agreed/shared quality standard the organization is committed to.

Quality Management (QM)/ Quality Assurance (QA) Systems describe formalized systems of structures, processes, and activities within an organization to manage, improve, or maintain the quality of the service provision. A QM or QA system is usually required when a provider organization applies for a certification or a quality mark/quality label.

Certification/ Audit /Accreditation is the formal process a person or an organization has to follow and document if they apply for a quality certificate (quality label or quality mark). A certification or audit is usually administered by an external certifying body, which at the end of a successful auditing process testifies the achievement of the defined Quality Standard for the applying individual or organization and hands over the Certificate (**Quality label, Quality Mark**). Some employers or public authorities require a certification as a precondition for staff recruitment or for public funding. Certification/accreditation processes however, are usually quite expensive for the individual or the organization unless there is some public funding for it. Accreditation/Audit usually includes the acknowledgement by a public authority, either a governmental or other official body that is entitled to award an accreditation on the basis of a successful certification/auditing process.

The purpose of the ERASMUS+ Project however was not to “re-invent” the wheel and create another new quality standard or a certification and auditing system but to provide tools for practitioners and providers to manage the necessary processes for quality assurance and implementation.

Quality standards and quality (development) frameworks for career guidance in Europe

“The review of national systems through the collected templates from the partner countries show few examples of developed quality development frameworks In the collected examples in this project the main approach seems to be ‘preparation systems’, which focus on preparation for concrete accreditation and quality assurance assessments.” (Dodd et al. 2019). The research paper mentions a few examples from the seven countries investigated that either have a quality framework at national or regional level or are in the process of establishing a quality framework:

- **The Netherlands:** The Dutch professional association NOLOC and the Career Management Institute CMI decided to merge their quality development and quality assurance systems and create one common national Quality Framework.
- **Ireland (NCGE):** established a sector specific QDF (‘A Whole School Guidance Framework’) on national level in line with the requirements of The Educational Act that schools have to provide students with “access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices”. Within this context Ireland established a Quality Development Framework which defines the areas of career learning and support for students on a policy level, not on the single organization level.
- **Norway (Skills Norway):** is on its way to establish “a national quality framework based on the understanding that all involved partners have a different role to play in a comprehensive lifelong guidance system. This includes: A

Framework for Career Management Skills, ... Ethical Standards and Guidelines; ... Quality Indicators/Benchmarks/Data Gathering.”

- **In the UK**, the “Matrix-Standard” provides a detailed Quality Development Framework that leads to a certification, which is compulsory for public acknowledgement of a guidance provider organization and for public funding.
- In the other partner countries, a number of Quality (Development) Frameworks exist on national level, mostly developed and established by professional associations, Higher Education Institutions, or private companies. They are not compulsory and not linked to public policy.
- In some countries however (like **Germany**), regional Quality Labels with detailed quality frameworks for guidance provider organizations are in operation, which are compulsory for public funding of the service in that specific region (e.g. Berlin, Hessen, Baden Württemberg).
- On EU / International level a number of Quality Development/Assurance Frameworks exist, some of them leading to an individual certification (e.g. the “Global Career Development Facilitator”, the “European Career Guidance Certificate”), and others which serve as recommendation for national policy and systems development. (e.g. the **ELGPN** “Quality Assurance and Evidence Framework (2016) and the **CEDEFOP** Framework “Professionalizing career guidance – Practitioner competences and qualification routes in Europe” (2009), or the **NICE** Competence Framework 2012).

In addition, two recently published sector specific Quality (Development) Frameworks should be mentioned:

- The **Handbook “Enhancing Quality in Career Guidance”** (Sultana 2018), which resulted from the ERASMUS+ project “MyFuture” and deals with career guidance and career education in secondary schools. The Handbook depicts a framework with six fields of action for the development and improvement of school guidance services and provides recommendations and links for school teachers and managers to resources and tools for quality development in school career guidance and highlights the importance of the “*reflective practitioner as guarantor of quality provision*” in career guidance.
- The **Gatsby Benchmark**, developed in the UK is another sector specific Quality Framework in the context of school career guidance. Eight benchmarks are suggested for effective and high-quality career guidance in schools. The benchmarks are designed to give orientation to schools and policy makers but also serve as a standard against which the performance of schools can be monitored and measured.

