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## A systematic review of research into career guidance policy in the Nordic countries (2008-2022)

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### ABSTRACT

This article sets out the findings of a systematic review on research into career guidance policy in the Nordic countries between 2008 and 2022. In total 60 papers were reviewed from across the Nordic region. They focused on national career guidance systems, career guidance systems for young people, the adult guidance system and career guidance for migrants. The corpus proved to be methodologically diverse with studies utilizing a wide range of different research strategies, although important differences were found between academic and grey literature. Most of the papers reviewed were atheoretical, with the remaining, mainly academic, literature drawing heavily on critical theory. The thematic analysis identified four major themes in the corpus: *the context for career guidance policy; career guidance provision and practice; technologies of governance; and beneficiaries and outcomes of career guidance policies*. The findings are discussed in relation to the strengths and weakness of the corpus and used to propose a research programme for the next 15 years.

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### KEYWORDS

Career guidance; career education; Nordic; policy; systematic review



## Introduction

This article uses a systematic literature review to explore the research on career guidance policy in the Nordic states since the economic crash of 2008. The crash has been chosen as the starting point for this article as it has shaped the political economy since and created a new set of policy logics within education and employment policy within which career guidance policy has been unfolding ever since (Castells et al., 2012; Crouch, 2014; Gamble, 2010). Inevitably all periodization can be contested, but a strong case can be made for focusing on the last 15 years as a distinct period of political economy which differs from the 'long nineties' period that preceded it.

In this article, 'policy' is defined initially as 'anything a government chooses to do or not to do' (Dye, 1972, p. 2), but more specifically as an ongoing process of 'laws, regulatory measures, courses of government action, and funding priorities' as well as the enforcement of these decisions (Cochrane & Malone, 2014, p. 3). While 'career guidance' is defined as interventions designed to support individuals in their progress through life, learning and work (McCash et al., 2021). The aim of this article will be to take stock of recent research on career guidance policy and to propose a way forward much as Weber et al. (2018) did previously with European career guidance research.

Career guidance remains as an important, if small, public policy area, which is frequently endorsed by national and international policy actors as bringing a wide range of benefits to individuals and societies. In a recent paper jointly authored by European agencies and international policy bodies such as the OECD and International Labour Organization (ILO) make the unambiguous statement that, 'evidence reviews give policy makers confidence that investment in guidance can be expected to provide positive economic, educational and social returns to both individuals and society' (Inter-Agency Working Group, 2021, p. 2). And numerous studies highlight the fact that most career guidance provision is paid for with public money and organized, regulated and often delivered by government (McCarthy & Borbély-Pecze, 2021; Watts, 2002).

Research on career guidance and public policy goes back at least to the 1960s when the European Economic Community began publishing reports on the organization of guidance systems in different European countries (Watts, 2014). Recently the level of interest in the intersection between career guidance and public policy has begun to increase, to become more strongly theorized and critical, and to draw on a range of disciplines and methodologies (e.g. Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2014; Hooley & Godden, 2022; Robertson, 2021). This international literature

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on career guidance policy has increasingly questioned technocratic assumptions about policy efficacy and argued for the importance of embedding an understanding of policies in context and culture (Sultana, 2023). This has led, in turn, to a wide range of studies which discuss the production, implementation and impact of career guidance policies in local and regional contexts (da Silva et al., 2016; Sultana, 2017; Watts et al., 2010). It is this turn in the debate that we are hoping to contribute to in this article by focusing attention on career guidance policies in the Nordic countries.

There is a strong case for viewing research and practice in career guidance collectively in the Nordic countries. A variety of structures, such as the Nordic Council, exist in the region which actively encourage co-operation and policy borrowing and lending between the Nordic countries. Beyond these structural links, there is a body of multi-disciplinary research which highlights the similarities between these countries referring to the existence of Nordic values and morals, 'Nordic exceptionalism', and of course the 'Nordic model', a term that originated as a description of political economy, but which is now applied to a highly diverse range of phenomena (Brandal et al., 2013; Frønes et al., 2020; Martela et al., 2020). Of more direct relevance to this article there is considerable discourse that encourages us to think about Nordic education systems and Nordic labour markets collectively and comparatively (Andersen et al., 2014; Blossing et al., 2014). When looking comparatively at international welfare systems Esping-Andersen (1990) famously named one of his three types as the 'Nordic' model, and in comparative work on youth transitions Walther (2006) comes to a similar conclusion, highlighting the 'universal' model of transitions as typical to the Nordic region. The legislation governing compulsory education (referred to as *grunnskóli*, *grunnskole*, *grundskola*, *grunnskole*, *peruskoulu*, etc.), is highly consistent across the Nordic countries and the majority of students transition to further education after completing compulsory school, meaning that the Nordic countries also experience similar progression pathways from school to work.

