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Mediating the transitions to work : The role of employment and career advisers in comparative perspective

Isabelle DARMON, Coralie PEREZ, Sharon WRIGHT

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Mediating the transitions to work:

The role of employment and career advisers in comparative perspective

Isabelle DARMON¹, Coralie PEREZ² and Sharon WRIGHT³

Abstract

Labour market and career advice and guidance have received considerable recent research and policy attention and have been heralded as part of the new institutional resources required in reformed, active, welfare states. We seek to understand the meaning of such policy enthusiasm by proposing an analysis of guidance as a ‘governmental technology’ particularly suited for new conceptions of social protection and mobilisation for work. We bring in the results of a three years comparative study of guidance services in France, Slovenia, Spain and the UK, particularly in the form of a cross-national typology. Our review of the conceptions of the user and of the governance mechanisms in place, from target related funding to ‘softer’ staff monitoring, show how they combine to shape staff strategies and user conduct into a limited range of stereotypical attitudes, testifying to the dissemination of a norm of adaptation to the labour market.

Keywords: Labour market and career guidance, activation, governmental technology, comparison, conduct.

Résumé

Le conseil, l’orientation et l’accompagnement des actifs sur le marché du travail sont devenus une composante essentielle des politiques actives d’emploi en Europe, en lien avec les transformations des systèmes de protection sociale. Ces programmes et services représentent une ressource disponible (ou imposée) pour que les individus puissent renforcer leurs capacités à se mouvoir sur le marché du travail et à faire face aux différents « risques sociaux ». Basé sur une recherche comparative européenne (comprenant le Royaume-Uni, l’Espagne, la Slovénie et la France), cet article propose, dans une perspective foucauldienne, une analyse de ces programmes et services en termes de ‘technologies gouvernementales’. Il montre qu’au-delà de la variété des cadres institutionnels dans lesquels ils sont délivrés, ces programmes disséminent des normes de comportement et d’adaptation au marché du travail.

Mots clés : Activation, politique d’emploi, orientation, accompagnement, comparaison européenne.

Codes JEL : J08, J68, I38.

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Policy context and theoretical framework.

In recent years, labour market and career information, advice and guidance has spurred much policy and research effervescence, especially – though not only – fostered by the OECD and the European Commission (Sultana/CEDEFOP 2004). After decades in a rather more humble and obscure position, this shift raises questions as to the new properties and functions with which labour market and career guidance may have been endowed. In this paper, we argue that this shift is best understood in the context of transformation of social protection systems, and, more specifically, of the erosion of former collective, institutionalised protection. The possibility of ‘de-commodification’ (momentary paid leave from the labour market), which Karl Polanyi (1944), and Gosta Esping Andersen (1990), had posited as a key principle of post-war Welfare States, has been dramatically curtailed, and it is usually argued that new institutional resources have to be thought through for individuals to cope with ‘risks’. In particular, in these views, individuals should be trained into developing their ‘skills’ as ‘assets’; or, for the most ‘vulnerable’ (i.e. those without such skills), they should be led to recognise their own needs for ‘development’, further education etc. In such context, labour market and career guidance has been re-discovered, or branded anew, as, precisely, a possible institutional resource of that kind. Indeed career information, advice and guidance services are presented, jointly with labour market programmes involving monitoring and ‘mentoring’ (*accompagnement*) for labour market reintegration, as resources for supporting individuals in making those decisions most likely to enhance, maintain and update their ‘employability’, and thus in subscribing a sort of individual insurance policy against unemployment, poverty and social exclusion (Council of the EU 2004). To the extent that this paper explores the implications of this claim, it is concerned with all of these services, generically referred to as ‘guidance’ services.

Another key to understand the current attractiveness of guidance lies in its potential contribution for the delivery of ‘full employment’, which is back on the agenda and invoked by European governments as well as by the European Commission as an attainable objective, after years in the purgatory of outdated leftist ideals. This rebirth is at the price of thoroughly subverting what had been meant by full employment up to the 80s. Indeed it would be more correct to talk about full *mobilisation* for work (Frade and Darmon 2006), since what is at stake is participation in the labour market, more than the form of participation, unspecified ‘work’, rather than status-laden ‘employment’.

The relevance of guidance services for the reform of social protection, and, perhaps more fundamentally, for the engineering and legitimisation of the transformation of employment, has become even clearer in the recent period, with the stepping up of ‘flexicurity’ as the new horizon for the preservation of the ‘European social model’: ‘transition security’ is at the heart of the Communication of June 2007⁴ now endorsed by the Council and guidance is being recast as support to transition management.