The framework and fields of action recommended for the implementation and improvement of school career guidance are quite similar in both handbooks. They refer to such dimensions as

- Career education/career learning/careers curriculum
- Career information, in particular labour market information, workplace experience, encounters with employers and further/higher education
- Career resource centres
- Partnerships/networks
- Career counselling, personal advice, addressing the needs of each student
- Professionalism/reflective practice and practitioners.

Most common quality standards and quality frameworks for career guidance and counselling (CGC) in Europe

The research findings show that there is a great variety of Quality Standards and Quality Frameworks in practice in European countries in the field of CGC. They differ in structure, terminology, and the way they group the different dimensions and criteria to broader categories. Some are based on an input-process-output model, others are based on a systemic approach or on concepts of professional competences. Some are sector specific; some are directed toward an external auditing; others refer to internal quality development. However, despite these differences in terminology and classification there are many common features and overlaps between them with respect to the concrete quality dimensions and criteria. *Table 1* clusters the most common quality dimensions and criteria in European career guidance quality frameworks according to the key domains of quality assurance designed by Hooley and Rice (2018):

- Policy
- Organization
- Process
- People
- Output/Outcome
- Consumption

Table 1: Quality dimensions and criteria incCareer guidance and counselling by key domains of quality assurance

Key Domain	Quality Dimension	Criteria/Indicator
Policy/ Societal goals	Social inclusion Equity/equal opportunities Ethical principles	Impartiality/Objectivity Gender/culturally sensitive service
Organization	Leadership/management Mission and vision/Ethical principles Participative organizational culture (communication/ collaboration) Material/Human Resources Promotion of Service/Marketing Networking/Partnerships	Management by objectives Measurable aims and objectives Clear structures, workflows and responsibilities Information resources: actual and quality assured information Effective use of technology Continuous quality development
Process	Service customized to client's needs Establishing an efficient and confidential relationship with client Openness of results/free from bias and administrative sanctions	Guidance contract Quality and relevance of guidance methods and diagnostic tools Effective information management and use of technology/distance counselling tools Action plan; Feedback and impact evaluation Signposting/referral to other service
People/ Practitioners	Professionalism Practitioner Competences Continuous professional development Self-reflection	Acknowledged competence profile Required entrance qualification Opportunities for Self-reflection/Supervision Participation in further training Application theory to practice Effective use of counselling techniques and diagnostic tools
Output/ Outcome	Acquisition of CMS and Decision-making competences Educational achievement Labour market integration Economic outcomes	Opening up educational or vocational opportunities/placement Action Plan Contact with the world of work Drop-out rates from education Unemployment rates Outcome monitoring and evaluation Supply of skilled workforce Social costs of un-/underemployment (e.g. welfare and health expenditures etc.)
Consumption/ Clients	Client centeredness Service customized to client's needs Protection of client's rights Avoiding conflict of interest	Accessibility/Transparency of the service Adequate information of clients about service Data protection, confidentiality, Voluntary usage of the service Guidance contract Monitoring of customer satisfaction Complaint management

Certification of guidance practitioners – tools and procedures:

The certification process designed in the project QUAL-IM-G is based on the certification development framework developed as one of the project outputs by The Netherlands NOLOC, the largest professional association for the career guidance practitioners in the country (2019).

In order to meet the combined challenge of a) being able to compare the underlying rationales of existing quality marks in the field of career guidance, and b) being able to develop a coherent, needs-based quality assurance system for career guidance practitioners, the certification framework is based on three principles:

1. It is generic enough to deal with specific needs and circumstances of different target groups, sectors or countries.
2. It is specific enough to grasp the essentials involved in the development of a quality assurance framework specifically targeted on the certification of the profession of 'career guidance practitioners.
3. It focuses on actual needs instead of desired outcomes.