There is also growing evidence that suggests that career guidance systems in the Nordic region have similarities (Hagaseth Haug et al., 2020). Such work has drawn attention to both the similar range of policies and practices that can be found in career guidance across the Nordic region and in the range of institutions which facilitate the borrowing of policy, such as legislation, and practice across the region. Meaning that career guidance in the Nordic countries is not only similar because of underlying cultural and systemic similarities, but also because of active collaboration between the five Nordic

countries and the self-governing regions around the development of career guidance systems. This shared history, culture and approach has led researchers to repeatedly see value in gathering and analysing research on career guidance across the region (Hagaseth Haug et al., 2019, 2020; Plant, 2003; Plant et al., 2003).

In this article we turn the focus towards public policy in the Nordic region and ask how researchers have treated this issue. Career guidance is a public policy activity of interest to governments across the Nordic region (Hagaseth Haug et al., 2020). While a small private sector exists, most career guidance in the Nordic region is funded by governments either directly or indirectly. The field is linked with a wide range of policy aims including the transition of young people to post-compulsory learning and work, the effective functioning of the education system for both young people and adults, the alignment of workers' skills with the need of the labour market, active labour market policy and the integration of migrants into Nordic societies and economies. Despite its apparent interest to policy makers, the field of career guidance often remains siloed with different sectors (schools, VET, HE and public employment services) all organized, funded and resourced differently (Cort et al., 2015; Hooley & Godden, 2022). Furthermore, it is typically a policy area with low public and political visibility, and this has consequences for the level of attention and funding that it gets.

We noticed that there is a growing body of research that explores how career guidance policy in the Nordic countries is developed and implemented and which has traced its impact on practice and the careers of service users (Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019; Plant & Haug, 2018; Varjo et al., 2021). Yet despite the cross-Nordic institutions dedicated to policy borrowing and an active and growing academic community, there has so far, been no attempt to take stock of this literature and to consider what its findings and implications are. So, in this paper we have sought to present the sum of this research as a coherent body of literature and explore what it tells us about the nature of research on policy in the Nordic countries.

## Methodology

The paper explores Nordic research on career guidance policy through a systematic review of published research. The review considered research published between 2008 and 2023 on career guidance policy and included both academic and grey (policy driven) literature. As discussed in the introduction this 15 year period has been identified as it follows the major shift in political economy that followed the

banking crisis. It would of course be interesting to compare the literature produced during this period with that of previous periods, but for reasons of volume it was necessary to place a boundary around the current study.

Key questions that guided the review are as follows.

- What are the key policy themes and issues that are addressed through this body of research? Which sectors do they pertain to?
- What are the methods and theoretical approaches that are used to explore policy in the Nordic region?
- What are the areas where further research is recommended by researchers already active in this field?
- Where are the gaps that are currently being ignored?

Literature was identified using combinations of the keywords set out in Table 1. Due to the complex, multi-lingual, multi-national nature of this study it was difficult to take a strict systematic review approach as national experts needed to be given latitude to use nationally relevant language and to try multiple combination to find appropriate literature. Local experts were also charged with screening the results and identifying papers that met the core criteria of addressing both career guidance and public policy. Given this we only report the number of papers that were selected for inclusion rather than the thousands that were identified, but which did not meet our inclusion criteria.

Searches were conducted in the search engine Google Scholar, university library search engines which aggregate a range of academic databases and in selected additional databases like Bloomsbury

Education and Childhood Studies, ERIC, Scopus, and Web of Science. This was supplemented with further searching using Google, primarily to source grey literature, and with the existing knowledge of the research team. The research team was recruited from all five Nordic countries and included speakers of all major Nordic languages so that searches could be completed in Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish as well as English. In some cases, research team members also reached out to key informants in the research and policy communities in their country to identify additional papers for inclusion.

It is important to be clear that this review focused on the intersection between career guidance and public policy in the Nordic countries and not on every paper published in the region on career guidance or related topics. Inevitably such a distinction requires a judgement call to be made in a field where almost all activity is ultimately reliant on public policy. Furthermore, it is necessary to note that the method outlined above has limitations and that material which may address career guidance and public policy can be missed where different vocabulary or terminology is used and that such problems are magnified when you are working across six languages. Nonetheless the search phase of the project identified a large number of relevant papers, giving researchers confidence that the findings reported in this article are indicative of the breadth and focus of career guidance policy research in the Nordic countries during the identified period.

