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“Know your terrain”: how to acknowledge the context of career guidance policies and why

Career guidance policies emerge from complex multilevel governance systems and rely on diverse tools and stakeholders. Understanding this context empowers practitioners to navigate challenges, advocate effectively, and shape impactful systems for lifelong career development.

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In his famous book *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu wrote that, to develop a successful military strategy, one must understand both the types of terrain and ground on which battles may be waged. While his advice was intended for war – circumstance we all hope to avoid –, it also applies in other fields: to work effectively, people need to know in which kind of context they operate, what the rules are and why decision makers choose to adopt them.

The context of career guidance policies?

In the field of career guidance, this context is defined by regulations, recommendations, frameworks, and funding mechanisms—all of which are shaped by public policies. As professor in political science Thomas Dye stated, public policies are “*whatever governments choose to do or not to do*” in addressing public issues. They are conceived, discussed and implemented by various actors and at different levels of governance within the “policy-making process”. By observing how the different actors behave and interact, and the results of these interactions, practitioners can understand policy makers’ motivations and objectives. In this way, they can reflect on their own

thoughts and positions on career guidance policies, assess the strengths and weaknesses of existing actions, and become more aware of the challenges in the implementation and evaluation across the different levels of governance. Moreover, being conscious of the process allows professionals to more effectively work in the advocacy and management of these policies.

Policy analysis, as the scientific study of the policy-making process, can help to unveil this path.

The national, territorial and local context: a multilevel governance system



Figure 1. Different levels of governance

Career guidance is a quite complex concept to define, and the way in which institutions conceive it shapes how it is provided. OECD, for instance, defines it in this way:

“Career guidance refers to services intended to assist people, of any age and at any point throughout their lives to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers. Career guidance helps people to reflect on their ambitions, interests, qualifications and abilities. It helps them to understand the labour market and education systems, and to relate this to what they know about themselves. Comprehensive career guidance tries to teach people to plan and make decisions about work and learning. Career guidance makes information about the labour market and about educational opportunities more accessible by organising it, systematising it, and making it available when and where people need it.”

Multi-lateral definitions such as this theoretical direction to single countries on how to develop their guidance systems. For example, the European Union (EU) describes career guidance as:

“A continuous process that enables citizens at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which those capacities and competences are learned and/or used. Guidance covers a range of individual and collective activities relating to information-giving, counselling, competence assessment, support, and the teaching of decision-making and career management skills” (European Council Resolution 2008/C 319/02).

In this way they set framework and a series of general recommendations to inspire member states in the provision of career guidance services. Although the EU description is not directly applicable to Norway, there are still pan-national definitions and parameters that influence Norwegian policy formulation.

The national level receives these supranational indications and decides how to translate them according to their preferences. Typically, governments separate career guidance interventions among the distinct areas of education, training, and active labour market policies, by issuing laws and guidelines, and funding plans and programs. Governments may also consult with national stakeholders interested in the topic, including trade unions, employers' representatives, and professional associations.

At this point, the administrative areas (regions, counties, districts, etc.) set the context for the implementation of guidelines and programs, establishing and promoting the network that ultimately delivers the services. These territorial networks are composed of many different actors: local authorities, third sector organizations, universities, schools, companies, and employment centers. This is the level closest to the people who need guidance services. Here we may usually find practitioners, counsellors, teachers, etc. or, in policy analysis jargon, "street-level bureaucrats".

The complex structure originated by the interaction of these different levels is called multilevel governance. Governance represents a more flexible and inclusive system that operates across different levels and sectors, involving a wide range of actors in decision-making: not only formal government institutions but also non-state actors such as companies, NGOs, and international organizations. The adjective "multilevel" highlights the fact that decision-making authority is dispersed across different territorial levels (local, regional, national, supranational), and policy outcomes result from the interaction between actors operating at each level.

What the governments do (or not do) to provide career guidance: policy instruments

Governance systems at all levels employ various tools, or *policy instruments*, to design and implement career guidance policies. These tools can be grouped into five main categories:

- **Economic incentives or resources**, usually organized in national or supranational plans and programs to fund services.
- **Regulations**, such as national or regional laws for educational and labour market sectors.
- **Information**, for instance campaigns or promotion of career guidance etc. They are usually provided by the local level but organized by the national or regional levels.
- **Direct provision**, the 'real' career guidance services, delivered by street-level bureaucrats.
- **Organizational instruments** to formulate policies and coordinate the implementation, such as inter-institutional expert groups, networks or commissions. They are usually found at national and regional levels.

