

European Competence Standards - Feedback, Insights and Changes



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On September 4, 2014, we collected first feedback on the European Competence Standards (ECS) from approximately 100 participants of the Canterbury Summit, with explicit statements coming from about 30 people from all around Europe. There was very little time left for feedback, so we asked the participants to primarily voice their criticism, based on the written presentation of the ECS, which all participants received ahead of the summit.

Additionally, we collected written feedback from stakeholders around Europe on the ECS until November 15, 2014. In this time, we received 14 statements from two international organisations and nine nations (Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). Most feedback came from people, who had actively participated at the summit or been represented their through their organisations.

There were three general points of criticism, which came up at the summit, and which were confirmed after the summit in written statements. Furthermore, there were a couple of more content-related suggestions regarding the ECS.

In this article, we will present and discuss the criticism of the ECS, reporting on how we will address the different points in the revision of the ECS for their publication in 2015.

1. Perceived Hierarchy between the Types of Career Professionals

The presentation of the “three types of career professionals” gave participants the idea that there was a hierarchy of roles intended with the three types. People got the impression that the “career advisors” were considered of lesser

value than the “career guidance counsellors” were and subject to hierarchical relationships in practice. The criticism was really against the idea of a hierarchy, demonstrated by the equal sentiments regarding the relationship between the “career guidance counsellors” and the “career experts”.

In essence, the participants supported the idea that the three types of career professionals needed different levels of competence, increasing with the type of career practice. However, they strongly opposed any kind of in-born hierarchical relationship between the three types. Additionally, they stressed that there should not be a hierarchical relationship between career professionals and clients either.

When a model was presented, where all types of career professionals are positioned in a circular (see Graph 1), non-hierarchical relationship to clients seeking support in career-related matters, the participants were largely satisfied. The criticism was not against the levels of competence, but against the hierarchical table of the professional functions.

2. Considering Career Advisors as Career Professionals

Further feedback indicated that it could be problematic to summarize “career advisors” under the broad umbrella of “career professionals”. Several respondents pointed out that a clear distinction is needed between “career professionals” (people specialized on career guidance and counselling), and other professionals, who might offer some degree of career support as part of their own profession, e.g. as a teacher, as a psychologist, as a HR manager or a public servant, but who shouldn’t be called “career professionals” in addition to the titles they already carry.

The argument is essentially that accepting other professionals as “career professionals” risks getting in the way of the professionalization of career guidance and counselling, since it suggests that “career guidance counsellors” are not needed, if enough “career professionals” in terms of “career advisors” are available.



Graph 1: Circular model demarking the relationship of career advisors, CGC practitioners and CGC specialists to the clients of career services. It stresses the importance of all types of career services and highlights that all types of services must be accessible for clients, depending on the career-related challenges they are dealing with (Source: NICE 2015).

This, of course, would be a misunderstanding of our concept, which endorses the need for both. However, the NICE steering committee has already stressed in the past, that career advisors should not be classified as “career professionals”, too.

The solution, which we have proposed before, is for the training of “career advisors” to be integrated in degree programmes of other professionals, and not as a full degree in itself, which could be achieved through BA-level programmes, for instance. Training as a “career advisor” in this understanding could be a specialization as part of Teacher Training or part of a programme in Human Resource Management or Social Work. It does not prepare a person for the challenges faced by a professional career guidance and counselling practitioner.

Furthermore, we should avoid speaking of three types of career professionals in the future, but refer to “three types of career services” instead. The distinction would be that career advisors offer career support as part of their main professional role, while career practitioners and specialist are professionals of career guidance and counselling.

3. Confusion with the Names of the three Types of Career Professionals

Directly at the beginning of the conference, the notion of speaking of “career guidance counsellors” was criticized on the basis that career counselling is only one of the roles associated to the profession. The alternative would be to speak of “career practitioners” or “career guidance and counselling practitioners”, which seems to be a neutral term in English. However, we fully realize that in other European languages there is often not an adequate translation of “practitioner” – at least none that would be understood in relevant national contexts. We have agreed to use the term “CGC practitioner” in English and suggest that it is adjusted and interpreted for translations into other languages and also for use in different English-speaking cultures.

