

Ensuring quality in career guidance: A critical review

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Abstract: In rapidly changing employment markets, career guidance has a vital role to play in supporting people in navigating transitions between education and employment across the lifespan. In this article, the issue of quality and quality assurance in career guidance is explored. Although there is no clear agreed international understanding of what quality career guidance looks like, through a review of current approaches we identify six main areas which may be quality assured and propose a new typology of approaches to assuring quality. The article concludes by considering critically some of the issues that quality assurance approaches in career guidance generate, highlighting the need for caution so that the pursuit of quality does not undermine the goals it seeks to achieve.

Keywords: Career guidance, quality, quality assurance, policy

Introduction

Rapid changes to the shape of employment markets are a hallmark of modern globalised economies, and such changes are predicted to increase in both frequency and magnitude in the next 20 years (Brynjolffson & McAfee, 2014). For young people in particular this has resulted in some major challenges which have elongated the school-to-work transition and increased its complexity and competitiveness (Mann & Huddleston, 2016). Navigating these shifting markets successfully requires individuals to have extensive knowledge of both themselves and the educational and occupational opportunities open to them.

Career guidance plays an essential role in building these skills and knowledge in countries across the globe. Watts (2014) has noted that formal reviews of career guidance policies and systems have so far been conducted in 55 countries and it is likely that the activity is practised in many more countries. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2004) has argued that career guidance can support three main policy areas: (1) the effective functioning of the labour market and through this the economy; (2) the effective functioning of the education system; and (3) increasing social equity. And there is a growing evidence base that highlights how career guidance can contribute to both individuals' career development and to these wider policy goals (Hooley, 2017; Hooley & Dodd, 2015; Hughes, Mann, Barnes, Baldauf & McKeown, 2016; Schroder & Langer, 2017).

As a policy domain, career guidance is concerned with transitions within the education and employment system and with enabling individuals to build a coherent narrative that links their experiences of education and employment. As with any policy area there is a considerable gap between the policy vision and the practical implementation. In this gap thousands of small decisions are made by programme managers, practitioners and educators that influence how far and in what way the visions and objectives of policymakers are realised in practice. At times the sum of these variations will undermine the policy altogether,

transforming career guidance into something else and frustrating or subverting the objectives of policymakers. At others, the process of translating policy into action at the local level will enhance and improve the ideas of policymakers and make the achievement of the policy objectives more likely.

‘Quality assurance’ describes a range of techniques that can be used to ensure consistency in the way that activities are approached and that can potentially also be used to ensure fidelity of practice to policy, although consistency of practice does not necessarily ensure quality. Most organisations, and the career guidance profession as a whole, already have a range of internal, informal and tacit ways of ensuring quality. Consequently, the creation of national quality frameworks needs to be handled carefully so that it enhances such local arrangements and does not serve to reduce their flexibility and dynamism. Quality assurance is an attempt to provide a framework against which policy and practice can be checked. Such an approach may draw on formal forms of evidence but may also incorporate more tacit forms of knowledge in describing how things should be done (what is quality?) and how it is possible to ensure that they are done in this way (how can quality be assured?).

It is important to recognise that services, such as career guidance, are notoriously difficult to quality assure given their intangibility; the way in which they are tailored for different clients; the way in which production, sale and delivery are often simultaneous; and the challenge of introducing meaningful competition into many service industries (Borsch, 1995). Given this, it falls to national systems to define quality in a way that is meaningful within their system and to devise their own approaches to manage, regulate and quality assure the delivery of career guidance. In this article, we explore these issues through an extensive review of the international literature concerned with career guidance and quality and propose a series of domains of quality assurance and a new typology of quality assurance approaches.

What is Quality and How Can it Be Assured?

Quality is a much used but highly ambiguous term. In common usage quality denotes services that are delivered well or products that are produced to a high standard. Most uses of the term quality in business or process management also speak to the aims of producing something that is excellent in comparison to other similar things. However, in developing a clear and objective definition it is necessary to specify what is meant by quality further and then to go on to develop ideas about how this quality might be achieved. One person's opinion about what constitutes a good quality sandwich may differ from another's and these two people may have very different ideas about how such a sandwich might be made. This problem of subjective judgements potentially undermines any attempt to codify quality.