To meet those principles, the certification framework has two cornerstones:

1. It is based on building blocks - elements that could be part of the quality assurance system.
2. It is based on asking questions, rather than providing answers.

The certification framework for career guidance practitioners consists of seven building blocks, each consisting of one or more sub-blocks:

Figure 3: Building blocks of the certification framework

Agreeing on the fundamentals of the quality mark			
Agreeing on the professional profile		Agreeing on the testing framework	
Designing the mentoring process <small>(in the broadest sense of the word and consists of any support offered to those interested in obtaining the quality mark)</small>	Designing the certification process	Designing the recertification process	Designing the organizational framework

The framework itself is being built up by providing answers to the questions raised in each sub-block. Providing different answers, it will lead to different outcomes and – therefore – different frameworks. This way of developing and implementing makes the framework both a highly flexible concept, as well as a concept that can be fully adapted to local, sectoral or national needs and circumstances.

Our concept of the mentoring process is defined in the broadest sense of the word and consists of any support offered to those interested in obtaining the quality mark.

Certification process: The certification process designed in the project:

1. is the result of the project partners' discussions and reflects their experiences;
2. focuses on the local needs in the Czech Republic and Slovakia as the two countries out of the project partners where there had been no quality mark in the career guidance area before the project started;
3. is based on the above presented certification development framework.

It has its focus on the self-evaluation of the career guidance practitioner (CGP) current level of knowledge and skills and definition of self-development. Within the certification process the CGP can find out their level of professional competences, reflects on the whole career guidance process and sets individual goals. Moreover, it provides an opportunity for self-reflection and focuses on quality. It addresses what I do in career guidance and how I do it - based on the organic approach - quality defined by the professional driven by professional values and the desire to do a good job.

Based on self-evaluation and self-development the certification process designed in this project contains a self-assessment tool and a mentoring process to guide the whole process and is supported by a portfolio of evidence as an audit tool. The goal is to be prepared for the certification (<http://guidancequality.eu/o3-certification-procedure/>).

The self-assessment tool designed within the project is linked to a specific quality standard (set up on local, regional or national level) and involves:

1. deep and searching questions about self and practice,
2. the specific quality standards to inform and guide the CGP's reflections,
3. other influencing factors such as ethical principles and other issues relevant to the particular context,
4. application of the CGP's ongoing reflections and enquiry into practice,
5. evidence from a range of sources to inform and support the self-evaluation.

For more detailed advice, guidance and counselling regarding the self-assessment, practitioners may use mentoring which is a part of the certification process in order to support CGPs in preparation for the certification.

The mentoring process consists of

1. one-by-one mentoring
2. self-study learning modules focused on specific topics identified as the most important for CGPs (for more details see the following chapter in this article and the project website: <http://guidancequality.eu/mentoring-program/>),
3. group mentoring facilitated by a mentor (experienced professional educated in mentoring) based on self-reflection and peer learning.

It depends on the capacity of the professional association introducing the certification and its agreement with the mentors (association members) which form will be offered during the certification process.

Despite the fact that only 14% of quality standards audited in the partner countries had a mentoring programme as a part of the accreditation journey for individuals and organisations, we highly recommend using some kind of mentoring (in the strict sense through dialogue) because any type of dialogue offers one of the most important ways of self-reflection and therefore quality development.

Portfolio: Although a professional portfolio performs many other functions (representation, evaluation, etc.) the CGP's portfolio within the certification process links to the preparation for the certification.

As generally recommended the minimum content of the portfolio is:

1. the evidence of formal education and training in the field,
2. the evidence of the quantity and quality of the experience,
3. CV,
4. the completed self-assessment tool,
5. case study.