Indeed we start from the hypothesis that advice and guidance, under their new guise, are one of the latest ‘governmental technologies’ (to take up the famous phrase coined by Foucault in his famous 1981 lecture on liberal political reason) designed to forge a new kind of subject: the ‘active subject’, apt to continuously adapt to flexible employment relationships and able to manage labour market transitions. This is most readily observable in the adviser/user interaction and indeed the adviser/user relationship has received significant research attention, especially in the context of the public employment service and welfare to work programmes (e.g. McDonald and Marston 2005; Demazière 2007).

However, it is important to keep in mind that this relationship is shaped by programme orientations and structures, and particularly by funding and steering frameworks and how these impact on/are negotiated with institutional and professional agendas. Thus, our analysis of guidance as a governmental technology, i.e. of what guidance programmes and services ‘produce’, has sought to encompass the different components of programme design, implementation and assessment. In addition, we provide an account of the prominence of this or that component in different contexts, of their inter-connections and of the pressures and tensions created for the actors involved, by comparing different clusters or types of programmes and services and therefore by proposing a typology.

One crucial question for us has been, of course, whether such typology could be other than national, since we are dealing with social and employment protection systems and their reform. Indeed, our initial choice of countries had been in part grounded in the now classical distinction between welfare regimes (Esping Andersen *op.cit.*): the United Kingdom, Spain as exemplar of the ‘Southern European’ institutional configuration, and two ‘continental’ countries – France and Slovenia, as the existence of unemployment insurance since the mid-70s is a feature which Slovenia shared with other continental countries and by which it

⁴ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. *Towards Common Principles of Flexicurity: More and better jobs through flexibility and security* (27.6.2007, COM 2007/359).

differed from other former socialist countries, making its transition to active labour market policies closer to that experienced by other continental countries (Wright et al: 2004).

However, and this is our second starting hypothesis, given the agreement of EU Member States on key strategic objectives of employment policies, including the mobilisation of all for work (through the notions of ‘full employment’, ‘inclusive labour markets’, ‘lifecycle approach to work’, etc.), the ‘modernisation’ of social protection systems, the ‘management and conditionality of benefits’, the ‘improved matching of labour market needs’ etc.⁵, we expected guidance arrangements to fulfil in part similar functions for similar target groups in different Member States. Indeed, since we focus on the actual role played by guidance in achieving these strategic objectives, it has seemed more coherent to construct a cross-national typology. National variations thus concern the distribution and relative prevalence of this or that type of programmes and services in each country, as well as the particular institutional shape of implementation and delivery. In this paper, we will therefore refer to national variations within our exposition of types of programmes and services. A systematic comparison of national guidance regimes cannot be undertaken here and should be the subject of a separate article.

In what follows, after a brief presentation of our methodological approach, we give a first account of the kind of analysis allowed for by the typology, to do with the design of labour market and career advice, mentoring and guidance (hereafter guidance) programmes and services and how design displays different conceptions of the user. We then turn to a fuller account of the types of programmes and the dominant mechanisms at play, in each, for the shaping of active and adapted jobseekers and workers, which leads us, in conclusion, to reflect on the continuities and innovations in disciplining mechanisms since the creation of labour markets⁶.

1. A typology of Labour Market and Career Information Advice and Guidance services for adults

⁵ All quotations from the ‘2005 Adopted Employment Guidelines 2005-2008’.

⁶ The paper presents results from a 36 month research project on ‘Guidance in Europe’, funded by the EC Leonardo da Vinci Programme. The project was jointly led by the Centre d'études et de recherches sur les qualifications (Céreq) based in Marseille (France) and by the ICAS Institute (Barcelona, Spain). The partnership also included the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia) and the University of Stirling (United Kingdom). A German partner was also involved but their participation remained limited. Project results are available on the project website www.guidanceineurope.com.

The basis for the typology which will now be presented essentially consists of 38 in-depth case studies of labour market and career advice and guidance services in France, Slovenia, Spain and the UK, involving 203 interviews with service managers and advisers, as well as 187 interviews with users. We also rely on 63 interviews carried out with policy makers and stakeholders in the first phase of our project.

The programmes and services studied were selected so as to broadly cover the spectrum of services available in each country across the various policy frameworks within which guidance services are organised (e.g. lifelong learning, continuous training, labour market and activation policies and legislation on collective redundancy); the various forms of provision (direct public, quasi-market⁷ or market provision) and for the main 'transitions' addressed by guidance services (from unemployment and/or inactivity to employment; employment to employment; redundancy to employment; or a combination of these).

Clearly, the provision of guidance services overwhelmingly concerns the transition from unemployment or inactivity to employment. Mass services are organised within the framework of activation policies, and are delivered by public employment services directly or by subcontractors competing on PES steered quasi-markets. But there is also a provision through local/institutional initiatives independent from the PES.