In response to such concerns a wide range of thinkers have developed ideas about what constitutes quality and how it can be ensured and assured. One set of definitions emphasises the value of subjective responses. Drucker's (2015) claim that, "quality in a product or service is not what the supplier puts in. It is what the customer gets out and is willing to pay for" (p.280) privileges subjectivity. Drucker views conceptions of quality that focus on the input rather than the output as a 'bad habit' which hampers innovation in a business. Drucker therefore has urged us to view quality as that which we value. So if one person likes the sandwich, it is quality to them. If another person doesn't like it, they may conclude that it is poor quality and not worthy of their money.

However, most definitions of quality do not view it as just a subjective judgement made by the users of a service or a product. The International Organization for Standardisation (ISO) quality standard retains the focus on outputs that meet customer requirements but defines how these requirements should be met (The British Assessment Bureau, 2016). In order to achieve these aims the ISO standard moves away from just focusing on the output (is it a good sandwich?) towards the specification of process.

However, it is not simply specifying the process through which the product or service was produced (how do you make a quality sandwich?), but also envisioning the kind of organisation that would be capable of creating such a product or service (what kind of company can make quality sandwiches?).

Alternatively, quality assurance systems such as Six Sigma focus on the management of processes, the reduction of variability in output and the reduction of errors in such processes (Pande, Neuman, & Cavanagh, 2000), while approaches like Kitemark quality assure products, ensuring that they are safe, consistent and error free (British Standards Institute [BSI], n.d.). A range of mechanisms also exists to quality assure the people who are involved in the delivery of products and services. Quality assuring the human or professional component of a service can be done in a variety of ways ranging from recruitment processes, qualification requirements and professionalisation processes to human resource quality assurance processes such as Investors in People (n.d.).

It is also worth noting that a number of approaches to quality exist that view the market as the ultimate guarantor of quality and that therefore seek to provide tools to inform market decisions. This may be through consumer advice services that offer expert advice on what constitutes quality to consumers or through the growing number of online consumer aggregation services such as Trip Advisor (2016), which support consumers to share and aggregate their opinions on what constitutes quality.

Defining and Assuring Quality in Education

Attempts to define quality in education intersect with many of the trends that we have identified above. However, the definition of both what constitutes quality and how such quality can be managed and assured have proven to be highly contentious within the field of education.

Barrett, Chawla-Duggan, Lowe, Nickel, and Ukpo (2006) have identified two broad approaches to defining quality in education. The first has its foundations in economics, and defines quality in terms of measurable outputs or outcomes such as student achievement in standardised tests, attainment levels, or rates of retention in schooling. The World Bank (and to a lesser degree, the OECD) has relied heavily on this first conception, as have many educational systems. The widely-quoted McKinsey Report (2007) on high-performing school systems, for example, defined system quality purely in terms of the achievement of students in that system in the PISA tests. Both international and national testing programs are often used in this way by policymakers to identify “quality” schools or systems, and those in need of improvement. System or school quality may be defined as high in terms of sustained aggregate performance against outcomes measures, or in terms of relative improvement over time, or in terms of high value added to outcomes, controlling for variables such as levels of social disadvantage.

The second tradition is a progressivist/humanist one that incorporates into definitions of quality the processes used in education. In such an approach, judgements about quality may draw on the quality of what is happening in the classroom. UNESCO has tended to conceptualise educational quality within the second, humanist tradition. Its 2000 framework for defining quality in education is notable for the strong emphasis it places on inputs and processes as well as outcomes.

Attempts to define and measure the quality of education are inevitably shaped by the implicit understandings of the purposes of education on the part of those defining quality. Chitty (2002) has proposed three key purposes of education: schooling as human fulfilment, schooling as preparation for the world of work, and schooling as an essential element of social progress and social change. Frameworks for defining quality in education vary in the degree of emphasis implicitly placed on each of these purposes. Understandings of education as a purely

instrumental activity that prepares students to be productive workers will likely frame quality in terms of basic skills and capabilities, while conceptualising schooling as a key mechanism for social change tends to lead to quality frameworks that include developing in students values and characteristics such as tolerance and inclusiveness as much as specific academic or technical skills. Beliefs about the broader moral function of education (such as whether schooling should lead to a more equal society) also shape the understanding and measurement of quality.

Barrett et al. (2006) have drawn together a framework that attempts to capture a multi-faceted understanding of quality that incorporates social, moral and instrumental purposes of schooling. They define quality as having the following components:

- effectiveness (both in terms of economic outcomes for individuals and society, but also in terms of human rights, participation and social cohesion);
- efficiency (the ratio of inputs to outputs);
- equality (both of access and outcomes);
- relevance (relating to the extent to which education is meeting the needs of a particular society, and varying with context); and
- sustainability (building capacity for ongoing learning and adaptation for all individuals).