The most vivid criticism related to the term “career expert”. It was opposed for two central reasons. On the one hand, the term can lead to

the perception that CGC practitioners lack expertise on career-related questions, and aren’t fully qualified for their professional roles. On the other hand, the concept behind any career professional “being an expert” was considered problematic. From a client-centred, constructivist perspective, clients should be viewed as the “experts of their own career narrative”, as one respondent stressed. A self-understanding of career professionals as (the actual) “experts” could have negative implications regarding the relationships, which career professionals seek to build with their clients. These should be “at eye level” in their nature, but are always threatened of becoming asymmetric, due to the procedural power and the informational advantages of the professionals. Based on this criticism of the term “expert”, it probably makes most sense to differentiate between “CGC practitioners” and “CGC specialists”. This argues towards specialization on different professional roles as a pathway for professional development and mobility. With this solution, we would avoid the word “expert” completely.

Finally, the term “career advisor” led to many misunderstandings, since it is used widely in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Here, it partially denominates school teachers with special responsibilities concerning career guidance and counselling, but is often also used as a job title for people who would rather be categorized as “CGC practitioners” from the perspective of the NICE framework. We considered to rather speak of “career supporters” or “career partners”, for instance, i.e. finding a term which isn’t in broad use at the moment, and which would describe a *partnering role* for CGC or a *supportive role* regarding career-matters, instead of a function, which is partially associated with the practice of a full “career professional”.

However, we came to the conclusion that these broad concepts would also lead to misunderstandings, and that it is inevitable that some of our terminology will already be in use in other ways. Therefore, we would prefer to stick with the term “career advisor” and kindly ask users of the NICE framework to translate our concepts for use in their cultural, organisational and linguistic contexts.

A helpful suggestion was for us to offer examples of more concrete job profiles, which match the three different types, so to give a more distinctive overview of the model’s flexibility and central aspects.

4. Content-related recommendations

Beyond the more general criticism of the model, we received proposals that were more specific:

1. Not to restrict the counselling-role to “career counselling”, but to be clear about the need for holistic, client-centred counselling, where people are regarded as a “whole person” – not only a “vocational self”. In particular, it is emphasized that “personal, social, mental health, educational or other issues [...] may be creating a barrier to dealing successfully with subsequent vocational/career issues.”

Additional comments also suggest that the role of counselling should be considered a *primus inter pares*, at least for the “CGC practitioners”. The concept “*primus inter pares*” refers to a role, which combines a notion of equality with the need for a special function, often one, which moderates or integrates the others. According to these commentators, counselling is “an integral aspect of the profession and practice”, which puts “service to the client” first, and where empathy is of fundamental importance. From this perspective, counselling is what holds all of the other professional roles together.

➤ **We tend to disagree with this proposal.**
We do share the understanding of Career Guidance and Counselling as a “counselling profession”, i.e. a profession, where the act of counselling a person is of central importance. In line with the view that even career education in group settings (often referred to as group counselling), particularly the development of career management competences, requires student-centred, interactive, experience-based approaches to training, a counselling-perspective, which focuses on the value for individuals’ career development, is absolutely necessary. However, only speaking of “counselling” could be misunderstood as a purely psychological or even therapeutic activity,

whereas "career counselling" must also involve educational and informational aspects. Therefore, we have decided to stick with the term "career counselling" as the title of one of the five professional roles.

2. To focus more broadly on "guidance counselling" instead of "career guidance counselling", arguing that career is commonly understood as something, which people only have "after education".