Guidance services specifically for people in employment (for their transition to another job) are only found in France, where the right to competence assessment (which is the support for the definition of a 'professional project') is set out in the labour code. However, some services operate as 'multi-transition' resources and thus cater for people in employment, especially in the UK, where they are a central component of lifelong learning and to a lesser extent in Slovenia and in France. The transition from employment to employment has so far been addressed very little in Spain and there are no notable multi-transition resources either.

As for the transition from redundancy to employment, provision is highly dependent on legislation. In France, companies of more than 50 employees planning collective redundancies are required to implement an outplacement programme in order to help their employees find new positions, and the State contributes to the costs. In Spain, although obligations are made to companies of more than 50 employees, the content is not specified and there is no financial support from the public authorities so far. In Slovenia, companies register their redundant

⁷ The term 'quasi-market' usually designates a way of externalising public services, by which the users can, in theory, choose a provider amongst those who were accredited or approved, and benefit from total or partial public financial support for the service.

workers with publicly funded labour funds and have to contribute to the cost. Finally, in the UK, where there is no legal encouragement to this kind of services and to their subscription by employers, there are only scattered initiatives, such as that of Careers Scotland with European Social Fund support.

Each selected programme or service was studied in its general design and implementation at a local site. This meant exploring, through documentary analysis and one-to-one manager-, adviser- and user- interviews, how access, beneficiary status, provider assessment and funding, provider status, management processes, staff profiles and employment conditions, programme contents, and adviser/user relationships were formally defined, implemented and experienced.

As explained, we take seriously the claim that guidance should provide support to transitions in reformed social protection systems. We accordingly sought to cluster programmes and services with similar formal conditions of participation, i.e. access/eligibility conditions and the existence, or not, of compulsion. Unsurprisingly we found that these formal conditions of participation were usually associated with different sets of aims, expected results, funding and delivery conditions and types of operators: that they gave rise indeed, not only to clusters, but to types of programmes and services.

We found three main modes of access to guidance services and programmes: open access, targeted access, and access on subscription by a third party (especially the employer). Participation in open and ‘subscribed’ services is normally voluntary, at least formally (we come back to this below), whereas participation in targeted services and programmes is compulsory for those programmes which are delivered in the context of activation policies. In some cases, however, formal compulsion only applies to participation in part of the programme.

The table below sets out the six types of programmes defined by conditions of access and compulsion, which also correspond, as said, to our empirical clusters.

Table: Formal conditions of participation in labour market and career advice and guidance programmes

	Open	Targeted	Subscribed by third party
Compulsory	(Use of open resource centres within workfare pathways)	Workfare programmes for benefit recipients (Type 4)	NA
Partly compulsory	NA	Activation programmes for registered unemployed (Type 5)	NA
Voluntary	Open resource centres for the general public* (Type 1)	Support for people at a disadvantage (Type 2) Advocacy services for victims of discrimination (Type 3)	Redundancy services contracted by employers (Type 6)

NA = Not applicable

* Here we also have included right-based services for people in employment in France (as a sub-type)

These different modes of access epitomize, in principle, quite distinct conceptions of the user, which are crucial for the design of the programmes and of what they intend to do with the users, even if, as we shall see in the following section, the conditions of implementation then come to nuance these conceptions (or on the contrary strengthen them) and sometimes blur distinctions.

Thus, we first find open and voluntary access services (type 1), such as the *Cité des Métiers* in France, the *Adult Educational Guidance centres* in Slovenia, *Careers Scotland*, and *Learndirect* in England⁸, all of which can be characterised as ‘open resource centres’ offering information and advice services for the general public on education, training and lifelong learning as well as occupations and the labour market. They share common delivery features:

⁸ We have found no example of such services in Spain, as guidance is still very much seen as a component of labour market integration programmes.

open space(s) where people can just drop in (or call), advice as support to what is mainly a self-service, low intensity of the adviser/user relationship.

These services are based on a conception of users as individuals who take responsibility for their own labour market situation and evolution, and whose ‘motivation’ and awareness of their own needs are sufficient as to lead them to visit (or call) the service. Users may need punctual information only, or require targeted advice to orient their labour market and career search, but, in both cases, they are posited as autonomous, and only in need of greater information or effectiveness, for example by applying a particular ‘method’ for ‘career management’, as with the ‘Career Planning Journey’ developed by Careers Scotland.

Similar conceptions of the user and similar aims are pursued in a subgroup of this type, ‘open resources for people in employment’, which consist of advice and guidance services grounded in worker rights in France. The services are funded by employers through the mutualisation of the compulsory training levy, but workers access these services on their own initiative. The competence assessment, which is defined in the Labour Code, is perhaps the most emblematic scheme of adult guidance in France and has no equivalent in the other countries studied⁹.