Articles identified through the search were reviewed and screened using title, abstract and ultimately through a full review of the paper. Key inclusion criteria were that the paper should:

**Table 1.** Search terms used in the systematic review.

Adult guidance	Funding	Åland Islands
Career(s)	Governance	Denmark
Career(s) advice	Government	Faroe Islands
Career(s) guidance	Policy	Finland
Career(s) counselling	Politics	Greenland
Career(s) education	Public	Iceland
Guidance counselling		Nordic
Study and career counselling		Nordic self-governing regions
Vocational guidance		Norway
Youth guidance		Scandinavia
		Sweden

**Table 2.** Key features of the literature reviewed.

Type of publication	No.	Country	No.	Language	No.
Journal	22	Finland	11	English	38
Grey: Government	16	Nordic region	10	Finnish	6
Book chapter	12	Sweden	9	Norwegian	6
Grey: Nordic body	4	Denmark	8	Swedish	5
Grey: International body	2	Norway	8	Danish	1
Doctoral thesis	2	Iceland	5	Icelandic	4
		Nordic comparison	4		
		Non-Nordic comparison	4		
		Nordic self-governing regions	1		

- include career guidance or a related area such as youth guidance or career education as a substantive focus;
- address public policy;
- be published after the start of 2008 and before the end of 2022;
- be focused on one or more of the Nordic countries; and
- be an academic journal article, chapter, book, piece of grey literature or a PhD.

Papers which met a series of criteria agreed by the team were entered into a database and coded in detail. A coding framework was developed by the team iteratively as papers were reviewed with key areas related to the research questions. Researchers were asked to code data against the following heading: whether the paper focused on career and career guidance; whether it focused on policy or merely mentioned it; who the target group of the interventions described in the paper were e.g. young people, adults, migrants; what themes were addressed in the paper; what methodology was used; what theoretical perspective and main theorists were used. Initial codes were agreed by all researchers, which were then reviewed and standardized by the lead author of the study. In the case of the thematic coding, an additional level of thematic coding was undertaken by the lead author and then reviewed by the research team to enable the analysis and discussion of a large body of thematically diverse material. Detailed metadata (e.g. year of publication, country and language) were also captured in the database alongside the thematic codes allocated to each paper. In addition, a further field was provided for researchers to make notes and enter miscellaneous information. This provided a consistent summative dataset that could be analysed collectively by the research team.

The team met regularly throughout the research to discuss findings, make collective decisions around edge cases for inclusion, and define and apply codes. These meetings were then used to agree the analysis and oversee the write up of the research.

We present the results divided into four sections, focusing on the respective papers' primary focus, (e.g. national level career guidance policy systems or career guidance systems in schools), their use of methodology, their use of theory, and finally, a (discursive) reading of their themes. For this latter task we wanted to foster a deeper level of understanding of the corpus, and all researchers were asked to provide one to three codes summarizing the key thematic areas addressed by the papers. These were combined with authors keywords, where these were available, to create a thematic dataset. In total 232 codes were identified which were then analysed using thematic analysis. They were coded

through a four-stage process and were initially reduced to 93 codes, then 25, then nine and finally merged to four main themes.

## Results

In total 60 papers were identified. The features of these papers are summarised in Table 2. They were published throughout the identified period with at least one paper published in every year apart from 2012 and concentrations in 2015 (10 papers) and 2020 (12). The papers were drawn from a wide range of different publication types including journals (22), book chapters (12) and doctoral thesis (2). Almost half of the material could be described as 'grey literature' with government (16), non-governmental bodies (3), cross-Nordic bodies (4) and international organizations (2) all responsible for the production of some relevant literature.

The papers also showed good geographical spread with 10 addressing the whole Nordic region, 4 offering comparisons between two or more Nordic countries and 4 providing comparisons between Nordic and non-Nordic countries. The rest of the papers focused on a single country: Denmark (8), Finland (11), Iceland (5), Norway (8), Sweden (9) and the Nordic self-governing regions (1). The overwhelming majority of papers were published in English (38), but there were also papers published in Danish (1), Finnish (6), Icelandic (4), Norwegian (6), and Swedish (5).

## Primary focus of papers

The papers had four main areas of focus which are set out in detail in Table 3 and which variously addressed national career guidance policy systems, career guidance systems for young people, the adult guidance system and career guidance for migrants.

## Methodologies used

The corpus proved to be methodologically diverse with studies utilizing a wide range of different research strategies. While a minority of the corpus are conceptual in nature (6), the overwhelming majority of the literature uses some kind of empirical research approach.

The most common approach is mixed methods studies (14). Investigations into policy issues frequently approach the issue from a variety of different directions, for example combining interviews with experts and policy makers with analysis of secondary data and document and literature analysis (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD, 2014). Other work takes a more classic mixed methods approach often