➤ **We tend to disagree with this proposal.**

There is a growing notion that people's careers also encompass their education and training at all stages of their life, including primary school. This understanding is endorsed widely, including by the EU and the OECD. We think it is important to refer to "careers" as the central topic, which our field of practice deals with, instead of only speaking of "guidance" or "guidance counselling". Important reasons are the need to transform the concept of career as it is understood publicly, as part of wider "career education", and because people's careers lie at the heart of the profession, a point that needs to be understood while we are establishing this new profession.

3. To broaden the understanding of "career education" to include "learning about career", and not only focus on the development of career management competences like planning skills.

➤ **We tend to agree with this suggestion.** The commentator doesn't go into much detail in this suggestion, unfortunately, but our understanding is that all people should ideally have a basic understanding of career theory, which prepares them to think about their personal education and career development as autonomously as possible. As critical citizens, who can judge the functioning of career systems and labour markets to some extent, people will then also be able to assess more adequately, to which extent they are suffering from structural, economic or cultural problems, which need to be fixed at the level of collective action (which are beyond their individual control).

4. To strengthen the international dimension of career guidance and counselling in the ECS in view of the political goal of increased international mobility in Europe and the increasing internationalization of the worlds of work and education. It was particularly stressed that guidance practitioners should "have the required skills and knowledge to answer the needs of their clients in relation to mobility" and that the competence base of guidance practitioners is strengthened through their own international experiences.

➤ **We tend to agree with this recommendation to some extent.** Indeed, careers, vocations and education are becoming increasingly international and transcultural, and populations are becoming increasingly diversified. However, the majority of citizens seeking career guidance and counselling are not interested in education and placements in other countries. Guidance on mobility questions probably will remain an area of specialization, similarly as guidance for other target populations, like parents returning to work after taking care of children for several years. We will review the competence standards however to ensure that intercultural competence is stressed as a key requirement for career professionals to work with people from "all walks of life".

5. To additionally define minimum standards in terms of basic knowledge and professional attitudes and values: A recommendation came from an experienced practitioner, who remarked the importance of one of the knowledge modules from the first NICE Handbook (2012).

➤ **We tend to disagree with this proposal.** Currently, the ECS have been prepared with no explicit reference to relevant skills, knowledge, values and attitudes. The argument is that the competences imply the need for relevant affective, behavioral and cognitive resources. We suggest for the ECS to be used in combination with the NICE Curriculum, including its knowledge modules and its professionalism module in defining appropriate learning outcomes for academic training in career guidance and counselling.

In the future, the ECS could be used to deduct the need for common standards at the level of affective, behavioral and cognitive learning outcomes. Currently the NICE Curriculum offers an adequate reference framework for this purpose though.

6. To include instruction / teaching of career management competences as a competence standard for career advisors: The feedback came from an expert from the United Kingdom who argued that career advisors were specialized school teachers in England, who don't offer professional career counselling.

➤ **We tend to disagree with this proposal.** The goal of the competence standards for career advisors isn't to define a complete profile for teachers offering some degree of career support, but competence standards for people in diverse professional roles. While teachers should obviously be able to teach, we can't necessarily expect the same from managers or public servants – it would go far beyond the scope of most training programs for such professionals, to include competences for class instruction etc.

5. Recommendations regarding the Implementation of the Standards

Several stakeholders noted that practitioners of career guidance and counselling and their professional associations hadn't been involved in developing the ECS in the first stage. They welcomed the invitation to do so via the stakeholder consultation, but it was clear that some of them would have preferred to be engaged in dialogue and discourse, rather than in mere commenting.

Many of the actors pointed out that they welcomed the ECS and would begin to use them immediately, e.g. in reviews of their national qualifications or competence frameworks for career professionals, in reviews of their degree programs etc. Generally, the actors who did send written feedback suggested that they would be happy to participate in further developments of the ECS and in efforts to implement them at the national level.