The conception of users underpinning targeted programmes is rather different. Let us start with ‘Support services for vulnerable groups’ (Type 2), which are programmes offered on a free and voluntary basis to individuals considered as vulnerable due to their low qualifications, long-term unemployment or other more or less ‘objective’ difficulties. Programmes and services of this type are quite varied, from rather short career advice and guidance, as for example in *Learndirect* (where ‘career coaching’ is offered as a second tier of services alongside their more general provision of information and advice to the general public), to long employability support pathways, typical of municipal provision in Spain.

What is common to these programmes is that users are targeted on the basis of a form of labour market ‘disadvantage’, designated as category of public policy. Even though users participate on their own initiative, the fact that they are constructed, a priori, as ‘suffering from disadvantage’ means that they are not regarded as only lacking information or technical skills of how to go about in the labour market, but as affected by a much more structural deficit, for which all sorts of economic and social explanations may be acknowledged, but which, in the last instance, is posited as affecting the individual and his/her perception of the labour market and of his/her position within it. The purpose of these services is thus above all

⁹ 50,000 competence assessments were provided in 2003.

to transform these erroneous perceptions – especially by ‘widening’ the scope of jobs that users think of, prepare for and apply to, and, in employability pathways, by improving their ‘personal and social skills’ in order to change their perceptions about themselves and ‘increase their chances’.

However, targeting is not always on the basis of labour market disadvantage: some guidance services (type 3, advocacy) are conceived for people suffering from discrimination in the first place, labour market disadvantage being constructed as the consequence of that discrimination. The construction of the user as a ‘victim’ of prejudice may be purely formal and instrumental, i.e. in order to secure funds allocated to the fight against discrimination, but can also upgrade the status of the user with regard to that of disadvantaged people, since, in the endless re-elaboration of the categories of the deserving and undeserving (Ditch 1991: 33), ‘victims’ definitely constitute the new ‘deserving’ protagonists, who therefore need protection, representation and support for ‘emancipation’ (especially in the case of women and lone parents): the promotion of specific labour market adapted conducts can only be an instrument at the service of a wider project, concerning the position of the group as a whole in society.

Targeted and compulsory access is characteristic of workfare programmes (type 4), which are exclusively aimed at (unemployment and increasingly other) benefit recipients, at a more or less early or late stage of benefit reception, depending on the countries (from 4 months in France to 18 months in the UK). The compulsory character of these programmes is rooted in a conception of the user as (potential or already established) prey to the ‘dependency culture’, when not directly as ‘scrounger’ and as a debtor to society, which is directly linked, of course, to the primary goal of these programmes: remove people from the benefit registers. Whilst this vision of the benefit recipient is likely to combine with others which can mitigate the user’s experience at implementation stage, it is nonetheless this conception which informs the design of these programmes.

Finally¹⁰, access through subscription could apply to services which one accesses by being a member of any organisation offering access to guidance, such as unions. However, we are mostly concerned here with workers being made redundant and ‘offered’ to ‘benefit’ from labour market advice and guidance by their employer, who has contracted the service (redundancy services, type 6). Conceptions of the user are here chiefly those of the providers,

¹⁰ Type 5 programmes are dealt with further below.

which are the ones in charge of the design and implementation of the programmes. In the case of industrial workers being laid off possibly for the first time in their lives, as in our Spanish and Slovenian cases, users are viewed as victims, although not of a prejudice to be combated but rather of an unstoppable course of events, which calls for a different response than in the case of discrimination. But these users are also considered to be out of touch with the ‘realities of today’s labour market’, and, in this sense, come close to the above mentioned conception of users as ‘deficient’ on some counts. Thus, there as well, in order to place users back into jobs (which is the chief aim), providers put forward the need for a profound transformation of user attitudes, especially towards more ‘realism’.

Categories of compulsion and voluntary participation are not as clear-cut as could appear in this first, rapid, presentation.

First, some services which have been primarily designed as open resources, such as the *Cités des Métiers* in France, or *Nextstep* and *Learndirect* in England (respectively the face-to-face and the telephone service for career information, advice and guidance), may be used by the public employment services as a resource to be consulted by participants in a workfare programme or pathway, a course of action encouraged by governments and which may also suit providers to raise volumes of users. However these referrals may, at least initially, pervert the ‘open’ character of the resource, since users referred by the PES tend to be at a loss what to expect from the service and can deal with it as one more imposition.

But it is especially in ‘type 5’ programmes and services (activation programmes targeting the registered unemployed not necessarily on benefits) where compulsion is often not clearly laid out. The perception of compulsion may come not so much from a formal injunction but rather from vague messages which make the unemployed feel guilty and fearful of the possibility of sanctions. Thus, as an adviser involved in the delivery of the *Objectif Projet* programme in France explains: ‘Beneficiaries always wonder what will happen to them if they refuse to take part’.