**Table 3.** Primary focus areas.

Focus	No.	Summary	Examples of issues addressed
National career guidance systems	22	Papers which look at the whole system broadly accept the contention made by organisations like Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2004) that there is a 'career guidance system' which is comprised of multiple elements often overseen by multiple ministries, but which in some way can be viewed as a coherent whole. In addressing this 'career guidance system' the papers are often trying to name something that is diffuse and define it as a legitimate field of public policy and therefore worth of study in research.	<i>Comparative studies</i> (Andreassen et al., 2019) <i>Critical commentary</i> (Plant & Valgreen, 2014) <i>Evaluation and evidence</i> (Alexander et al., 2020; Skovhus et al., 2021) <i>Ideology and underpinning concepts</i> (Bakke, 2020) <i>Investment and reform</i> (Kjærgård et al., 2016; Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2015)
Career guidance systems for young people	25	The largest proportion of studies were focused on young people in schools and the wider education system. A smaller group of papers looked at the provision of career guidance to young people outside of the school system. While a third group look at youth guidance more systemically exploring guidance in the education system and outside of it as well as the connection between these two locations.	<i>Comparative studies</i> (Hooley, 2022) <i>Critical commentary</i> (Brunila, 2013; Røise, 2020; Skovhus & Thomsen, 2017) <i>Delivery approaches</i> (Määttä, 2019) <i>Description of current systems</i> (Olofsson et al., 2017) <i>Evaluation</i> (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2020) Governance and regulation (Kalalahti & Varjo, 2021) <i>Reform of the system</i> (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 2019). <i>School-to-work transitions</i> (Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019)
The adult guidance system	9	A small group of papers looked at the adult guidance system variously making the case for the value of adult guidance and exploring its current enactment.	<i>Critical commentary</i> (Fejes, 2008) <i>Comparative studies</i> (Haasler & Barabasch, 2015) <i>Description of current systems</i> (Nordisk Nätverk för Vuxnas Lärande, 2017) <i>Evaluation</i> (Vilhjálmisdóttir et al., 2011) <i>Making the case</i> (Cort et al., 2015) <i>Reform of the system</i> (Mennta- og menningarráðuneytið, 2015).
Career guidance for migrants	4	Finally, there is a small corpus of papers which focus on career guidance for migrants and refugees. These papers view career guidance as policy that can support integration and skills utilisation of new entrants to the Nordic countries.	<i>Critical commentary</i> (Linde et al., 2021) <i>Making the case</i> (Karlsdóttir et al., 2017)

combining surveys with interviews or focus groups (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014). It is also very common to combine document analysis of policy and regulations with other methods such as surveys (Lundahl & Nilsson, 2009) or interviews (Brunila, 2013). Much of this mixed methods work seeks to capture the multi-faceted nature of policy which simultaneously exists as documents and structures the lived experience of individuals.

There is also a large volume of qualitative research (13) which typically uses interviews and case study methods to investigate the experience of a variety of stakeholder groups impacted by policies. This frequently includes careers professionals (Thomsen et al., 2020) and end users of guidance services (Mariager-Anderson et al., 2016). But it is also common to interview experts, typically to form a picture of policy systems as a whole (Zacheus et al., 2021). Interestingly, there are no qualitative studies which examine the perspectives of policy-maker themselves. While policy makers are sometimes interviewed in mixed-methods studies, this is normally to gain an overview of policy systems rather than insights into the process of policymaking itself. In contrast to this large array of qualitative research, purely quantitative research is relatively rare with only two papers taking this perspective. The lack of strong quantitative work is

worthy of note because policymakers are often keen to have access to high quality quantitative studies, particularly those that demonstrate the efficacy of interventions.

Another main methodological approach that is deployed across these studies is document analysis (11). Typically, these approaches draw together a range of policy documents and secondary analyses to build a picture of a career guidance system (Alexander et al., 2020) or of an important component of it. A variety of different analytical approaches are used including forms of discourse analysis with approaches informed by Foucault (Fejes, 2008), Bacchi's 'What's the problem represented to be?' approach (Røise, 2020), and actantial analysis (Varjo et al., 2021).

Other approaches utilized to investigate career guidance policy include literature-based studies (6), and conceptual pieces (6) which explore key issues and concepts in career guidance policy such as how broader Nordic political economy and ideology shapes the particularity of career guidance policies (Bakke, 2020). There are also several papers which take a strongly comparative approach (5) to contrast the system of different Nordic countries. For example, Nordisk Nätverk för Vuxnas Lärande - NVL (2017) looks at the co-ordination of guidance services for adult learners across the Nordic countries

comparing the approaches taken in the different countries.

There are a small number of papers (3) which utilize a public review methodology in which an expert group or group of policy makers are tasked with investigating a particular issue and making recommendations for policy. For example, Kjærgård et al. (2016) describes how an expert committee appointed by the Norwegian government comprising of academics, policy makers and practitioners gathered a range of evidence to support its collective deliberations and inform recommendations for the future of the system.

There were some patterns in the use of methodologies, with grey literature most likely to use mixed methods approaches (40% of all grey literature used this methodology), comparative reviews (16%) and qualitative studies (16%). While academic research was most likely to use document analysis (29%), qualitative studies (26%) and conceptual analyses (10%). Such differences remind us that the distinction between academic and grey research is about more than the commissioner or publisher of such research, but also speaks to different underlying understandings of what research is for and how it should be conducted.

### Theoretical perspectives

The concept of theory is a complex and contested one. Einstein's (1934) summary of the nature of theory argues that 'the supreme goal of all theory is to make the irreducible basic elements as simple and as few as possible without having to surrender the adequate representation of a single datum of experience' (p.165). In other words, theories are a way to make the complexity of the world understandable without oversimplifying it. In social and political science studies, such as those analysed here, scholars have a wealth of pre-existing theoretical work to draw on to help them in their task of explaining the phenomenon of career guidance policy. In this section we will present the major theoretical resources that the corpus relies on.

