

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Career Services in Higher Education – a Proposal

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Address: Bd. Mărăști, no. 59, sector 1, Bucharest, Romania, postal code 011464

Phone: +40 21 206 76 00; Fax: +40 21 312 71 35

E-mail: qar@aracis.ro

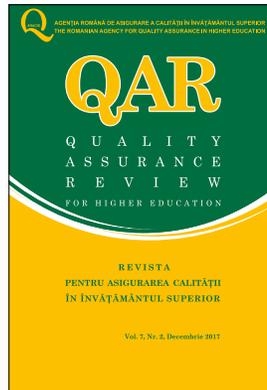
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Telefon: +40 21 206 76 00; Fax: +40 21 312 71 35

E-mail: qar@aracis.ro

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Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Career Services in Higher Education – a Proposal

Mihai Andronie *Associate Professor*
University “Spiru Haret” of Bucharest, Romania
mihai_a380@spiruharet.ro

Ioan-Adrian Trifan *Head of Department*
University “Spiru Haret” of Bucharest, Romania
adrian.trifan@spiruharet.ro

Abstract: *In the context of career services for students, there has been identified a need for establishing some criteria, preferably some standards, for creating a quality assurance system or reference framework for these services in higher education institutions. The paper draws upon the results of an UE consortium that in the last two years has developed a reference framework as a potential tool for this area. There is a brief presentation of the research results in this specific area, including an outline of the proposed standards and guidelines for quality assurance of career services in higher education.*

Keywords: *career services, standards, guidelines, quality assurance system*

Introduction

As a response to the ESG 2015, within the framework of the Erasmus+ programme¹, over the last two years an European consortium² has been drawing up a set of standards and guidelines for quality assurance of career services (CS) in higher education institutions (HEIs)³ (hereinafter referred to as the Guidelines).

Briefly, the process consisted in: desk and field research on the current status and requirements for the provision of high quality career services; drafting a first

¹ Project title and number: Quality Assurance of Career Services in Higher Education - QAREER, 2015-1-RO01-KA203-014972, www.qareer.ro.

² Spiru Haret University (SHU) – Romania; Melius – Italy; The National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) – Belgium; Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (UNIR) – Spain; Wroclaw University of Environmental and Life Sciences (WUELS) – Poland; University of Padova (UNIPD) – Italy.

³ For the full deliverable, see <http://cercetare.spiruharet.ro/qareers/IO4.pdf>, coordinated by the QAREER project team of WUELS, namely Anna Partyka-Górska, Jadwiga Bolechowska, Jakub Kwaśnicki, Krzysztof Kafarski, with contributions from the following staff of the project partners: Mihai Andronie, Ioan-Adrian Trifan, Bogdan Danciu, Ruben Gonzalez Crespo, Stefania Aceto, Ester Alonso Velasco, Daniel Burgos, Gilda Rota, Zoltan Denes, Sara Danelon, Annalisa Bonfiglioli, Erik Edman and Liva Vikmane.

version submitted for panel evaluation by internal and external stakeholders of the consortium in the area of CS; integration exercises for piloting the Guidelines in various European HEIs; public consultation with relevant stakeholders from the consortium countries and validation.

The purpose of the Guidelines is to support HEIs in improving the quality of their career services through the provision of a quality reference framework that can be used as a benchmarking tool (to measure the extent to which quality services are provided) and as a reference framework (subject to changes according to contextual and national features) for quality assurance in career services.

The Guidelines are primarily addressed to the staff of HE careers services and to the governance representatives of HE institutions'. However, the integration exercise for testing the Guidelines, conducted at five EU universities, has also proved a positive involvement of other categories of stakeholders, both internal (the communication staff, students and the teaching staff) and external (employers' representatives).

The Guidelines

Research. As above-mentioned, the Guidelines are based on the results of desk and field research carried out by the project team. The overall aim of project Intellectual Output 1⁴ was to identify perceptions, values and present practices regarding the quality of career services by stakeholders and players in the field, and using them to develop the Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Career Services in Higher Education (project Intellectual Output 2). The adopted methodology combined desk and field methods of data collection and analysis, including literature review and practices collection; a set of interviews to key informants, representing the main targets addressed by the project (career counsellors and practitioners, Higher Education students, Human Resources managers in small and large enterprises, Quality Assurance managers); a survey addressed to students.