Overall, quality in education more generally continues to be subject to debates that build on underlying differences in understandings about the purposes of education. How, then, is quality defined and assured within the specific field of career guidance?

Quality Assurance in Career Guidance

There are a number of key challenges in developing processes that assure quality in the delivery of career guidance services. The first of these is that ideally provision of career

guidance support should extend across the lifespan (Hooley, 2014). Career decisions are not made solely at school, and changes to the labour force mean that shifting to new occupations and sectors is a usual part of most people's careers and may well increase in intensity in the future (McMahon, Patton, and Tatham, 2003). For this reason, career guidance provision is often spread across a range of providers from schools to community-based organisations to employers, each of which operates within distinct resourcing and structural frameworks. Monitoring and assuring quality thus demands frameworks and processes that are useful for and applicable to a very broad range of contexts and service users.

Related to this issue, policy responsibility for career guidance is often spread across a number of government departments ranging from education to employment to youth to welfare (McCarthy and Hooley, 2015). This can often result in the development of fragmented or multiple systems within countries with the consequence that developing an approach to quality that is relevant and applicable across departments (and accepted by all participating stakeholders) is likely to be complex and fraught with difficulties.

Thirdly, the nature of career guidance as an activity that is at once embedded in wider educational provision and that works across boundaries makes it difficult to identify where the appropriate level of focus is for quality assurance. Bimrose, Hughes and Collins (2006) have noted that career guidance is defined by ambiguity and indeterminateness and that this is in tension with the aims of quality assurance. Career guidance is an embedded intervention which acts in concert with other interventions on complex individuals to shape the ways in which they interact with a changing environment. This complexity can serve to frustrate some kinds of thinking about quality.

Despite these difficulties the issue of quality has been explored within the career guidance field in a number of ways. However, the literature that exists on this subject within

the field is poorly unified. This results in the multiple, overlapping definitions and approaches that exist concurrently.

How issues of quality are conceptualised and addressed in the field of career guidance varies across different countries and contexts for policy and practice (Bimrose, Hughes, & Collins, 2006; Sultana, 2005; Almeida, Marques & Arulmani, 2014). However, Simon (2014) has argued that across Europe indicator based approaches to quality have predominated within career guidance. This is aligned with Barrett et al.'s (2006) first tradition of quality in education being viewed as measurement and standardisation.

Domains of Quality Assurance in Career Guidance

In the literature there appear to be six key domains in which there have been attempts to measure quality more broadly in business and education. We argue that in each of these six domains, quality may be more or less evident in the delivery of career guidance. While a range of terms has been used, we define these domains as policy, organisation, process, people, output or outcome and consumption. We will explore each of these before turning to questions of how quality in these domains might be assured.

Policy

In providing the frameworks and resourcing for service delivery, policy itself represents one domain in which quality may potentially be better or worse. Do policy frameworks support the delivery of quality career guidance?

Quality standards can offer policymakers a way of exerting influence on national systems. Simon (2014, p.185) has recounted the example of the Czech Republic where 'a national decree contains specifications for guidance services in education, outlining the services to be provided, the guidance activities required, the indicators to be used, the anticipated outcomes, the materials available and the charges allowable.' The use of quality

standards allows policymakers considerable control over practice even in systems that are highly decentralised or marketised (Fretwell & Plant, 2001). For example, in England, where careers provision has been strongly marketised, providers of the National Careers Service are required to hold the matrix Standard.

The matrix Standard in England is particularly interesting because in addition to a set of requirements to which providers have to adhere it also includes an inspection regime and an accreditation framework. While many other countries tell providers that they must deliver a high quality careers service, in England the system ensures that they also have to listen if they want to be able to access government contracts.

However, it is also possible to conceive of policies themselves being subject to quality assurance processes. Reviews by international bodies such as the OECD, the World Bank and the European Union all serve to create guidelines for national career guidance systems and to exert some market pressure on them by making international comparisons possible. A recent example of this has been the OECD review of Norway's skills system which has diagnosed the country's underdevelopment of career guidance provision as part of the wider issues facing its skills system and has made recommendations for improvements to the system (OECD, 2014).

Even more ambitiously there is some movement within Europe to create a series of standardised indicators that can be used for describing and quality assuring career guidance policy systems (der Boer, Mittendorf, Schreerens, & Sjenitzer, 2005; ELGPN, 2015; Hughes and Gratton, 2006). Researchers in the Asia-Pacific region have also developed a range of frameworks for making assessments about quality (Almeida, Marques & Arulmani, 2014; Rice et al., 2015; CICA, 2014). However, arriving upon a single quality approach that is both meaningful and useful for a wide range of countries has proven to be very difficult. The

complexity and diversity of career guidance has often proved resistant to those who have tried to create a simple national summary of it.