More than half of the writing (37) that we identified did not include any explicit theoretical perspective. This was much more common with the grey literature, where all but one paper, had no theoretical perspective. Academic articles, chapters and PhDs were much more likely to include theoretical frameworks. Much of the work that ignores theory assumes that the representation of reality is unproblematic and then proceeds from the basis that the accumulation of data about a topic is sufficient to understand it and potentially to inform future policies. While it would be possible to contest this and to uncover the implicit assumptions and theories that underpin such

work, such a task is beyond the scope of this paper. Given this we will now turn to the minority of papers that did explicitly locate the theoretical basis of the papers.

The remaining 23 papers which locate themselves theoretically used a wide range of different theoretical perspectives largely drawn from the critical theory tradition (Thomsen et al., 2022). We can summarize the theoretical perspectives that were apparent in the corpus under four main headings: theories of discourse, theories of governance, psychologically derived theories and relational theories.

#### *Theories of discourse*

A range of papers view policy as an exercise of power which seeks to establish normative definitions of 'knowledge' and 'truth' in the field. Discourses are specific practices that systematically define the objects they discuss, determining what can be said and by whom, as well as when, where, and under what authority (Foucault, 2019). For instance, Røise (2020) utilizes Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' approach to analyse the discourse surrounding the reform of career education in Norway. Another paper draws on Bernstein's theories of discourse production to show how the different discourses that are advanced in the counselling of migrant youth are resolved in ethically problematic ways for the counsellors (Linde et al., 2021). Finally, several papers draw on Foucauldian ideas of governmentality to inform their understanding of career guidance policy. For example, Fejes (2008) utilizes the concepts of technologies of the self to examine the way in which career guidance shapes subjectivities and contributes to self-governing individuals.

#### *Theories of governance processes*

A wide range of authors draw on theories that explain how policy systems work and then explore the dynamics of power. Policy processes are commonly seen as an expression of will, born through complex struggles, compromises, (re)definitions, and finally interpreted through the meanings given to it by actors based on their own experiences and resources (Ball, 1994). This includes drawing on scholars like Walther and Esping-Andersen to create typologies of regimes through which the operation of career guidance systems, and the politics and policies involved, can be understood (Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019). A particular area of focus is New Public Governance theory which Wallenius et al. (2022) use to explore the interplay between ideology, governance, and forms of career guidance practice. Other work explores the interplay of different actors within such systems of governance drawing on stakeholder

participation theories (Plant & Haug, 2018) and Lipsky's street level policy makers (Mathiesen, 2022).

### **Psychologically derived theories**

The academic field of career guidance is strongly influenced by psychology. In many cases this disciplinary approach creates a focus on individuals rather than on policy systems (Hooley et al., 2018). However, Thomsen et al. (2022) highlight the value of the critical psychology tradition in which 'the individual's psychology is always situated in a context and studied in relation to the world in which the individual takes part' (p.485). Several papers in this study draw on critical psychology to explore how individuals experience the impacts of policy. For example, Cort et al. (2015) discusses how despite European policy on adult guidance, such services are difficult for adults to access in Denmark. They use Holzkamp's concept of 'disruption of the cyclicity in everyday life' to analyse working life narratives and reflect on the possibilities offered by adult guidance.

### **Relational theories**

Several theorists have argued that there is a relational turn in social science (Dépelteau, 2018). Such theories focus attention on the relationships and interactions between individuals and use these to understand how social systems operate. A small number of papers in this corpus use approaches informed by this perspective, particularly deploying membership categorization analysis (Määttä, 2019) and actant theory, drawing on the work of Greimas, to analyse the interactions between different policy participants (Kalalahti & Varjo, 2021).

Most of the theoretically informed work described above can be understood within a broadly defined tradition of critical theory. Within this frame the more theoretically informed papers in the study are quite heterogeneous, but it is noticeable that they still represent a relatively limited sub-set of the social theories that could be used to understand career guidance policy. Indeed, it is particularly noticeable that there is relatively little research which draws on either mainstream career development theories, perhaps because these rarely explicitly address policy, or the broader theories that are used within political science to analyse other forms of policy (e.g. see Jones et al., 2021 study on the use of theories in the analysis of health policy). Given this it might be possible to make the case for both a greater use of theory in the analysis of career guidance policy, and for the broadening of the theoretical perspectives that are used.

## **Themes addressed**

The thematic analysis identified four major themes in the corpus: *the context for career guidance policy*; *career guidance provision and practice*; *technologies of governance*; and *beneficiaries and outcomes of career guidance policies*. We will use these codes to structure our discussion of the themes addressed in the corpus.