Ideal platform for the quality standard and certification process is an online portfolio where reflections of CGP's work, outcomes, achieved descriptors and their profile can be edited on an ongoing basis. The quality profile of CGP can be approved by an independent mentor. The mentor if he/she is asked to do so can look at the portfolio and confirm the achieved self-evaluated outcomes and a proof of the quality.

The entry requirements vary depending on the target group of the certification (beginners or advanced career guidance practitioners). The discussion on this topic can be valuable within the professional association and based on our experiences it is important to make the decision on it as the very first step. In order to keep the certification process and certification as accessible as possible it

is not appropriate to set entry level requirements which may create barriers to successful certification.

The minimum entry requirements are:

1. application for certification,
2. CGP's professional portfolio which meets the requirements.

The CGP interested in the certification is contacted by an assessor. The assessor may be a mentor operating in the role of the assessor. A person who acts as a mentor in the CGP's certification process should not act as an assessor for the same CGP. If the portfolio complies with the descriptors of the standard, the assessor issues a certificate. The certificate may reflect the level of points earned in the certification and is recommended to issue it time-limited (e.g. valid for 24 months).

On behalf of the requirements for a mentor he/she is a person who has already completed the certification process and regularly attends education (trainings) for mentors. The mentor works with the CGP and the objective is to reflect on whether their submitted portfolio corresponds to the quality standard descriptors. The mentor can be chosen from a publicly available list (e. g. published on the website).

The certification itself is mostly valid for a limited period of time to assure continuous quality development. Therefore, the requirements of the recertification process need to be clearly specified by the providing organisation to the practitioners (e.g. process and requirements of the recertification, possible additional payments).

The certification process is based on the needs of the professional community. It is an open process initiating discussion and supporting the development of the individuals and the field itself. It is therefore important to return to the discussions on regular basis and to make quality evaluation per asking the right questions (e.g. based on the presented certification development framework).

Developing a Mentoring Programme to support guidance practitioners for certification requirements

The goal of the QUAL-IM-G project was to provide a comprehensive, individualized mentoring programme that prepares counsellors for a wide range of quality standards in different certifications. Different training programmes for career guidance counsellors that were developed within European projects exist. However, of those that were researched during the project at hand, only 14% provide mentoring as part of the support resources for organisations and

individuals. One of the goals of QUAL-IM-G was therefore to create a mentoring programme that would prepare guidance counsellors for different quality standards and certifications. The aim was not to design a new training programme to enhance skills, but to help experienced practitioners document their experience, skills and knowledge to meet the expectations of the examiners – and to fill any gaps found in the process. Most quality assurance standards address multiple and inter-related aspects of provision including professionalism, CPD, evaluation, partnerships, LMI, client satisfaction and leadership. Therefore, the mentoring programme focuses less on the development of professional knowledge, skills and competences, but on one's capacity to comply with transversal elements of existing quality standards. That is why the product is compatible with existing transnational and national quality standards for career guidance counsellors and thus highly transferable to different contexts.

Each step in the development of the mentoring programme was coordinated with the research conducted during the project as well as the international partners, who each brought different expertise to the table. Based on the comprehensive analytical paper on impact and success factors of different QA approaches in Europe and the expertise of the partners from 7 different European countries, the most essential topics on which the programme should focus were identified, after which the according modules were developed and internally tested by the partners. The programme was then piloted in transnational events in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, in Germany and in Austria with more than 40 experienced counsellors participating. Across the four countries, all modules could be tested, which provided comprehensive feedback on which of the modules were most helpful, best executed and most needed. Although the participants were generally very satisfied with the mentoring, a lot of feedback was collected regarding the organisational and content aspects of the mentoring programme. To the extent that these were feasible and compatible with the objectives of the project, they were then incorporated into the final version of the programme.

