

# Quality Assurance Standards

A synthesis of quality standards across partner countries  
**Summary report**

Vanessa Dodd, Erik Hagaseth Haug, Tristram Hooley and Siobhan Neary  
May 2019



Co-funded by the European Union



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## Partners

**Association for Career Guidance and Career Development, Slovakia (ZKPRK)** – coordinator of the project initiative, association of career professionals and service providers in Slovakia ([www.rozvojkariery.sk](http://www.rozvojkariery.sk))

**BKS Uspech, Slovakia** – applicant organisation, career guidance and training provider, ISO certification expert ([www.bksuspech.sk](http://www.bksuspech.sk))

**Teamwork for a better future, Slovakia** – non-profit association working in career guidance ([www.ozbuducnost.sk](http://www.ozbuducnost.sk))

**NOLOC, Netherland** - Dutch association for career professionals with about 2850 members ([www.noloc.nl](http://www.noloc.nl))

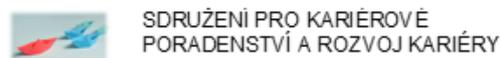
**German National Guidance Forum in Education, Career and Employment, Germany (nfb)** – creator/coordinator of the national QA system for guidance ([www.forum-beratung.de](http://www.forum-beratung.de))

**International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS), England** - applied research centre specialising in career development and employability (<http://www.derby.ac.uk/research/icegs/>)

**ABIF, Austria** - independent social science research and consulting institute with a clear focus on practical application of research ([www.abif.at](http://www.abif.at))

**Association for Career Guidance and Career Development, Czech republic** – newly created sister organisation of ZKPRK in the Czech republic

**Inland Norway University of Applied Science (INN), Norway** – research institution



## Executive Summary

QUAL-IM-G is an Erasmus + funded project which aims to build on the experience of different projects in the field of quality assurance for career guidance. It recognises that countries will have varying traditions in developing quality standards to support individual practitioners and organisational procedures. The project will review current national and transnational quality assurance processes, develop a certification/accreditation procedure for career guidance practitioners, and create a quality assurance framework for provider organisations.

This report presents an analysis a range of transnational and national quality assurance (QA) practices in career guidance within partner countries, 21 quality activities were assessed. The report focuses on identifying the variation of different approaches, the factors that enable these approaches and the impact of these different approaches.

### Project headlines

- Most labels submitted were for individuals and organisations predominantly addressing all age needs, although specialist awards were identified that have a focus on SEND. Certification processes tended to be organisational focused, with smaller numbers addressing individual counsellors or both.
- Most of the labels examined were national standards and were voluntary except in the UK where the standards were linked to accessing public funding.
- Only 14% of quality standards provide mentoring as part of the support resources for organisations and individuals. The mentoring relationships identified focused on goal related (instrumental) support which was aimed a predefined goal or psychosocial (developmental) focused on supporting competence and effectiveness within professional practice.
- Quality development frameworks support quality assurance and enhance guidance services within organisations. NOLOC and CMI in The Netherlands have recently consolidated their quality development frameworks to create on national standard.
- Assessments of quality standards tend to include both internal and external elements. A range of resources are available to support the process and include workshops, mentoring, portfolios, case studies and webinars for example. Audit methods predominantly include the production of portfolios of evidence and or assessment visits. Often a number of methods were used.
- Accreditation lengths lasted on average for 3 years but the longest being 5 years and shortest 1 year. 67% of quality labels had associated costs, these varied between €262 and €7500.
- Most quality assurance standards addressed multiple and inter-related aspects of provision including, professionalism, CPD, evaluation, partnerships, LMI, client satisfaction and leadership.

There are many challenges with quality systems as there is often little backing from government and limited financial and personal resources available. However, quality is a policy issue and is the collective responsibility of service providers, policy makers and other

stakeholders. Strong professional associations play an important role in developing professional standards for career guidance.

## Improving the implementation of quality assurance in career guidance (QUAL-IM-GUIDE)

### Introduction

This Erasmus + funded project was established to build on the experience of different projects in the field of quality assurance for career guidance. It recognises that countries, depending on the history in the field of careers will have varying traditions in developing quality standards to support individual practitioners and organisational procedures.

The goal of this project therefore is to:

- review current national and transnational quality assurance processes,
- develop a certification/accreditation procedure for career guidance practitioners, and
- create a quality assurance framework for provider organisations.

The project also seeks to develop 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.

For the purpose of this project, we started with the definitions of quality developed as part of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN, 2014) project. As this project has evolved so too have the definitions. The Intellectual Outcome 4 paper 'Designing a quality development Framework (QDF) for organisations providing career guidance' presents a comprehensive and useful set of definitions addressing all aspects of quality.