The key conclusions of the research were the following:

- National situations are very diverse and, even in the same country, the role and the activities of career services at the university are different;
- Some good examples of quality standards for career services already exist, related to overall services or to one or more areas of this service (e.g.: work placement, staff development etc.);
- However, a reference framework recognised (or known) by universities is not available yet, and the quality of career services is mostly included in the quality of support services within the European Higher Education Area (ESG) guidelines;

⁴ QAREER O1 Intellectual Output "Quality of Career Services - Toward a European Reference Framework", see https://qareer.ro/images/2016/QAREER_O1_O4_Quality_of_career_services_report.pdf.

- There is no common understanding among stakeholders on the meaning of quality and, above all, on the role of the career services;
- Given the particular features of career services at the university, a broader range of stakeholders need to be taken into account, as career services represent the link between the academic and the labour world, not an employment service for all;
- Professionalization and development of CS staff must be taken into account while dealing with quality issues: this is confirmed both by key respondents, practices and literature review;
- Students' needs are focused on results more than on processes, and the service provided in terms of career by universities is not understood in full, sometimes it is not even known.

Panel Evaluation and Integration Exercises

The project Intellectual Output 2, namely the first draft of the Guidelines and standards, underwent an analysis and testing phase. Apart from adapting the Guidelines and standards in terms of wording and reducing some repetitions of definitions, the main conclusions of the integration exercises placed a special emphasis on:

- Promoting the institutional cooperation with companies and relevant institutions -not only from the Career service of the University but also involving faculties and departments. This could be implemented by, for example, collecting the information available on career opportunities or for creating a database in order to provide a more accurate and updated set of information about career opportunities to the students;
- Networking: that is, promote peer networking opportunities for the career service professionals at EU and international congresses and events and also network with other Universities and companies to increase the employability of students and the attractiveness of the Universities to companies;
- Supporting the participation of practitioners from companies in curriculum development and in learning always according to the needs mentioned by each faculty and in the frame of the legal regulations available in each country;
- Promoting the development of agreements for internships/traineeships with companies and institutions related to each field of study guided by the faculty members;
- Promoting the participation of Career Office staff and students in job fairs and the contact of academic and Career Office staff with employers and practitioners;
- Facilitating the involvement of faculties by encouraging them to provide feedback on the state of the labour market in their field of studies;

- The need to promote and build more solid ties among the various university departments and faculties and staff categories (administrative, research, PhDs, professors etc.) with the Career office in order to be more responsive to the labour market needs;
- The need to promote the active and collective participation of Educational Guidance services, Career Office and academic staff in national, EU and international congresses and seminars as a means to improve the links between the careers office and the University departments;
- The need to facilitate opportunities at institutional level such as practices exchange and peer networking.

The entire process led to improving the Guidelines and standards and allowed passing them to the next stage.

Public Consultation and Validation. By means of four multiplier events, the Guidelines have been introduced at national level in the project consortium countries (RO, IT, ES, PL) to an audience consisting in: CS practitioners from HEIs, QA managers and specialists, academic and governance representatives from HEIs, policy makers, students, teaching staff, employers' representatives etc. The debates during the multiplier events generated new perspectives on the existing Guidelines and led to adapting them as validated guidelines, namely as final project product. Among the main contributions, we can highlight the following:

- Clarification of certain definitions and approaches;
- A more user-friendly document;
- The Standard A.SE.4. Outreach has been updated so that it provides more ways for increasing the outreach of careers services, i.e.:

DESCRIPTION	MINIMUM	MEDIUM	MAXIMUM
A.SE.4 Outreach The curriculum of each study programme contains a mandatory module (with credits allocated) on specific career service issues, such as the location, office hours and services offered by CS.	A.MI.SE.4 Standard The career service office is easily accessible respecting both its location and opening hours.	A.ME.SE.4 Standard A central CS at the university collaborates with other units at the institution and with other stakeholders.	A.MA.SE.4 Standard The curriculum of each study programme contains a mandatory module on specific career service issues.