Additionally, many of them emphasized the wish for flexibility in using the ECS at the national level, pointing to differences in approaches and training. One actor specifically suggested: "The possibility of country specific differences in our understanding of what constitutes our practice of guidance counselling needs to be written in to the document." Another wrote: "We hope that [the ECS] will have a recommendatory nature" in view of their implementation at national level and in degree programs.

Referring to the "Career Advisor" role, another actor voiced that "if NICE is to set standards for other professionals contributing to career guidance it will need to consult with those professions at some stage in the process."

We thank the stakeholders from the different countries for these suggestions and for raising a couple of particularly important issues regarding the implementation of the ECS. In Canterbury, we discussed these and similar questions and came to the following conclusions:

First, we would like to stress that we want to establish ECS through the self-commitment of relevant degree programmes in Europe. The higher education institutions involved in NICE will try to implement the ECS in this way, so to create a common occupational profile and establish common European competence standards for career professionals in Europe.

We consider the competence standards as a flexible framework, which needs to be adapted to national legislation and standards, the goals and target groups of degree programs, local cultural and language.

The ECS can also be used as common reference points for purposes such as the development of accreditation systems for career practitioners or occupational standards at national level.

In some countries there are occupational standards for career guidance and counselling. As sensible next step could be to look at the coherence between the national occupational standards and the ECS. We would appreciate feedback from national accreditation bodies and would be happy to support the further

development of occupational standards at the national level.

In countries, where no occupational standards exist so far, we would be happy to assist in their development, assisting academic, professional and political bodies. The ECS can be used as a framework of reference for these purposes.

Finally, NICE considers the ECS to be a living document, which shall be revised regularly. Stakeholder from all European countries will be involved as actively as possible in reviewing the standards for their updates.

Synthesis of discussions around the critique of reality



by Johannes Katsarov and Lea Ferrari

During the activities of the conference, the group of eight moderators produced a presentation of the main point discussed in their group in order to arrive to a joint presentation. Following the moderator report, statements from other moderators and participants the contents of the statements were classified using clear categories of concerns/problems and potential solutions. The task of every group was to discuss and identify the main challenges, which career guidance and counselling (CGC) practitioners have to cope with in everyday practice. Even if our insights are not representative, they highlight important points for research and innovation in our field. Five key points emerged:

1. The first need, which was expressed, was that for career guidance and counselling to become a profession with a unique identity. One argument was that the conceptual frameworks for career guidance and counselling needed to be linked to a concrete societal mission, in order to give them

direction. In addition, the public needs to know what the profession is about, in order to trust and use it. Finally, people who work as career guidance counsellors need to be attracted to what they can perceive as a vocation with safe working conditions and a sufficient income. As long as career guidance counsellors are mainly employed in short-term projects, their motivation to specialize on career guidance and counselling will be limited, as well as their ambition to invest their energy into the development of sustainable services and networks. However, this was also stressed, the career profession must be understood as a wide field. While a common core is needed, which is aligned throughout Europe, enough space must also exist for career professionals to specialize on the differing situations in the various countries and regions of Europe, as well as on the large variety of target groups which can benefit from career services.

2. Several reasons were given to argue for the proper training of career professionals, which secures their competences for offering services of good quality. First off, culture and the influence of culture, both on the side of clients and on the side of practitioners were referred to. A **sensitivity** for a wide range of cultural groups was seen as an imperative for competent career guidance counsellors, as well as their reflexivity to look at their own assumptions and biases critically. Secondly, reference was made to the relative reliability and **limited usefulness of labour market predictions and information** in career-related decision-making. The argument made was that citizens need to be enabled to understand that the world is changing, that practices need to change (lifelong learning) and that no one has "crystal ball" (lack of security/ prevalence of chance). Nobody, not even career guidance counsellors or future scientists can know how the future will be. This makes proper training of counsellors very important, because theory (understanding of complex cause-effect relationships) needs to inform strategy (flexible goal-oriented planning, which involves use of unforeseen opportunities). In particular, the need for career professionals to understand micro- and macro-economic realities was stressed. Additionally, reference