The identification and definition of quality within policy systems is likely to be bound up with political questions. Policy actors will want to be on the side of quality and so the definition and positioning of quality as a rationale for policy action is likely to be contentious and replete with political consequences. Definitions of quality at the policy level may also be influenced by political ideologies concerning the roles of the market and of government in provision.

Organisation

A second domain in which quality may assured in career guidance is the organisation. Are provider organisations designed, resourced and managed in a way that facilitates or hinders quality delivery?

The discussion of the matrix Standard earlier highlights one example whereby organisations delivering career guidance are managed through standards for compliance. However, more usually quality assurance of organisations in career guidance tends to take the form of guidelines for evaluative development. Examples include the Gatsby Good Career Guidance Benchmarks in Britain (Gatsby Foundation, 2014) and the School Career Development Benchmarking Resource in Australia (CICA, 2014). Such examples give providers a clear articulation of what constitutes quality and offer them a blueprint for achieving these outcomes.

However, the identification of quality can serve as an ideological battleground within organisations. Bimrose, Hughes and Collins (2006) have argued that organisational management can use quality as ‘a rhetoric of rationalisation’ to ‘build legitimacy for their actions’ (Eccles & Nohria, 1992, p.52-53). Nevertheless, it is equally possible to view quality

as an instrument that workers or consumers can use to hold organisations and organisational management to account. Such discussion opens up the question as to how far quality functions as an instrument through which power is mobilised and stakeholders seek to advance their interests.

Process

A third domain in which there may be variation in quality is that of process. Some approaches to quality in career guidance focus on ensuring the accuracy of information, and the IT systems and processes that exist around its updating (Plant, 2001). Plant highlighted a range of examples of process approaches to quality in Denmark, Canada, the Netherlands, the UK and the USA and noted that this approach is typified by the creation of guidelines addressing issues like the production of information, the use of the internet or the development of resources.

Such examples seek to regularise aspects of career guidance practice for the purpose of reducing errors and standardising the client experience. These are typically evaluative tools (guidelines) rather than compliance tools (standards), but sometimes there is a move to establish stricter regulations perhaps using a wider approach to quality assurance such as the ISO quality standard. Plant (2004) has been critical of such approaches, arguing that they squeeze career guidance into unsuitable shapes. The creation of career guidance specific tools such as the matrix Standard in the UK solves some of these problems (Maguire, 2005), but still creates a template into which guidance processes are expected to fit.

A key way in which processes are quality assured is through the production of codes of ethics which set out the ways in which professionals can and cannot act. Plant (2004) noted that many professional associations have closely aligned their regulations on how to act ethically with wider standards or guidelines that explain how professionals should act. Such

ethical guidelines have the potential to frame practice in radically different ways. However, as Plant (2001) observed it is often difficult to ascertain whether ethical standards are being adhered to and how much influence they actually exert on the nature of careers practice.

People

A fourth quality domain is that of the staff involved in service delivery. It is common for career guidance quality systems to be built around professional standards and guidelines for people (Plant, 2001). Such an approach can be framed in terms of compliance; for example, as performance criteria or occupational or professional standards which must be met in order to justify the individual's legitimacy as a practitioner. Alternatively, approaches to ensuring staff quality can be framed as more advisory documents setting out areas that practitioners should attend to in their practice.

Plant (2001) pointed out that the German Association of Career Counsellors (dvb) maintains a Directory of Certified Career Counsellors. The attempt by the Career Development Institute in the UK to found a similar register (CDI, 2016) also speaks to a similar aim. However, with the exception of Quebec where practitioners require a licence to practice (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, 2012), such standards are attempts to influence the market rather than genuine requirements with which practitioners have to comply. The balance between regulation and advisory standards relates to a political battle between stakeholders, with professional associations often keen to increase regulation as a way of safeguarding their status whilst governments typically seek to use regulation more sparingly.