	<p>Guidelines The career service office is located in an area that is intensely frequented by students and its opening hours cover most part of the day. The location should be decided in cooperation with governance staff of the university and faculties.</p>	<p>Guidelines Each career service office provides services tailored to the peculiar profiles of the study programmes organized by the respective faculty/ department and dispose of their own staff.</p>	<p>Guidelines The module is delivered by career service staff and its content is designed together with the deans and teaching staff in order for it to fit the peculiarities of the study programme; credits are allocated to the module. A presentation of CS could be included in the practical activities module; 20%-30% of the credits for the practical activities module could be allocated to the students' participation in CS activities.</p>
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- A new standard was proposed and validated, introducing career services for the teaching staff also, namely:

DESCRIPTION	MINIMUM	MEDIUM	MAXIMUM
<i>P.SE.8 CS for teaching staff</i>	<p>P. MI.SE.8 Standard Every member of the teaching staff has access to good quality information about LLL and career and personal development options and opportunities.</p>	<p>P. ME.SE.8 Standard Support of an informed adviser is available on request so that the beneficiary can make the best of the information received.</p>	<p>P. MA.SE.8 Standard LLL and career/ personal development information is conveniently available in a variety of media appropriate for teaching staff. The career service office delivers group and individual sessions for the teaching staff.</p>

	<p>Guidelines HEI with its structure and operating procedures in career services ensures access to good quality information about LLL and career and personal development options and opportunities for the teaching staff.</p>	<p>Guidelines Each time teaching staff requests an individual session, support from an informed adviser is available.</p>	<p>Guidelines LLL and career/ personal development information must be accessible, organized and up to date with an appropriate system that is user-friendly, flexible, and adaptable to change. The services for teaching staff are compulsory.</p>
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The Guidelines at a Glance. As can be noticed above, the structure of the final document presents the standards under a table form, including the description of each standard, with three levels of implementation and specific guidelines for each level. The final product tried to cover, at its best, all areas of careers services that requested attention, as resulting from the research, testing and validation activities, namely:

1. three main phases:
 - a. Access;
 - b. Process;
 - c. Output;
2. in three main areas:
 - a. Staff management and development;
 - b. Services provision;
 - c. Monitoring and evaluation.

The final list of standards and guidelines includes the following topics:

ACCESS

DESCRIPTION
STAFF
<p><i>A.ST.1 Recruitment</i> Development of internal regulations at HEI regarding the selection criteria for specialists' professional background, making provision for the effectiveness of services, in agreement with national law.</p>

A.ST.2 Update

Development of plans for professional development of specialists (e.g. mobility, training etc.).

A.ST.3 Management

Development of internal regulations at the HEI regarding the ratio between the number of students and specialists in career services.

SERVICES

A.SE.1 Information to prospective students

Development of promotional materials and public information sessions, including a question and answers section.

A.SE.2 Information to enrolled students

Development of materials including information about the location of the career service office, its working hours, the services it provides and the procedures to be followed.

A.SE.3 Reception

HEI provides a distinct space for career services, preferably in an area with easy access to most students, a resource centre for providing the students with individualized and confidential career services.

A.SE.4 Outreach

The curriculum of each study programme contains a mandatory module (with credits allocated) on specific career service issues, such as the location, office hours and services offered by CS.

A.SE.5 Beneficiaries

The career services are provided free of charge for at least 3 years after graduation and could be provided beyond that date for a preferential fee.

EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT

A.EV.1 Monitoring information flows

A person offering career services in a HEI provides each potential recipient with a summary of how information flows are managed (brochures, leaflets, etc.).

A.EV.2 Monitoring the number of accesses

The records of career services access (on paper and/or computer) contain details of each activity performed for each beneficiary person/group.

A.EV.3 Monitoring the number of students taken in charge

HEI has operational procedures regarding the activities carried out with the students on a daily basis.