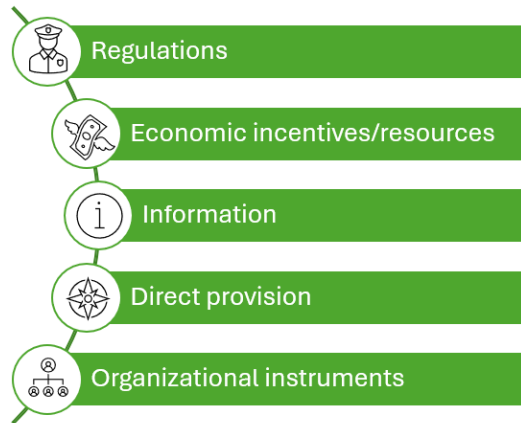


Figure 2. Policy instruments in career guidance

Together, these instruments form the career guidance system of a specific country. However, it is important to note that also what governments choose not to do is a policy in itself, because non-choices have an impact on population. For more detailed comparisons of European career guidance systems, [Euroguidance network website](#) provides information on them. Euroguidance is a network of research centers throughout European countries which link together the Careers Guidance systems in Europe.

How to advocate for career guidance: the policy cycle

Knowing the context and instruments of career guidance policies is critical for improving them. The phases in which it is possible to act are outlined in the *policy cycle*, a framework that breaks the policy-making process into a series of distinct but interconnected stages:

1. **Agenda-Setting:** the process through which issues gain attention and become prioritized for government action.
2. **Policy Formulation:** the development of policy options and proposals to address issues on the agenda.
3. **Decision-Making:** the process by which governments select a specific course of action from the available alternatives.
4. **Implementation:** the execution of adopted policies through government agencies, programs, and actors.
5. **Evaluation:** the assessment of policy outcomes to determine if the policy achieved its objectives.

Whether experts in a specific field – in this case, career guidance – may be involved in every phase, it is in the first and second stages that they can influence how the policies will be designed. Depending on their role, they can raise awareness and frame issues in the agenda-setting stage, or craft feasible and actionable policy proposals in the policy formulation stage. For instance, practitioners could organize themselves in associations with the aim of identifying issues, framing problems with evidence and data, and advising political leaders on what should be prioritized.

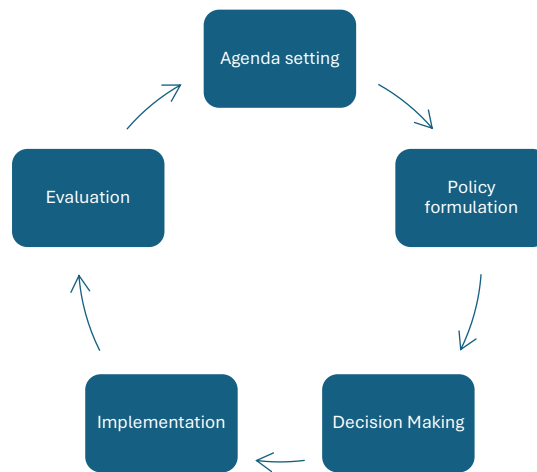


Figure 3. The policy cycle

In synthesis

To conclude, the tools of policy studies help practitioners to understand the instruments used in the delivery of career guidance and the context in which these policies are embedded. Being aware of this system allows, on one hand, to align services with policy goals and, on the other, to understand the problems in their conceptualization and implementation. This gives the opportunity to effectively advocate for better practices. For these reasons, practitioners should be encouraged to explore their local contexts, collaborate with stakeholders, and actively contribute to strengthening career guidance policies.

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The strategic importance of street-level bureaucrats

Practitioners and other “street-level bureaucrats” are essential for three main reasons:

1. **Policy in practice:** as the primary liaison between policymakers and citizens, they ensure that policies are implemented during their interactions with service users.
2. **Discretion in implementation:** due to the complexity of their tasks and the limitations of rigid policies, these professionals exercise significant autonomy in decision-making, often adapting policies to specific situations. This discretion might lead to variability and potential inequalities in service provision.
3. **Resource constraints:** operating under limited resources and high demand, they are frequently forced to prioritize and make trade-offs.

Plans and programs in your context

Try to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main interventions in career guidance policies in your country? And in your region, or in your city, or town?
2. Who are the promoters and the implementers? Are they from the public sector or private organizations?
3. Are there groups advocating for career guidance? How can you contribute to their work?