An alternative approach advanced by Watson (1994) privileges the training, professionalism and continuing professional development of the practitioner over what Plant (2011) has critically described as an "indicator based QA approach" (p.92). Watson sought to

reimagine quality assurance as a series of organic relationships within a community of practice and contended that the process of formal, counselling-style supervision should be at the heart of this. In counselling, ‘supervision’ is a formal developmental arrangement created to allow therapists to discuss their work with an experienced therapist. Supervision is designed to support therapists to become reflective and effective, to monitor the interests of the client and to maintain ethical standards (Despenser, 2011). Supervision has some similarities with the process of peer observation in teaching practice (e.g. see Hendry and Oliver, 2012) as both privilege reflection and professional feedback as guarantors of quality. Supervision is sometimes used in career guidance (Ladany and O’Shaughnessy, 2015), peer observation less commonly, but neither of these practices are as strongly embedded as they are within the counselling and teaching professions.

Output or Outcome

Outputs or outcomes represent a fifth domain in which quality may be assured. There have been various attempts to define the capabilities that individuals need to successfully manage their careers (Hooley, Watts, Sultana, & Neary, 2013). Such lists of career management skills can be rendered as assessable learning outcomes. This offers one way in which the quality of career guidance could be measured. However, the use of summative learning assessment as part of career guidance remains fairly uncommon. In addition, the use of summative measurements to assess quality in career guidance is problematic. Individuals develop their careers skills and knowledge through a range of sources, including family, peers, media, the internet and work experience. Consequently, isolating the impact of a given career service on an individual’s knowledge and skill development is a difficult task and may not provide robust measures of service quality.

An alternative approach to quality assurance is to focus on the work- and education-related outcomes of career guidance. For policymakers, this can often be reduced to the

course or employment outcomes to which career guidance clients progress after receiving career guidance. For example, in 2014 the statutory guidance for schools issued by the Department for Education in England reported that schools ‘were not doing enough to evaluate the quality of their careers guidance provision’ and recommended that ‘Destination measures can be used as part of this evaluation.’ As noted, many external factors beyond career guidance influence clients’ trajectories, so we should be sceptical of the idea that employment outcomes can be used as an indicator of the quality of career guidance. However, it is important to recognise that this kind of straightforward outcome measurement is often appealing to policymakers. A more extreme example of such outcome-based approaches is offered by the National Careers Service, the English adult career guidance service, which has linked the funding of services to the achievement of customer satisfaction, career management skills and employment outcomes. We discuss further the capacity of poorly-informed measures of quality assurance to distort activity and work against quality later in the paper.

Consumption

Finally, consumption, or the service as experienced by the customer, is another domain or dimension of quality. Customer satisfaction as a measure of quality in career guidance is sometimes ascertained through the use of tools such as surveys (for example, the Australian New South Wales government measures school student satisfaction with careers guidance through a pathways survey). Measures of customer satisfaction give providers some indication of the perceived quality of provision, although again, such mechanisms still appear to be relatively uncommon. However, the use of such measures can highlight the same problems experienced in other areas of education when transferring essentially market-based mechanisms to a non-market environment. First, consumers of guidance services have limited knowledge (particularly in the case of younger students in schools) and may not always be

able to provide accurate measures of the quality of a service. Second, unlike purchasing a product, educating and providing guidance may at times involve supporting customers to deal with negative information (for example, helping them recognise that a particular decision or pathway is unwise), potentially invoking negative responses to the provider that are reflected in surveys. So while measuring satisfaction with provision is important, it may need to be undertaken with an awareness of these limitations.

Haug (2016) has argued that despite these reservations, user perspectives are critical to understanding, measuring and defining quality in career guidance. However, if users are to be able to contribute more than just passive reports of satisfaction it is important that they are involved in both the co-design of the intervention and the co-design of the measurement or quality approach (Haug & Plant, 2016). Such a perspective has the potential to transform this quality domain from a measurement of consumption into a more radical and integrated approach to quality assurance.

Table 1 below outlines examples of the type of indicator that might be found for each of these six domains in assuring quality in career guidance:

Table 1. Potential indicators of quality in the six domains.

Domain	Policy	Organisation	Process	People	Product	Consumption
<i>Focus question</i>	<i>Are the policy frameworks or settings conducive to quality provision?</i>	<i>Is the organisation capable of delivering a quality product?</i>	<i>Is this particular process capable of delivering a quality product?</i>	<i>Are the people involved suitably qualified and skilled?</i>	<i>Is the product of a good quality?</i>	<i>Do consumers believe the product to be of a good quality?</i>
Example of question framing a potential indicator in career guidance	Does the government have a lifelong careers strategy?	Does the organisation monitor and evaluate its career guidance provision?	Does the organisation have a clear definition of its guidance processes and a documented	Do all providers have careers staff with career-specific qualifications?	Do all clients increase their career knowledge and skills?	Do clients believe that the career service is meeting their needs?