The terms we have used within this research are:

**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. 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.

This report analyses a range of transnational and national quality assurance (QA) practices in career guidance within partner countries. It focuses on identifying the variation of different approaches, the factors that enable these approaches and the impact of these different approaches. The conclusions from this work will be used to develop four outputs (O2-05) in order to strengthen the implementation of different quality standards in partner countries.

## Quality assurance in career guidance

This project builds on the experience of previous projects and initiatives in the field of quality assurance in career guidance. The Resolution of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) Council 2008/C 319/02 on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies led to the development of different quality standards for individual counsellors and organisational providers of career guidance.

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.

### What is quality and quality assurance?

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.

## 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.

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.

## Overview of data collection

The first output of the project is completion of an analytical paper synthesizing information on quality assurance (QA) processes used in partner countries. Findings from the report will inform the development of the four subsequent outputs. Data collection protocols were agreed during the October 2017 launch meeting of the project in Bratislava, Slovakia.

Table 1. Submissions by country.

Partner Country	Number of Submissions
The Netherlands	4
Germany	6
Norway	1
Czechia	3
England	2
Slovakia	2
Austria	3
<i>Total</i>	<b>21</b>

A total of twenty-one templates were collected for analysis. Some data were inputted into excel for ease of analysis. Content analysis was used to synthesise the qualitative findings. In some instances, descriptive statistics were used to best make sense of the data. A copy of the template used is available in the full report.

## Findings

The following section details the results from the audit template. Table 2 details the partner countries and the standards audited. Some countries completed the template for international standards, many for their own national standards and one partner country audited a standard also used in France (Qualite Totale CIBC).

Table 2. Partner countries and quality standards submitted.

Partner Organisation Country	Quality Standard
<i>The Netherlands</i>	Noloc Erkend Loopbaanprofessional (Noloc Acknowledged Career Professional)
	OVAL
	Blik op Werk Keurmerk
	Register Loopbaanprofessional / Registered Career Guidance Professional
<i>Germany</i>	BerufsBeratungsRegister (Career guidance register)
	Quality Frame Berliner Model
	Kundenorientierte Qualitätstestierung für Beratungsorganisationen
	BeQu Standard
	Quality Standards for Guidance Practitioners in the Area of Education, Career and Employment
	Certified provider of educational guidance and counselling

<i>Czech Republic</i>	Euroguidance National Career Guidance Award
<i>Slovakia</i>	Quality standards of supported employment
	IMPROVE – project Improving Validation of Not-Formal Learning in European Career Guidance Practitioners
<i>Norway</i>	Recommendations for guidance in schools
<i>International</i>	Qualité Europe Bilan de Compétences
	Qualite Totale CIBC (French standard)
<i>Austria</i>	European Career Guidance Certificate
	Certified Adult Educator
<i>United Kingdom</i>	The Matrix Standard
	Quality in Careers

### What types of labels/quality standards were submitted?

There was a large range and variation with one label having one organisation and another having 1823 organisations. Seven labels were for individual practitioners with an average of 448 individuals certified under the label. Most of the labels submitted were for individuals or organisations working with all ages or adults only. Only two labels were targeted for services with young people and two labels certified providers of career guidance for special education needs and disability (SEND) clients. The labels were generally aimed at the following client groups; young people, SEND, adults, all age and a combination of client groups including adults/SEND and vulnerable clients.

Most quality labels (67%) had costs associated with the quality assurance process. The average cost per quality label was up to €3267 with a range running from €262 to €7,500 Euros.

#### Purpose of the standard: Individual or organisational

We asked questions to determine whether quality labels in partner countries were labels to quality assure individuals or organisational provision.

- Two labels were procedures aimed at certifying features both in the organisational and individual levels (National Career Guidance award - Czech republic and Recommendations for guidance in Schools – Norway).
- Nine examples of certification procedures at individual level (e.g. Qualité Europe Bilan de Compétences – counsellor – France, and BBR BerufsBeratungsRegister (Career guidance Register, Germany).
- Ten examples are aimed specifically at the organisational level (e.g. Quality in Guidance and Counselling in the field of Education, Career and Employment – Germany, and the Matrix Standard – England).

Most quality labels analysed were voluntary to undertake. Two standards were compulsory. For the Matrix Standard in the UK, all organisations that receive public funding must meet the requirements of the standards.

## Mentoring programmes for career guidance practitioners

Mentoring relationships come in two primary forms:

- **Goal-related (instrumental) support.** This type of mentoring relationship focusses on mentee success and advancement in relation to a set of goals articulated prior to the relationship.
- **Psychosocial (developmental) support.** This type of mentoring relationship focusses on the supporting the mentee as they develop their sense of identity, competence and effectiveness as a professional (Allen, Finkelstein and Poteet, 2009).