### **The context for career guidance policy**

The literature that addresses career guidance and policy in the Nordic countries is typically very aware of context. Context was discussed *geographically* and *sectorally*. Discussions of geographical context addressed the *urban/rural divide* in the Nordic countries, the context of the *countries* themselves, and of key areas within them and considered how far the Nordic region and the concept of *Nordicity* offered explanatory power for understanding how policy operated within these countries. So, for example Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið (2020) is an evaluation of the school counselling system in Iceland and takes the urban/rural distinction as one of the key units of analysis, identifying that rural school are far less likely to be able to offer a school counselling service. Another example of attending to geographical context can be found in Helms Jørgensen et al. (2019) work on school-to-work transition regimes which explores policies in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland to examine whether it is possible to still talk about a coherent family of youth policies in the Nordic countries.

Papers also attend to the sectoral context within which career guidance operates and which it tries to affect. This includes discussions of *work and workplaces* and the *education system*, particularly in relation to schools and adult education. For example, Mariager-Anderson et al. (2016) look at the context of low skilled work and explore how workers' experience of this context and the sources of help and support that they can access organically, including 'self-help', interact with guidance policies. While Kuusipalo et al. (2021) explores how historical changes in adult education have interacted with guidance policies, frequently pushing all adult education into a guidance adjacent space in which all adult education is viewed as being primarily about propelling individuals towards the workplace.

### **Career guidance provision and practice**

The second theme addresses the nature of career guidance itself, exploring how policies, funding and governance arrangements impact on the arrangement of provision and practice. This includes discussions of



the location and organisation of career guidance, the career guidance profession and specific discussion of the creation and implementation of career guidance policies including discussion on the development of co-operation and co-ordination structures. Examples include Thomsen et al. (2020) discussion of the location of career guidance service in Danish trade unions and Hooley's (2022) examination of the regulation of professionalism in school-based career guidance, which was undertaken to inform policy development in Norway.

There is also literature which directly looks at the creation of career guidance policies and which analyses their meaning and evaluates their implementation. An example is Varjo et al. (2021) who look at how debates in the Finnish parliament have led to the development of career guidance policies. An important element of policy implementation that is frequently addressed are questions relating to the co-operation between different elements of the career guidance system and the co-ordination of the system itself. Nordisk Nätverk för Vuxnas Lärande - NVL (2017) addresses this topic directly across the whole Nordic region discussing collaboration at an inter-ministerial policy level as well as on the ground.

### **Technologies of governance**

A range of papers address the theme of governance either in terms of *systemic governance*, i.e. how career guidance systems are managed through the application of a range of policy instruments which function as carrots, sticks and sermons (Bemelmans- Videc et al., 1998). Alternatively, governance is viewed in more Foucauldian terms as *governance of subjectivities*. In these papers writers are often exploring how career guidance can function as a technology of self-discipline.

A good example of the discussion of *systemic governance* is Olofsson et al. (2017) study of the management of guidance services in three Swedish municipalities. Their study proceeds from the assumption that guidance services are too weakly governed leading to weak delivery of these services. In their study they look at governance practices across their three case studies to make recommendations for the Swedish government. Similarly, Hooley (2019) looks at a range of international approaches to the quality assurance of career guidance systems, to make recommendations for the Norwegian government. While Wallenius et al. (2022) addresses the governance of the system in more ideological terms by exploring how the rationalities that underpin school guidance in Finland have changed over time.

The *governance of subjectivities*, *governmentality*, is also addressed in a variety of papers. For example, Plant and Valgreen (2014) discuss the way that

career guidance can be used as a technology of social control. This argument is also made by Plant and Thomsen (2011) who talk about career guidance as 'social control in a velvet glove'. While Harjula et al. (2021) explore how Finnish career guidance policies are designed to foster particular choices and world views which emphasize the requirements of the information society and the labour market. Fejes (2008) addresses these issues directly through a Foucauldian lens, arguing that career guidance fosters a process of self-confession designed to shape our subjectivities and lead us to govern ourselves in the interests of power. Similarly, Kjærgård (2012) show that neoliberal governmentality characterizes career guidance, with career guidance practice tasked with responsabilising individuals into taking responsibility for their careers.

### **Beneficiaries and outcomes of career guidance policies**

The final theme looks at the benefit from career guidance both to individuals and to wider social and economic systems and examines which beneficiaries and outcomes policy is focused upon. The research within this theme focuses on the different groups that are benefiting from career guidance and typically highlights those who are viewed as vulnerable and marginalized such as migrants, women, low skilled workers and most commonly, young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). It is noticeable that most of the work that is focused on beneficiaries concentrates on the role that career guidance policies can play in either school-to-work transitions or the initial integration of migrants. The amount of research that explores the role of career guidance policies in supporting those who are already in work is far more limited. There is also an important strand of work that looks at the *involvement of beneficiaries* in the design and delivery of career guidance.