			process for delivering them?			
Indicator/s	Existence of key public policy documents and funding to support their implementation	Career guidance evaluation documents with links to future plans for improvement	Existence of organisational documentation and evidence of their use in practice	Percentage of careers staff with career-specific qualifications	Percentage of school students showing an increase in career management skills over a 2-year period.	Percentage of clients satisfied with service provision

A Framework of Approaches for Assuring Quality

Each of these domains represents an area in which quality in career guidance might conceivably be measured, monitored and improved. Some of the most ambitious quality frameworks, such as the German BuQu Quality Standard, seek to quality assure a number of these domains simultaneously (German National Guidance Forum in Education, Career and Employment [nfb] & Research Group Quality in Guidance at the Institute of Educational Science, Heidelberg University, 2016). However, even where more comprehensive approaches are taken this still only answers the question of ‘what’ should be quality assured and not ‘how’ this quality assurance should be undertaken.

Bowen-Klewley, Cooper, and Grannall’s (n.d.) analysis of vocational education and training quality assurance in seven countries identified two key models of system quality assurance, a compliance model and an evaluative model. With respect to career guidance Plant (2001) made a similar distinction between ‘standards’ which require compliance and ‘guidelines’ which serve as a voluntaristic framework for the improvement of quality.

Bowen-Klewley et al. (n.d.) found that compliance models are usually implemented in countries with no or weak traditions of quality assurance as a means of establishing basic levels of quality and consistency of provision. Compliance approaches focus on establishing standards that are monitored internally and externally, combined with processes and sanctions

for noncompliance. Evaluation models tend to be implemented in somewhat more developed systems and focus on internal self-review against a series of guidelines.

Bimrose, Hughes, and Collins (2006) have discussed the way in which compliance approaches can work in concert with evaluative approaches. They claim that internal and informal mechanisms (evaluative) are vital and highlight examples of both organisational practices, such as the provision of training and professional practices and a commitment to reflective practice that can support quality enhancement. However, they also stress the importance of more formal mechanisms and describe how these formal and informal quality systems interact, for example by demonstrating how professional associations support self-regulating professional practices or quality marks drive continuous improvement processes within organisations.

Both standards and guidelines are typically framed in a way that is generic and system-wide. However, Grant (2006) made the case for using system-wide standards together with contextualised standards identified by each institution to ensure that provision is tailored to local needs and meets context-specific demands. Standards can also describe minimum standards (necessary, for example, for continued registration of an institution), high quality practice, or varying levels of quality that give guidance to providers about the levels between minimum acceptability and high quality practice, and articulate the characteristics of high quality provision.

In addition to the compliance/standards and evaluative/guidelines approaches policymakers have increasingly turned to market and other kinds of competitive mechanisms to ensure or raise quality. Such market mechanisms often frame decisions (such as school choice) by reporting particular metrics that are considered by consumers to be relevant to quality (e.g. class sizes, teacher qualification levels or student attainment). This kind of

approach to quality assurance then assumes that the market will drive quality improvement both by allowing individuals to choose a higher quality school and through the belief that this market pressure will exert an upward pressure on the quality of all actors within the system. Finally, Plant (2011) has proposed a more organic approach to quality, where the professionalism and responsiveness of providers acts as a force to drive quality improvements in provision in response to perceived local needs built on communication and consultation with the local community.

We would like to propose a typology that combines these four approaches to assuring quality in career guidance. These are encapsulated in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1. Four approaches to quality assurance in career guidance across systems.

		Change driver	
		Local	Systemic
Degree of provider professional autonomy	Low	<i>Advisory</i>	<i>Regulatory</i>
	High	<i>Organic</i>	<i>Competitive</i>

The horizontal axis in Figure 1 represents the degree to which the move towards greater quality is driven and conceptualised either at the central system level or at the level of the local provider. The vertical axis in Figure 1 represents the degree of autonomy extended

to local providers that is embedded in each approach to quality assurance, moving from low to high.

Regulatory approaches focus on legal requirements imposed on providers as a means of improving quality. They include mechanisms such as practitioner registration (incorporating qualification requirements), regulations about facilities or other resourcing, and regulations around outputs (for example, a requirement that a school or career guidance facility must provide a certain number of individual counselling sessions per year). Standards for compliance are central to regulatory approaches as are inspection regimes if such approaches are to be successfully implemented.