Questions from the audit template provide a useful starting point to discuss the needs required for a quality standard mentoring programme. We collected data on a variety of topics including information about quality standard implementation challenges and types of resources made available for each standard. This information will be used to help inform the creation of a mentoring programme that can be accessed as part of the quality standard process.

Most quality standards in the partner countries did not use mentoring as a part of their resources to support individuals or organisations through the accreditation process. Three out of 21 completed forms stated they had a mentoring programme.

Although most quality standards audited did not explicitly state the use of a mentoring programme to support individuals or organisations through the journey, most quality standards audited did have bespoke resources to guide the process. These resources will be discussed further in the section on audit and labelling procedures.

There are several common elements to consider when developing effective mentoring programmes:

- **Context.** The location of mentor-mentee meeting (Karcher, Kuperminc, Portwood, Sipe, and Taylor, 2006). Will the mentoring programmes be face-to-face at the organization? Will the mentoring be conducted online? Will the mentoring programme be a blend of the two?
- **Structure.** The nature of the mentor-mentee relationship. Will the mentoring be one-to-one or group mentoring?
- **Goals.** What are the goals for the programme? Is it successful implementation of the quality standard (instrumental) or will other elements of professional development (developmental) be included?
- **Infrastructure.** The infrastructure for a mentoring programme refers to the recruitment, training and ongoing support for mentors.
- **Dosage.** This refers to the amount (total hours of contact time), intensity (relevant to developmental mentoring) and duration (total length) of the mentoring programme.

In the Netherlands, Career Management Institute (CMI) Netherlands provides a mentoring programme for those seeking the quality label. CMI mentor regulation documents were provided in order to further understand the quality standard's mentoring programme. The document provides useful information on the infrastructure of a quality label mentoring programme.

### Certification procedure for career guidance professionals

In the collected templates, partners were asked to describe certification procedures for career guidance professionals and/or career guidance organisations. Hooley and Rice (2018) argues that the development of quality standards, including certification procedure, be part of a holistic quality assurance system. There are six key domains in which quality and the certification procedure may be enacted in the delivery of career guidance:

- **Policy.** Quality assurance can help ensure career guidance is delivered in a consistent manner in line with current policy requirements.
- **Organisation.** Quality assurance can help determine whether provider organisations are designed, resourced and managed in a way that enables quality delivery.
- **Process.** Quality assurance can provide blueprints on the way organisations or individuals can reduce errors in client experience.
- **People.** Quality assurance can ensure compliance that delivery staff adhere to professional standards of the sector.
- **Output or outcome.** Quality assurance can focus on defined and measurable outcomes of clients using the service.
- **Consumption.** Quality assurance can be driven by customer satisfaction of the career guidance service.

### Quality development framework for organisations providing guidance

Quality development in career guidance and counselling often implies organisational development. This means that a quality development framework “enables organisations to activate and integrate both the individual perspectives of staff members and the perspective of the organisation to develop and safeguard solutions for assuring or enhancing the quality of guidance, which suit the organisation” (NFB, 2012, p. 9).

The quality development framework also functions to operationalise national quality assurance standards into the local organisational level. Therefore, a quality development framework supports the quality assurance and enhancement of guidance services within organisations.

Providers of guidance services can use the quality development framework:

- for a systematic introduction of quality development into daily work,
- to improve existing quality approaches with respect to aspects, which are specific for career guidance and counselling,
- to document and communicate their quality development efforts to funders and responsible policy makers (NFB, 2012, p. 8).

The review of national systems through the collected templates show few examples of developed quality development frameworks. This corresponds with another recent review at the European level concluding that quality development frameworks for organisations providing career guidance are currently available in very few countries (Haug, 2018). 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. In a European context, initiatives have been taken and recommendations have been given on the importance of frameworks designed for the implementation and continuously quality development on an organisational level (ELGPN, 2012; 2015).

In the Netherlands, there has been a consolidation of quality development frameworks to help support the creation of one national standard.

### **Noloc and CMI joining forces: towards one Dutch national quality framework for career guidance professionals**

With her mission of improving both the quality of career guidance in the Netherlands as well as increasing the number of qualified guidance professionals, in 2011 Noloc implemented her own quality assurance framework for individual career guidance professionals. The ‘Noloc erkend’ quality mark nowadays is one of the two quality marks for individual career guidance professionals in the Netherlands. Some 1,500 career guidance professionals have obtained the Noloc quality mark (January, 2019).

Besides the Noloc quality mark for career guidance professionals, the Career Management Institute (CMI) offers an additional quality mark for more experienced career guidance professionals. Some 330 of them have obtained the CMI quality mark ‘Register Loopbaanprofessional’ (January 2019). Noloc has adopted this CMI quality mark as the quality mark for her more senior members.