The Mentoring Programme is designed for experienced counsellors who want to see their accumulated skills and knowledge certified. The mentoring is aimed at (experienced) individual practitioners working in the fields of vocational and educational guidance, counselling or coaching who wish to undergo a QA process or certification. The programme allows them to comply with quality standards which most of the researched QA practices focus on. It provides a balanced approach between the development of competences of the candidate (reinforcing theoretical base, providing examples of good practice, ...) and the preparation for the QA procedure (description of one's own practice, preparing and collecting evidence, ...). It also contains mentoring methodology that allows counsellors to monitor and document their learning progress.

The mentoring programme includes modules that were the most necessary (i.e. there are few to none corresponding offers) as well as the most in demand (i.e.

the skill or knowledge is required to obtain certificates). The project partners identified the most crucial topics in which career guidance counsellors must prove and document their expertise to comply with existing quality standards. For each of these 21 topics, the partnership created a training module. Each module is approximately half a day long, but can be shortened or extended, according to the needs of the clients. Usually, a module consists of theoretical information (in most cases in the form of a PowerPoint presentation) as well as practical exercises, either to be done during a group training or to be done alone as "homework".

The 21 modules can be organized into 9 thematic fields:

- *Guidance Approaches and counselling techniques*
 - Theoretical Basics / Action Planning
- *Outcomes of Counselling*
 - General Outcomes of Counselling
 - Social Outcomes of Counselling
 - Career Management Skills
- *Ethics*
 - General Discussion on Ethics
 - Mission Statement and Vision
 - Intake / Needs Analysis
- *Knowledge on labour market, education & offer landscape*
 - Using Labour Market Information
 - Networking and partnerships
- *Decision-making techniques*
 - Decision-making techniques and personality
- *Acquisition of skills & competencies*
 - Assessments and career testing
 - Building a Career Portfolio
- *Personalization of the service*
 - General Personalization of the service
 - Gender
 - Career Guidance at a Distance
- *Quality Assurance*
 - General Discussion of Quality Assuring Guidance
 - Measuring Feedback and Impact
 - Reflection of Own Practice
 - Evidence Based Practice
- *Management*
 - Management Basics
 - Marketing

The mentoring programme avoids redundancies and unnecessary repetition and helps the consultants to catch up in exactly those areas where they have not yet been able to document their skills. Since the target group is defined as

experienced career guidance counsellors, none of the participants will need support regarding each of the topics. Therefore, the mentoring programme is designed as a “cafeteria model”: Based on an initial external or self-assessment (and depending on the applicable national QA standards), it can be decided which of the modules are important. These can then be implemented flexibly and adapted to individual requirements. Since the modules are independent of each other, content and exercises may overlap.

All in all, the mentoring programme of QUAL-IM-G is a transversal instrument that can be flexibly used beyond the borders of quality standards, certifications and even countries.

Testing the Mentoring Programme – results from three seminars in Austria, Czech Republic, and Germany

Pilot testing in Austria: At the beginning of 2019, the Austrian partner organisation abif tested the entire mentoring programme over the course of 5 days with seven experienced counsellors who were interested in obtaining certification. This approach resulted in a very tight program and minor redundancies, which is why the participants emphasized that the cafeteria-style mentoring is the most effective and efficient approach.

In terms of content, the counsellors were very satisfied: they confirmed that the selected modules were the most relevant topics, and that they, too, were interested in learning how to best demonstrate their respective knowledge and skills. They do not believe that it is necessary to have so many face to face units and emphasize that there should be more homework and opportunities for self-reflection. The Austrian participants were particularly interested in the modules concerning distance counselling, ethics, assessments and the individualisation of counselling. Although they emphasize that these are topics that could be talked about for hours, they find that the mentoring program covers the most important aspects and makes the best use of the time available.

Pilot testing in Czech Republic and Slovakia: The pilot of the mentoring programme for 23 Czech and Slovak participants was organized in Brno Šlapanice (CZ) from 9th to 13th January 2019. These first candidates for newly created national certification for guidance counsellors tested all the developed modules. The mentoring was conducted jointly by Slovak and Czech Associations for Career Guidance and Career Development and participants had access to an experimental self-assessment tool that helped them identify the strengths and weaknesses of their practice. The overall feedback was very positive, although some participants deemed that the very intense program didn't leave sufficient space for self reflection. In terms of delivery, participants prefer a flexible blended model – with individual preparation in advance and then one-day group seminar focused on peer-learning and reflections.