An example of work that focuses on the way that career guidance can improve the lives of specific groups is Karlsdóttir et al. (2017) who present evidence that career guidance and associated measures can actively benefit refugees in their struggle to integrate into Nordic labour markets. Other examples include Haasler and Barabasch (2015) who explore how career guidance can benefit mid-career professionals and Lundahl and Olofsson (2014) who argue, that despite its potential to support young people, the career guidance system in Sweden is failing young people by transferring all responsibilities onto them.

Other papers consider the benefits in terms of the *specific outcomes* that career guidance policies might bring about. These include the development of skills,

successful transitions, improved wellbeing, increased motivation and greater clarity of life and career objectives. Such outcomes are simultaneously individual outcomes, but their value is usually presented in policy terms. So, an individual might benefit from a smoother school-to-work transition, but the impetus for the policy is usually presented as an attempt to solve social problems such as early school leaving.

For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2021) argues that school guidance policies in Iceland should lead to increased autonomy and ownership of career, as well as desirable social and economic outcomes such as effective skills alignment, reduced early school leaving and increased participation in the labour market. While Vilhjálmsdóttir et al. (2011) draw attention to the learning outcomes that adults gain from participating in guidance and Det Kongelige Kunnskapsdepartment (2021) argues that career guidance can increase motivation to learn.

Such arguments about the individual and policy outcomes of career guidance often rely on logic models or assumptions about what career guidance policies should achieve. However, discussion about the definition and measurement of the outcomes of guidance policies is also linked to a more emergent discourse about the efficacy of guidance policies. Some research notes that the evidence supporting career guidance in the region needs to be organized and strengthened in ways that can empower the field to address policy more successfully (Hagaseth Haug et al., 2019), with Skovhus et al. (2021) going as far as to set out a research agenda for career guidance in the context of Denmark.

## Discussion

Career guidance policy is a specialized area which falls between disciplines and public policy areas. Yet, a systematic review of the research in this area in the Nordic countries shows that there is a lot of interest in this subject. The interest is driven by a wide range of different motives, but at the core, there is the belief that career guidance is an important and effective, if often overlooked, policy intervention which intersects with a wide range of larger policy areas and has the potential to contribute to a wide range of societal ‘problems’.

The research base that has been revealed by this exercise has several key strengths. Firstly, there is a substantial body of literature produced during the last 15 years which covers a range of policy issues across all the Nordic countries and self-governing regions. Secondly, the work has a strong empirical grounding, with most studies offering new data and

analysis to inform the understanding of career guidance policy in the Nordic countries.

This literature also has important limitations which it is worth reflecting on. Firstly, it is worthy of note that there is relatively little high quality quantitative work in this corpus. Secondly, it is important to recognize that this literature is divided between grey literature produced by governments, or intra- or non-governmental actors and academic literature produced by researchers in universities. The relative lack of interaction between these two literatures and the notable differences in their nature create a level of unevenness. In particular, the favouring of mixed methods and comparative reviews in grey literature contrasts with the more analytical and conceptual work that takes place in universities. This difference is compounded by the engagement with theory in the academic literature and the essentially atheoretical nature of much grey literature.

It is perhaps not surprising that research produced by different stakeholders, driven by different purposes, takes varied forms. However, it's essential to recognize that the divergence between these forms is not only in themes but also in the underlying epistemological perspectives. Both communities are researching career guidance policy, but they hold different views on what constitutes valid and useful evidence in this investigation with academics typically emphasizing the importance of connecting observations to wider theories of social reality but less interested in ‘solving’ policy ‘problems’, whilst researchers involved in producing more policy-orientated literature proceed from a positivist ontology and focus on the accumulation of empirical evidence that can underpin or justify policy actions.

The existence of a substantial, if complex, evidence base on career guidance policy in the Nordic countries raises some questions about whether what has been found is uniquely Nordic and ultimately whether the decision to draw the boundaries around these five countries is a sensible and defensible one. It is certainly the case that it is possible to find similar papers in other countries which raise a range of related issues (see for example the [International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy \(ICCDPP\)](#) country papers from 2019). Within the corpus there are four papers which actively compare Nordic countries with non-Nordic countries and often report opportunities for policy borrowing and lending (Haasler & Barabasch, 2015; Hooley, 2022).

What is evident from this body of literature is that researchers in the Nordic countries tend to explore trends across the region, make comparisons among Nordic countries, and that there is an infrastructure which exists through various Nordic institutions which supports this process of policy borrowing, lending, and comparison. It is also worth noting the

existence of a range of research funders who encourage and support cross-Nordic work, including The Nordic Council, the Nordic Network for Adult Learning and national funding councils. The extent and way in which Nordic research funders may be themselves perpetuating Nordicity, Nordicism, the Nordic model and other formulations of Nordic ideology and branding is definitely a subject worthy of more discussion (Marjanen et al., 2021).