Ambiguity about compulsion in an activation context can thus be much more insidious, but no less effective, in shaping user conduct, than outright compulsion, which can leave the user’s deeper ‘needs’ and motivations untouched.

Overall, what is remarkable about this first overview of types of guidance services is that the conception of the user associated which is expressed in the conditions of access and the existence, or not, of compulsion, is entirely driven by the framework within which these

services are delivered. The very same user, e.g. an unemployed person, visiting an open resource centre (type 1), where he/she will be constructed as active, motivated and simply in need of information or focused advice, is represented as a vulnerable individual needing to overcome and redress key deficits, in a type 2 service. If he/she receives benefits, he/she will be summoned at some point to take part in a workfare programme, where he/she is seen, by construction, as a debtor on society. Although ‘profiling’ the ‘tiering’ of services according to different kinds/levels of ‘needs’ have been introduced in some quarters (e.g. in *Learndirect*), our results clearly show that visions of the users and of their ‘needs’ are commanded by policy and institutional rationales in the first instance. This finding comes to question the basis for the supposedly neat distinction between different levels of welfare state support according to different levels of ‘ability for autonomy’, a feature of liberal governmental reason according to the governmentality literature (e.g. Dean 2002:48)¹¹.

2. Shaping users’ conducts

Another lesson from this first overview is that shaping users’ conduct is the paramount and most frequent aim of guidance services and programmes. Programme and service designers and steering bodies seek to achieve this through a variety of features, from the mere spatial disposition of the service to a variety of governance mechanisms –target related funding and performance related pay, employment conditions of staff, but also ‘softer’ devices such as peer review monitoring, internal staff training or even paradoxical injunctions. Indeed, as we shall see, the way in which user conducts are shaped is sometimes more the result of tensions between different programme requirements than of direct steering.

The tightest steering of programme delivery and outcomes is to be found, as could be expected, in workfare programmes. The technical specifications of the PES subcontracted programmes, in particular, normally distinguish themselves by their meticulous character and by the reduced margin of manoeuvre left to providers, to the point that it has been said that one of the effects of contracting out is reinforced control as compared with direct delivery (Considine 2001).

Above all, subcontracted programmes are highly constrained by the subjection of provider funding to placement rates. The type of user conduct promoted here is clear and unequivocal:

¹¹ One can ponder over what is more contrary to human freedom and dignity: the frightening rationality created by Dean or the institutional maze and idiosyncrasies described in our paper.

the acceptance of a job. Restrictions on the kinds of jobs considered ‘suitable’¹² for provider payment are few – e.g. in France, Spain and Slovenia, the requirement that employment contracts should be for more than 6 months. In the UK, providers of the *Employment Zone* programme are rewarded for job retention for more than 13 weeks. Although management and staff are adamant that this is an incentive for finding users their ‘dream-job’ so that they will hold on to it, it can also amount to putting pressure on users for them to remain in their job for the right period of time. This hypothesis is further reinforced by the fact that users also receive a small retention payment (from Job Centres and from providers).

With such crude governance mechanisms at play (compulsion, financial incentives), the role of advice and guidance per se becomes secondary to that of monitoring or, in France, *accompagnement* (i.e. ‘mentoring’, a rather vague notion meant to convey the individualisation of public policies, which in fact refers to the regular interviews with jobseekers for the control, and possibly coaching, of their jobsearch activity). Indeed conduct is shaped (jobs are accepted), but it may be argued that the underlying mobilisation of the user is less than when other governance mechanisms are used, as individuals can be led to take an instrumental approach to the programmes, which is certainly not the kind of conduct aimed at by workfare policies. In fact this instrumental approach is sometimes promoted by advisers themselves to reach the quantitative targets set out by the programmes (‘Since you are here, make the best of it!’). Advisers seek to compensate for the unreason of the workfare programmes by appealing to users’ reason, in the sense of finding some extent of self-interest whilst complying with the rules.

Interestingly, a similar level of pressure for placement outcomes can be found in redundancy services provided by private firms, through entirely market driven mechanisms. Indeed, in Spain and France, the collective outplacement market is very competitive and in the hands of a limited number of private providers, which seek to outdo each other by committing to very high placement targets as well as to the ‘quality’ of the jobs accessed. This is meant to convince not only the employers, but also the staff representatives who are usually associated in the choice of the provider and play an important role for ‘selling’ the service to redundant workers.

¹² The notion of what is a suitable job offer has become wider and wider over time in the three countries, and more and more detached from the characteristics of the previous job held. There is no such notion in the UK.