Advisory approaches describe what quality looks like for providers, and may include exemplars of good practice for them to follow. Staged or rubric-based advisory approaches describe increasing levels of quality, supporting providers to identify the quality of their current level of provision, together with what higher quality might look like and the types of actions necessary to achieve it. Such approaches assume that professionals need to be told what quality looks like but stop short of requiring this. Examples in career guidance include the Gatsby Foundation career best practice guidelines, or the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) school career benchmarking resource.

Organic approaches view quality as being defined by the provider and the professional. They view quality as a local concern that will be driven by professional values and the desire to do a good job. Examples in career guidance would include systems which privilege professional autonomy and local choices. Such approaches may include quality circles, supervisory arrangements, peer observation and mentoring for careers professionals, professional networks and local self-evaluation. Another organic approach follows from the desire to involve users as co-producers in the development of career guidance services and

the design of forms of measurement (Haug, 2016; Plant & Haug, 2016). There are both potential tensions and complementarities in organic approaches to quality assurance which involve both professionals and service users in defining and measuring quality.

Competitive approaches view quality as being driven by customer responses to information on outcomes, consumer feedback and movement of consumers towards or away from specific providers in response to consumer perceptions about quality. Sometimes such approaches may be underpinned by funding arrangements such as payment by results systems. While such approaches place serious constraints on professionals they look to professionals to exercise autonomy and to innovate in order to succeed in the competition or market. Examples in career guidance would include systems that focus on client destinations and other forms of outcomes, particularly when, as with the National Careers Service in England, these are linked to funding arrangements.

Critical Perspectives on Quality

Thus far we have sought to describe the different approaches to assuring quality within career guidance. However, as we have also discussed, the concept of quality is contentious and benefits from some critical examination. In this final section we identify four critical concerns with respect to quality assurance of career guidance provision. These relate to the politics of quality processes, to the capacity of measurement to improve quality, to the potential of quality processes to distort existing systems through the provision of false incentives, and to the extent to which it is relevant and useful to try and quality assure a complex and embedded activity like career guidance.

The Politics of Quality

The first concern relates to the purposes of career guidance and its inherently political nature. Seeking to quality assure career guidance raises fundamental questions about the

purposes of career guidance. If quality is defined at least in part as fitness for purpose (e.g. Green 1994), then it must be asked, ‘Whose purpose or purposes?’

The outcomes of career guidance are important for a range of stakeholders, from governments and businesses to individuals and families, and interests and needs are not uniform across these groups. So, for example, from a business perspective, career guidance may be seen primarily as a tool to ensure that employment markets have an adequate supply of labour at the lowest possible price, and indeed, employer groups frequently argue that schools, universities and their programs (including careers guidance) are not providing them with the “right” mix of labour, with the “right” skills and attitudes (e.g. Jinman 2015). However, meeting the market’s needs in this respect may be in conflict with the best interests of individuals within that market. Some sociologists have argued that career guidance may even work to reinforce existing inequalities and power structures, acting as a tool to reconcile those with least power to their roles and fates (e.g. Roberts 1977).

With respect to quality systems, Plant (2001) asks the questions:

“Who ‘owns’ the standards or guidelines? How are they put to use? With which sort of consequences? How are they interpreted, maintained, developed, and enforced? Who has the power in the process of developing and adapting such standards or guidelines? Do they attempt to cover all guidance settings across sectors? In cases of clarification, who can appeal on the interpretations, to whom, and with which consequences?” (p.7)

The point is clear that quality systems are not neutral but rather a tool that lends power to particular groups, and privileges certain sorts of practice and certain kinds of outcomes above others. How quality systems are designed, implemented and policed all add to this dynamic. Furthermore, the more that quality systems are linked to funding

mechanisms or licenses to practise, the more clearly the standards act as an instrument through which power is wielded.

Does Quality Assurance Deliver Service Improvement?

At present there is very limited evidence about the effectiveness or impacts of the implementation of different quality assurance systems. Quality assurance systems ask organisations and professionals to behave differently. As a consequence, we might expect that the implementation of quality assurance systems, and indeed of different types of quality systems might lead to identifiable outcomes. However, evidence with respect to this is currently limited (e.g. Bowes, Hughes, Reece, Moreton, Howe, & Birkin, 2015; Hooley, Matheson, & Watts, 2014; Maguire, 2005; Simon, 2014). There is a clear need to place considerations of quality on a better evidenced footing.

Simon (2014) notes that,

“while quality standards have contributed enormously to helping organisations enhance their quality procedures, some authors believe that companies that choose to apply for an accreditation rather than just implementing quality processes in their organisation do not take the implementation of the quality scheme as an opportunity to improve internal processes and systems but simply want a certificate for the wall” (p.185).