A lot of the research analysed here is actively seeking to foster a Nordic perspective by actively comparing the Nordic countries (Andreassen et al., 2019; Karlsdóttir et al., 2017; Vuorinen et al., 2009). There is also some research which reflects on the cultural, political and systemic features of the Nordic systems and highlights the ideology of Nordicity as a key driver behind the organization of career guidance policies (Bakke, 2020; Hagaseth Haug et al., 2020). Such research argues that the political economy, welfare states, and cultures of egalitarianism and work-centrality shape the nature of Nordic career guidance systems in particular ways.

Finally, it is worth noting what is considered worthy of research in this corpus and therefore where some of the gaps or omissions might be. The corpus is strongly focused on career guidance policies that relate to young people with much less interested in the adult system. While the adult education system is strong and well researched in the Nordic countries (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009; Tikkanen & Nissinen, 2016), there is less research on adult guidance. This focus on youth also effects the way that issues of inequality and social justice are addressed in this literature. There is a lot of focus on issues of failed or incomplete transition into the Nordic mainstream (both in research on youth and migrants) as the primary source of social injustice and inequality. However, there is much less attention on inequalities that exist within the mainstream of Nordic working life. So, for example, although gender segregation in the labour market remains an important policy issue in many Nordic countries (Grönlund et al., 2017) and there is a strong case to be made that this is an area where career guidance can helpfully intervene (Schulstok & Wikstand, 2020), this issue is rarely addressed in this literature.

Another gap can be identified in relation to the fact that while there is a rich tradition of research within political science dedicated to exploring the conditions and consequences of policy formulation and implementation, this dimension is noticeably lacking in this context. This absence might be attributed to the fact that most interest in career guidance is conducted by scholars in the field of education, psychology or sociology, rather than in political science. Such an observation in relation to the study of career guidance *policy* perhaps suggests the need

for more interdisciplinary collaboration with political science.

The outcomes of career guidance policy both in terms of the interventions created and their impact on citizens are viewed as worthy of attention in this literature. However, there is very little research on the process of career guidance policy making itself. Work like Varjo et al.'s (2021) analysis of parliamentary processes around the development of career guidance policy is rare. And there are no interviews with policymakers or other policy actors tracing the complex process by which policy comes to be developed and to achieve the form that it does. This omission can make the policy process invisible and result in a decontextualization of career guidance from the political processes that actually bring it into being.

### Towards an agenda for future research in Nordic career guidance policy

Having reviewed the last 15 years of research on career guidance policy, we wanted to finish this article by offering a list of areas where it would be useful to see more or different kinds of research over the next 15 years. We hope that this list can inform the agendas of researchers in the region.

- **The policymaking process.** As argued above, there is too little research that tells us how policy making actually works. The *how* of policy is not investigated as thoroughly as the *what* and this needs to change as we move forwards. We need to hear more of the perspectives of policymakers and to trace the process of policy implementation.
- **Professionalization.** The career guidance profession and professionalization are identified as important themes in the research discussed in this study. However, professionalization of career guidance clearly remains an ongoing project in the Nordic countries. It is important that future research looks at the perspectives of career guidance practitioners and reflects critically on the existing training, professional development and professional regulation approaches that exist in the region.
- **User perspectives.** While there has been some important work done in the Nordic region over the last 15 years about the perspectives of users, it remains rare to hear directly from those who career guidance is designed to benefit. It is important that the ultimate purpose of career guidance policies is not lost, and that there is an ongoing project to listen to the experiences of users.
- **Increasing theoretical and methodological sophistication.** We have highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of different research

approach used in this corpus. We have also commented on the patchy, and relatively narrow, use of theory, particular in grey literature. As research in this area moves forward it will be valuable to look at both these methodological and theoretical issues. In particular, it would be valuable to see more high-quality quantitative studies and to see the use of a broader range of theoretical perspectives and more theoretically informed work. Alongside this there would be value in increasing the dialogue between academics and the researchers who produce policy-focused grey literature, to allow for mutual exchange and learning.

- **Multiple and intersectional inequalities.** This existing literature is very focused on addressing inequalities at the entry point to the labour market. Yet there would be value in exploring more deeply how career guidance policies interact with a wide range of other inequalities. For example, as the Nordic countries become increasingly multi-cultural, there is value in considering how career guidance policies interact with this multi-cultural reality. Another example is around gender, where there is a need to more deeply scrutinize gender relations and the role that career guidance policies have in challenging or reinforcing labour market segregation and other gender inequalities.
- **The Nordic model.** The research reviewed in this study suggests that it is possible to think about a Nordic model of career guidance policy. However, the nature of such a model remains vague and propositional. There is a need for robust comparative research, which draws on wider thinking about the Nordic welfare, education, and labour market models to identify which features are genuinely Nordic and which are confined to one or two countries.
- **Looking outwards.** While we remain convinced that there is a lot of value in considering the Nordic region collectively, there is a danger of such work becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy if wider comparisons are never undertaken. Given this we would like to see much more robust comparative work which looks further than the Nordic countries and asks what else can be learnt from the rest of Europe and the OECD, and indeed other countries beyond these more obvious comparisons.

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