Thus, one of the main Spanish outplacement companies, a member of an international business group, claims to (and does) achieve labour market placement rates over 80%, whilst also committing to place beneficiaries in jobs complying with the characteristics defined in the notion of ‘valid job offer’ (*oferta válida de empleo*): permanent contracts, wage levels as per the collective branch agreement, location at a distance less than 30 kilometres from the beneficiaries’ home.

However, this provider retains considerable margin of manoeuvre by avoiding any commitment concerning the sectors in which redundant employees will be placed: whilst the redundant workers often come from the industry, the vacancies passed on by the consultancy to users are mostly in service sectors, where collective agreements are usually less attractive than those prevailing in the industry. This is where mentoring and guidance come in, through carefully planned ‘stages’ designed to prepare users for this considerable change (which is not announced in advance). Users, who are referred to as ‘candidates’, will go through a diagnosis phase in which they are also invited to ‘mourn’ over their lost job, then move on to the longer phase where they concentrate on attitudinal change, particularly with regard to ‘professional expectations’: a key device is for the adviser to go through the (quickly renewed) stack of job offers on her desk with the candidate, and let him/her react, at first, with indignation, and as months go by and the ‘reality’ is the same, with increasing resignation and adaptation. When this is achieved, the candidate can move on to the third phase of active job search.

Thus, although the capacity of the consultancy to obtain many and quite varied job offers is a key to its prestige, it can be seen that the mentoring process is in fact as crucial a ‘success’ factor. To operate that process, the consultancy hires young graduates, usually in the social sciences, with no previous professional experience, and on contracts which last for the duration of an ‘employment unit’ (10 months to one year), although they will normally be renewed. The combination of such employment conditions, which are rather standard in the guidance sector in Spain, with lack of experience and readiness to adhere to the ‘company culture’, ensures that little critical distance is taken with regard to day to day work. Clearly, the very specific profile of staff is, in this case – and more generally in this type, an important factor for the effectiveness of providers’ strategy.

The governance mechanisms mobilised in general activation programmes (type 5), can be far more complex and multifarious than outcome related funding, and yet highly effective in shaping conduct through ambiguous rules and paradoxical injunctions, particularly in the French *Objectif Projet* programme and in most programmes subcontracted by the Spanish

regional employment services¹³. As said above, users referred by their local employment agency to this kind of programmes are not well informed of their rights and obligations, which is a cause of anxiety. Providers, for their part, are expected to deliver a certain number of hours and are paid on that basis. In the Spanish programmes, an average of usually 20 hours is usually required for the provider to be able to claim full payment. Yet at the same time providers are asked to adopt a personalised approach to each user. These tensions, which we have characterised elsewhere as a form of ‘double bind’¹⁴, tend to be solved by provider staff through the ‘psychologising’, so to speak, of the relationship with the users. The first interview is crucial for persuading the users that they need to stay on and to sign up a ‘contract’ to that effect. Indeed, in the French case, if the contract is not signed not even this first interview is paid to the provider. Staffs are thus led to construct user deficits in a way that can prove the relevance of their intervention.

Double binds can however be so tight that they block any action: indeed this was what was meant by the psychologists of the Palo Alto school when they coined the term. In our context, this is one of the very few instances where governance mechanisms seem to be totally unproductive for the shaping of user conduct, although they can have important effects for advisers. We are thinking here, in particular, of the current transformations in the vocational guidance service provided within the National Employment Agency of Slovenia. There, qualified in-house vocational guidance advisers used to receive users to define vocational objectives with the help of psychological tests and one or two individual interviews. In the Ljubljana agency, 19,000 such interviews take place with jobseekers every year.

In the past few years the profile of the jobseekers referred by employment advisers has changed: they are not only individuals with doubts about their career, but also all those who the employment adviser believes to need some extra, ‘in-depth’ support, which, in practice, means people who have much more stringent concerns than their career plans. Advisers react by seeking to do ‘motivational’ work. At the same time, however, new activity targets have been imposed on them, which limit the number of interviews to one per person and promote the shift to collective workshops. Faced, on the one hand, with users with social and economic rather than career demands, and, on the other hand, with rationing and standardisation

¹³ In the UK, all labour market programmes are workfare programmes. In Slovenia, the career service within the PES falls within type 5 but its governance mechanisms are very different and are dealt with separately further below in the text.

¹⁴ We had already analysed the role of paradoxical injunctions in training schemes for the long-term unemployed in a previous research project (see Darmon et al. 2004).

measures, career advisers are left in a position of impotence, in which they can merely process users, with likely consequences, in the medium term, on their professional status.