Table 2: Perceived usefulness of different mentoring modules by participants of the pilot run in the Czech Republic

Piloted mentoring module	Perceived usefulness (1-5 scale); (in brackets German Testing Results)	
Mission and vision	4.56	(4.9)
Outputs and outcomes	4.44	(4.9)
CMS	4.35	
Reflection of own practice and quality development	4.33	(3.8)
Intake and contracting	4.31	
Networking and partnerships	4.19	(4.6)
Ethics	4.17	(4.6)
Decision making and action planning	4.17	
Theoretical basis	4.06	(3.6)
Tools	3.93	(4.3)
Basis in counselling	3.87	(3.8)
Marketing	3.78	(4.4)
Labour market	3.56	
Personalization and equality	3.47	
Distance counselling	3.18	

Pilot testing in Germany: The German testing seminar took place in the first week of April 2019 (4 ½ days of training) with 13 participants – most of them practitioners or trainers in the field of career guidance and counselling – plus 4 trainers. In seven half-day training units 12 of the 22 Modules of the Mentoring Programme were presented and tested. The selection of the modules was necessary due to the limited time available and was agreed with the Project Coordinator beforehand. All the presentations and training materials were translated into German which proved to be very helpful for the testing.

Summarizing the quantitative and qualitative results and feedbacks from the participants the testing of the Mentoring Programme in Germany was very successful and of great value for the participants. During the whole workshop the participants actively participated in the programme as a whole as well as in the group work and plenary discussions. The overall feedback however was, that there was not enough time in most modules. For the quantitative and qualitative feedback, we used the same questionnaire that was used in the Czech/Slovakian testing seminar (quantitative results see Table 2).

Quantitative Results: Participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert-Scale how useful they found the modules for the purpose of preparing practitioners for a certification. The data show that the modules Mission and Vision, Ethics, Outcomes, Evidence Based Practice, Networking, Career Portfolio got the highest

agreement in terms of being *useful for a preparation for certification* whereas theory, counselling techniques and reflection of own practice were felt not to be significantly important for this specific purpose. However, the ratings for these modules were widespread (some very high and some very low) and some participants indicated in an open question that for their *own benefit* they would have appreciated to work more intensively on these modules.

Qualitative Feedback: There was a wide range of qualitative feedback to the single modules that cannot be presented here. Most of the 12 modules presented in the seminar were highly appreciated by the participants. Depending on the individual interests, expectations, and knowledge the evaluation differed between highly relevant and useful and less interesting. Some wanted more theory, others more practical exercises. Unanimously, participants indicated that more time is needed for all the modules and that especially more time for practical exercises is needed. In particular the modules "Ethics" and Theory and Counselling Techniques" seemed to be too short and would need more attention.

Outlook and further steps

The mentoring programme and the tools supporting certification processes can be efficient tools that, if properly integrated, can play several beneficial roles in the implementation of existing and development of new quality assurance systems for career guidance. The experience with the development, testing and implementation of the mentoring programme and the certification process in Slovakia, Czech Republic, Germany and Austria allows us to formulate the following recommendations for a successful integration of these tools within a quality assurance system for career practitioners:

- The structure of the modules should rigorously **follow the structure of the respective criteria and indicators** of the quality standard.
- In terms of content, the mentoring should resist the temptation to provide candidates with too much theoretical input, but rather focus on providing meaningful inputs that **strengthen and provide structure for critical self-reflection and documentation** of candidates' current practice, as well as indicate points for its further development.
- Similarly, the mentoring can be supported by the use of a **template for documentation** of candidates' practice – as an inspiration, a **self-assessment** tool was developed by the partners of the QUAL-IM-G project.
- Mentoring modules should be **relatively independent** one from another, in order to allow a flexible "à la carte" use by the candidates for certification. Different quality criteria can have different levels of "difficulty" for different candidates, depending on their experience and background: for example, a counsellor working independently as a free-lancer will probably have a very different view and development potential for measuring impact of his/her

service, compared to a candidate working in a public institution with legal requirements and established procedures.