In April 2018, Noloc and CMI agreed that from July 2020 on, there will be just one Dutch national quality framework for career guidance professionals based on the mutual strengths of both organizations. In order to reach this ambitious goal, it was also agreed that the Noloc and CMI organizations will merge, and the new quality framework will be carried out under the responsibility of Noloc.

In the Norwegian context, work is underway with Skills Norway as the leading partner to establish a national quality framework based on an understanding that all involved parties have a different role to play in a comprehensive lifelong guidance system. This includes: quality standards for practitioners - what skills are needed? (*process*); a Framework for Career Management Skills – individual learning goals for guidance (*output*); Ethical standards and guidelines (*process*); and Quality Indicators/ Benchmarks/Data Gathering (*output*). Norway is also developing a web-based guidance service (Skills Norway, 2018).

### **Audit/labelling procedure for organisational providers of career guidance**

There are a variety of ways in which quality standards audit organisational practice. Audits usually focus on three areas:

- organisational structure,
- organisational process and
- organisational outcomes.

Audits can sit on a continuum of formality where audits can be internal only or assessed by an outside accrediting body through a series of external professional visits.

### Types of assessments

Many quality labels submitted completed information about their audit and labelling approach. Most (71%) standards used a mix of both internal and external assessment types (see table 6). BeQu a quality standard in Germany has an innovative audit approach some of which was described earlier. BeQu was one of two standards that use an internal assessment approach only. Their approach is a participative process of assessment.

The most common type of auditing procedure was a mixture of both internal and external audits. This typically involves completing an in-house assessment against the quality label criteria prior to external assessment.

### Resources to guide the audit

Most quality assurance standards had bespoke resources to guide individuals or organisations through the audit process. One quarter (25%) of quality standards audited offered more than one resource to support the auditing process. Five templates did not provide information on resources available to support individuals or organisations through the quality standard accreditation process.

The most common resources provided to support the accreditation process was guidance documents (35%) followed by workshops (20%). Table 8 below lists the variety of resources mentioned and the frequency in which they were mentioned. Resources such as mentoring, self-assessment tools and advisors, case studies of practice, webinars, telephone and email support, and one day consultancy were provided less often.

Nineteen (19) templates recorded relevant assessment tools use during the audit. Of the nineteen, 63% used more than one type of assessment to make a decision whether to award the quality standard. Most quality standards (68%) used a portfolio of evidence to make decisions about whether or not an organisation or an individual met the criteria of the quality standard. Seventy-seven percent (77% or 10 out of 13) of quality awards that required portfolios of evidence used them in conjunction with other assessment methods.

### Accreditation length

Once an organisation is accredited with a quality assurance standard it lasts approximately three years on average. Depending on the standard there may be periodic checks

throughout the accreditation life. For example, the Matrix Standard in the UK conducts continuous improvement checks at 12 and 24 months within the accreditation cycle. These checks are conducted remotely between the organisation and its assessor. A self-reflection tool is sent to organisations detailing the areas for continuous improvement identified in the initial assessment. The organisation sends in evidence that it is working on the areas identified. This is discussed in a telephone interview facilitated by the assessor. After this process the assessor makes a decision upon the evidence provided in a manner similar to the initial assessment.

## Content of the frameworks

Most quality assurance standards explored within the research a multiple focus on inter-related aspects of provision. Practitioner related aspects such as, professionalism, CPD and ethics are regularly addressed within the framework, as are organizational requirements such as leadership, service process and marketing. Continuous quality improvement is also represented in terms of evaluation and assessment of client satisfaction. It is interesting to note that ethics is only referred to in one standard as this a central component of professionalism. It may be that it is only explicitly identified but implicitly included within professionalism for other standards.

## Conclusion

The notion of quality is a contested and complex concept. It appears in different levels or domains of policy (Hooley and Rice, 2018). Different national approaches are informed both by the national context and current policy initiatives. When trying to summarise some general recommendations, it is useful to include the reflections from the German partner NfB which aligns with our interpretations of the data.

To utilise this learning and to progress quality standards, the following recommendations are made:

- The definition and development of quality goals and criteria require a common understanding of the issue among the relevant actors and stakeholders – it is a **negotiating process**.
- Developing (new) quality standards or guidelines needs to be **connected** to existing quality concepts and credentials
- Scrutinizing the **compatibility** of different quality development systems and acknowledging them as compatible standards/ guidelines as appropriate
- Seeking legislative or **mandatory solutions**, since government funding usually does not guarantee sustainable quality development
- The termination of most of the project or programme funded guidance provision inhibits sustainable development of quality and professionalism in career guidance. **Quality needs continuity** and security to grow and sustain.
- A **return** from short term project funded guidance provision to legally grounded service provision by regular **public institutions who have a legal mandate** for career guidance seems to be necessary.

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