The nature of the pressure is different in targeted, but voluntary, programmes and services (types 2 and 3), where no target-related funding or monitoring applies. However pressure for specific outcomes can stem from other factors, e.g. from institutional rationales and the tensions they create for advisers.

In France, for example, we studied a pilot career advice programme of the French Association for Adult Training (which since then was rolled out nationally) aimed, in part, at filling vacancies on existing training courses. The programme is targeted to the long-term unemployed, young people with no qualifications and recipients of the minimum social welfare benefits, i.e. people who have been through all kinds of public employment service programmes before. Users enrol in this programme often on the recommendation of their local employment adviser or of social services but they do so of their own accord.

The service consists in two or three one-to-one advice sessions over four to six weeks, in which users are led to formulate their ‘professional project’. But this also involves exposing users (through simulation) to various occupations, in particular in the sectors experiencing recruitment difficulties and for which the AFPA centre offers training (construction, catering). In this example, institutional interests and user demands are made to coincide by advisers’ ‘work’ on users’ representations of particular occupations. The unease which advisers might feel, due to the interest of their organisation in filling training vacancies, is probably in part offset by the fact that the programme is clearly designed and presented as a mechanism for precisely that, and not for general, ‘impartial’ career advice. And the fact that participants have previously exhausted all other measures may also reassure staff that it is relevant and justified to offer quick, pragmatic solutions. Users are then free to go for the training or not.

The pressure experienced by advisers sometimes comes, at least in part, from users themselves. People visiting local voluntary services or advocacy services in Spain, France or the UK, often do so because they face pressing economic needs and seek to work immediately. This can leave advisers in the paradoxical position of having to ‘protect users against themselves’, whilst knowing that job outcomes are, increasingly, what matters to their organisations. Advisers tend to resolve this tension by advising users to undertake a series of steps before applying for jobs, but this is often limited to preparing users mentally and ‘increasing’ their ‘personal and social skills’, so as to improve their range of possibilities. In

addition, users tend to expect that the advisers will find them jobs, which leads advisers to do some degree of ‘expectation management’. These two combined factors explain why the motivational and behavioural components of the mentoring provided are sometimes as important in this type as in activation programmes, even though users join the programmes of their own initiative.

We finish our exploration of the mechanisms through which guidance is operated as governmental technology by turning to open resource centres (type 1), where, as mentioned above, the very concept of the service itself is akin to a certain mode of conduct from users: anticipating and taking responsibility for change in one’s employment trajectory, acquiring the reflex to use these centres as a resource whenever needed. The ergonomics of the centres and their organisation are performative in that they lead users to act in a certain way. This is backed up by the kind of relationship with advisers, which can be quite different to that encountered in other types of services. In particular, it is significant that, in contrast to the other types of guidance services studied, advisers tend to refer to users’ demands, rather than to user needs: a demand is clarified and responded to, whilst a need is uncovered, interpreted, and addressed. Advisers act here more as experts in career guidance than as social workers or therapists, as in other types of services, which, in principle, is meant to reinforce the position of the user as taking charge.

This is particularly clear for the *Slovene Adult Educational Guidance service*, provided by 14 centres (ISIOs) located within the Open Universities, and a key tool for the government’s lifelong learning policy. Its remit is to inform the user on the training best adapted to their expressed wishes and demand. There is no elaboration of these wishes with the adviser, and no assessment of the person’s skills either. This is also the case in the *Learndirect service*, in the UK, where the first level of provision bears on information, often of a practical nature, regarding access to training. In the *Cité des Métiers*, where advisers are seconded by other institutions and agencies, ‘being reactive to the user’s demand’ is, according to advisers, the only guideline they receive from the organisation for their intervention.

However the ambition to turn people into ‘managers of their own careers’ can be more explicit as in *Careers Scotland*. According to the authors of a thorough evaluation of the service, which involved a longitudinal survey, ‘the examples where the clients had visited Careers Scotland, identified an area of interest, followed up and then found related training or employment seemed to be in the minority. Instead, plans and actions, or inactions, took place within a constantly changing environment. This is to be expected and reinforces the role that

AAG [All Age Guidance service] and *Careers Scotland* play in developing career development skills rather than mapping out specific career plans' (Scottish Executive: 2005: 58-59, our emphasis). What, then, do these generic career development skills consist of? Becoming 'aware of one's strengths and interests', feeling 'confident' about taking up 'opportunities', showing 'willingness to take on other offers' than the ones initially sought for, in other words, the aim is to develop users' realism, determination, motivation and adaptation, in what is portrayed, in a somewhat overdramatic fashion, as a 'constantly changing environment'.