Using quality standards as an accountability mechanism by linking them to resourcing may provide an incentive towards genuine implementation, but leads directly to the next critical concern.

Does Quality Assurance Distort Activity?

Quality assurance systems, particularly if linked to incentives such as funding, or to disincentives such as naming and shaming of poor performers, have the capacity to distort the behaviours of those within the system in unintended and often undesirable ways. Large-scale

testing regimes in education provide an illustrative example. The literature on student testing in schools demonstrates that while high-stakes testing regimes can be implemented by policymakers with the intention of monitoring and improving quality, there is a broad range of negative flow-on effects. These can include a narrowing of curriculum breadth to focus on assessed material and a decrease in time allocated to non-tested areas (David 2011; Polesel, Rice, & Dulfer, 2014; Jones, Jones & Hargrove, 2003; Madaus, Russell, & Higgins, 2009), teachers teaching lower- rather than higher-order skills (Macmillan 2005; Chang, Al-Smarrai, Ragatz, Shaeffer, De Ree, & Stevenson, 2013), or even at one extreme, teacher cheating (Jacob & Levitt, 2003).

Developing and implementing quality assurance systems for career guidance would need to take this criticism into account and strive to avoid these types of negative flow-on effects. Using measures of quality such as numbers of counselling sessions provided or CVs developed with students, for example, can actually push providers away from quality by encouraging rapid but superficial service provision. Other measures, such as post-provision placement of clients into work, may inadvertently encourage providers to target “easy” students or clients, and avoid those complex and difficult clients who are most in need of support. Regulatory and competitive models of quality assurance are probably most likely to carry with them these types of unintended consequences as they compel professionals and providers to behave in certain ways that may be in conflict with their professional judgement and what they perceive to be the needs of their customers. Colley, Lewin, and Chadderton (2010) have argued that within Connexions (the youth careers service in England between 2000 and 2011) the divergence of service expectations (which they describe as managerialism) from professional judgement resulted in professionals experiencing ethical dilemmas that compelled them to engage in forms of resistance and subversion. Hedderman (2011) has drawn attention to practices such as cream-skimming, short-termism and tunnel vision that arise in response to

accountability systems where stakes are high, most particularly when outcomes are linked to future resourcing.

Is Quality Meaningful for Career Guidance?

Finally, there is the question of the extent to which it is both possible and reasonable to apply models from other fields of practice to career guidance. As has been noted, cross-professional comparisons incorporate a number of risks (Grossman, Compton, Igra, Ronfeldt, Shahan, & Williamson, 2009). The application of market models to education highlights some of these risks. Schools and teachers in many first world countries have already experienced negative consequences deriving from a *carte blanche* application of free market models to schooling (e.g. Dumay & Dupriez, 2013), sometimes done without any in-depth consideration by policymakers of the differences between the production of manufactured items and the development of the capacities of human beings.

Similarly, there may be limits to the degree to which we can apply models of quality assurance drawn from other fields to career guidance provision. The real difficulties in determining the quality of outcomes highlighted earlier constitute one central concern. Other concerns include the extent to which quality assurance systems are capable of examining a multifaceted activity such as career guidance that includes everything from the provision of pieces of factual information to long-form experiential learning programmes. Career guidance is inherently boundary-crossing in nature, involving multiple inputs from multiple sources. If quality assurance processes are narrowly framed, they run the risk of constraining practice. Furthermore, der Boer, Mittendorf, Schreerens, and Sjenitzer (2005) found that a key obstacle to building effective quality assurance systems in career guidance was the difficulty of deciding what guidance was and recognising it when it was embedded in the practice of other

institutions. Defining career guidance and its contours across the lifespan is central to the problem of assuring its quality.

Conclusion

In this article we have explored the role of quality and quality assurance in the delivery of career guidance. Our principal finding is that there is a wide range of different approaches to quality within the career guidance field, but that these different approaches are poorly theorised and evidenced. We have proposed a conceptual model that may be useful in examining quality approaches within the field. However, we have also raised some critical concerns with the quality agenda. There are good reasons why a headlong drive towards more ‘quality’ may result in unanticipated and detrimental consequences. At the heart of these concerns is a recognition that quality is not a neutral concept but rather a political one.

In the light of this discussion it is important that policymakers, practitioners and researchers seek to deepen understanding of quality and to hold claims that particular interventions can advance quality up to greater scrutiny. The questions should always be: What do we mean by quality? Who is this quality for? And what unintended consequences might result from the implementation of interventions?

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