- In an ideal case, every candidate for certification should have a **clearly assigned mentor** who is not in the conflict of interest – he/she should not also have the role of the assessor. This mentor should be a **peer** that has an experience with the quality assurance process.
- The mentoring should combine **different delivery methods** to optimize the pedagogical impact of often limited resources that the certification body has for the support of candidates: self-study, conversation with a mentor (face-to-face, by distance, synchronous, asynchronous), e-learning with group interactions that allow sharing of experiences between candidates.

It appears that if at least some of these conditions are fulfilled, the mentoring programme can play the following roles within a wider context of a quality assurance system for career guidance practitioners:

- A tool **supporting the efficiency** of the quality assurance mechanism. The goal of the mentoring programme is to help the candidates fulfil the criteria of the quality standard, document relevant practice and collect required evidence for the further phases of the quality assurance process.
- As a pedagogical approach that **facilitates the understanding and appropriation of quality requirements** set by a quality standard. Good understanding and appropriation are necessary preconditions for the identification of candidates with the quality assurance process and, most importantly, for the strengthening of the inner motivation and commitment to quality development.
- As a mean to **strengthen the engagement in continuous quality development** and professional growth, as described in the previous point.
- As a marketing tool that **increases the attractiveness of the quality assurance process**. This point is especially relevant in systems, where the participation in quality assurance is not mandatory for practitioners – this is often the case for quality assurance mechanisms that were developed by professional associations in the bottom-up process (as is the case in Slovakia, Czech Republic and Germany). The fact that a mentoring programme is directly embedded within the quality assurance process and is part of the “package” of connected tools and services reinforces the image of a process that is focused on development and professional growth.
- A mean to build a **collective understanding** of the goals of the quality standard and a **culture of quality improvement within the community** of guidance practitioners. For this reason, the mentoring should strategically make use of group meetings of candidates from different sectors of activity.
- Connected to the previous point, the mentoring can also contribute to the **exchange of practices** and building a **common understanding of guidance** between professionals working in **different sectors**.

- Furthermore, the Mentoring Programme and the supporting certification tools designed to help the candidates to comply with the requirements of the quality assurance systems, also have the **potential to raise the awareness and commitment of guidance provider organizations to invest in quality assurance**. Convinced and well-motivated practitioners can support the willingness and preparedness of guidance institutions to invest in quality assurance.

Currently, the **Mentoring Programme is part of the newly created certification system for career practitioners in Slovakia**. Other partner countries use the mentoring resources developed in the QUAL-IM-G project in different ways that are appropriate to their national and/or organizational needs: elements of the developed mentoring are used within the initial and CPD courses for career practitioners. Currently, the mentoring is available as a set of teaching materials, presentations and exercises. The **full programme** (21 modules) is available on the project website in English (www.guidancequality.eu). In addition, the **core programme** (7 modules) is available in German and Czech/Slovakian language. In order to fully realize the potential of the mentoring in terms of flexibility and modularity, the programme will be **reworked to an online version by using an open-source and transferable e-learning platform**, such as Moodle. Professional associations, practitioners and providers from other countries are invited to use the Mentoring Programme and the connected tools, translating it in their language and adapt it to their needs - presupposed the source is acknowledged (www.guidancequality.eu) and the Slovakian Project-Coordinator is given notice (info@zkprk.sk). The results of these further developments could then be integrated into the project website and the future e-learning platform thus **creating a European platform for Mentoring Programmes designed to support the implementation of quality assurance in career guidance**.

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