Although, in practice, advisers seem to be providing quite concrete support to users, e.g. helping them to identify relevant courses or funding opportunities, this is not what is put forward as the future of the service. Such ad hoc, directly instrumental and personalised help is not quite amenable to standardisation, which is increasingly on the agenda of such massified services (200,000 users per year). In particular, a software tool has been created, the Career Planning Journey, which is expected to become the most common resource accessed by users, with advisers providing back-up only. This new procedure is being enforced on highly qualified advisers, used to a high degree of professional autonomy, through a 'soft' governance mechanism, a quality process involving exchange of practices, mutual observation between staff and 'self-reflection' forms. However the results of these analyses are directly fed into the individual annual staff reviews. The outcomes of the review for staff, in terms of rating and bonuses, are thus directly dependent on their adhesion to standardisation.

Standardisation is not only characteristic of mass 'open' guidance services, indeed it is being implemented in very different guidance contexts, but it has had perhaps a more striking impact on this type of services, some of which still count with guidance professionals with some seniority and a high sense of their independence. In a way complete de-personalisation is a logical step to take in services whose effects are already embedded in their very design and physical arrangements.

Conclusion

At the end of our survey of types of labour market and career advice and guidance services, we are faced with a paradoxical picture: on the one hand, these services are offered in a great variety of institutional settings, each with their own access and eligibility conditions and

related conceptions of users (from open and voluntary access to targeted compulsory participation), their own objectives (from information to placement into jobs), and, finally, their own governance mechanisms (from target related funding to ergonomics, via modes of staff recruitment, employment conditions, and provider and staff monitoring). And yet, on the other hand, what emerges is a rather uniform enterprise of stereotyping of user conduct around very few and very basic attitudes: taking responsibility for one's situation, being realistic about the labour market, being open about the jobs in recruiting sectors, and being adaptable in a 'sustainable' way are the key messages being delivered to users across almost all types of services. In short, this study bears witness to the quite widespread and systematic dissemination of a more or less explicit norm of adaptation to the market.

Only few brakes on the dissemination of this norm and stereotyping could be identified. Certainly, staff's professional experience and ethics play an important role. In fact, two quite distinct conceptions of what it is to be a 'professional' emerged from our interviews with managers and advisers. For some, being a 'professional' means being able to apply a certain number of principles, rules and common protocols set up in the provider organization, to collectively strive for the common objectives and targets (often placement, but sometimes only numbers of users). Such conception, which suits the de-personalisation of guidance services (even when the 'professional' is expected to implement standards in a flexible way and with a discreet personal touch!), seemed quite prevalent in the UK, where providers are accredited against a standard, but on the rise everywhere, especially in human resources consultancies providing redundancy or subcontracted activation services. For others, being a good professional means relying on one's own judgement for understanding what is going on in a given situation; drawing from individual and collective knowledge and experience rather than resorting to pre-established procedures; and having enough authority to decide how to proceed in a specific situation. Such conception, which was much more contrary to the standard shaping of conduct, was found especially amongst staff with some seniority, and was rather widespread in some specific institutional settings in France (competence assessments for workers, and what we could call militant guidance), although on the wane (Perez and Personnaz 2008).

Stereotyping is also more contained, of course, in settings in which users can be guided to a variety of outcomes, and not just job search or placement. In particular, the educational and training advice, offered mostly by 'open resource centres', tends to be more open and responsive to user demands than guidance services focused on employability.

The institutionalisation of the labour market at the turn of the 20th century had found ‘its way through the objectivation of norms in institutions, rules, spatial arrangements. The norm is democratic. It acts at a distance or through the mediation of rational bureaucracies, which ignore the person and only take into account codified rights and duties’ (Topalov, 1994: 408, our translation). It has been contended that ‘advanced liberal states’ proceed quite differently, and aimed at transferring such governmental activity onto the very individuals themselves – who ideally should be mentored into ‘governing’ themselves (Rose 1999). As summed up in a somewhat insisting (but characteristic) fashion by McDonald and Marston, ‘the rationalities of advanced liberal states act on the agency of active citizens, on the self-steering properties of individuals’ (2005: 378).

Our own investigation into some of the resources currently most poised to take on the role of mentors for ‘self-government’ contributes to exposing further the nature of this ‘self-government’ as amounting, in fact, to regimenting oneself into a very small number of stereotyped attitudes of adaptation and compliance. Depending on the institutional and organisational context, this can be arrived at through coercion, through psychological persuasion or, more rarely, through more rational and instrumental arguments. These strategies are put forward by advisers who themselves have to comply with process and/or outcome targets and deal with paradoxical injunctions. In such contexts, the use of terms such as ‘agency’ and ‘self-government’ seem to us to display too much of a fascination towards the rhetoric of ‘liberal reason’. In the process, the authors of such terms fail to highlight with sufficient precision the considerable degree of stereotyping of our conducts, and its implications for freedom.

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