<p><i>A.EV.4 Monitoring the needs of students and enterprises</i> The needs of beneficiaries within the HEI are specified using open questioning techniques and professional practice skills, keeping personal records of all the beneficiaries (students and/or enterprises).</p>
<p><i>A.EV.5 Feedback collection</i> Feedback collection (surveys) is an ongoing process which can be useful for decision-making.</p>

PROCESS

STAFF
<p><i>P.ST.1. Staff development</i> HEI has a plan for training sessions for staff, according to the needs analysis.</p>
<p><i>P.ST.2. Staff career progression</i> HEI has a transparent public policy regarding career progression included in staff regulations.</p>
<p><i>P.ST.3. Staff peer networking</i> HEI organises peer learning sessions in annual planning of activities for staff and elaborates a manual of good practices.</p>
<p><i>P.ST.4. Code of ethics</i> The code of ethics is commonly understood and applied.</p>
<p><i>P.ST.5. Staff management</i> HEI offers access to a wide range of opportunities for the staff (new capabilities, leadership and management skills).</p>
SERVICES
Counselling
<p><i>P.SE.1. Diversity and inclusion</i> HEI allocates the necessary resources to satisfy the needs of beneficiaries vulnerable to exclusion, elaborating guides of good practices.</p>
<p><i>P.SE.2. Individual services</i> HEI allocates the necessary resources to satisfy individual needs of beneficiaries vulnerable to exclusion.</p>
Career guidance
<p><i>P.SE.3. Career-related information</i> Career-related information is used after the information has been interpreted and tailored to different categories of needs.</p>

<p><i>P.SE.4. Career-related learning</i> HEIs have their own proactive policy to promote the benefits of career-related learning using innovative techniques.</p>
<p>Work placement</p>
<p><i>P.SE.5 Labour market information</i> HEI maintains and updates a database containing current labour market information.</p>
<p><i>P.SE.6 Information technology used in work placement</i> Work placement resources must be accessible, organized and updated using an appropriate system that is user-friendly, flexible, and adaptable to change.</p>
<p>Transversal</p>
<p><i>P. SE.7 Cooperation with management and teaching staff</i> At least one member of career service staff is a full member of each faculty/department decision-making bodies responsible for the design of curriculum and syllabuses.</p>
<p><i>P.SE.8 CS for teaching staff</i></p>
<p>EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT</p>
<p><i>P.EV.1. Collecting feedback from users</i> After each career service activity, it is possible to collect feedback from users by online surveys.</p>
<p><i>P.EV.2. Collecting feedback from internal players</i> The procedures for feedback collection comprise both qualitative and quantitative methods.</p>
<p><i>P.EV.3. Collecting feedback from external players</i> After each career counselling service activity with external players, they have the possibility to express their feedback (in writing or online).</p>

OUTPUT

<p>STAFF</p>
<p><i>O.ST.1 Data collection</i> HEIs carry out systematic research, using opinion surveys for the beneficiaries of career services.</p>
<p><i>O.ST.2 Staff awareness</i> Staff awareness of CS staff is a key issue and should be part of good practices.</p>

<p><i>O.ST.3 Planning for improvement</i> HEI creates a culture of continuous learning and implements principles of strategic development maintaining a network of specialists collaborating with the staff members.</p>
<p><i>O.ST.4 Communication of results</i> In the internal procedures, HEI establishes principles of operational communication with the staff and collaborators, facilitating official exchange of information.</p>
<p>SERVICES</p>
<p><i>O.SE.1 Analysis of the feedback from internal players</i> Online surveys are used for feedback collection from all categories of internal players.</p>
<p><i>O.SE.2 Analysis of the feedback from external players</i> HEI regularly performs market research on career services and adjusts its services based on its results.</p>
<p><i>O.SE.3 Planning for improvement</i> HEI uses its own resources for improving the quality of the service.</p>
<p><i>O.SE.4 Communication of results</i> Data communication in the operating procedures of the career services at HEI is done through face-to-face meetings.</p>
<p>EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT</p>
<p><i>O.EV.1 Data analysis</i> HEI makes data analysis regarding the types of services with respect to the satisfaction level of the beneficiaries.</p>
<p><i>O.EV.2 Cost-benefit (SWOT analysis)</i> HEI takes into account the cost-benefit ratio regarding the figures obtained from the labour market, which are related to the efficiency of the CS.</p>
<p><i>O.EV.3 Planning for improvement</i> HEI's improvement plans are implemented for each service, based on the data analysis.</p>

Conclusions

According to the QAREER consortium, the final Guidelines may represent a useful tool that can be used by any European university to provoke a reflection on how to improve the quality of its career services. The way the Guidelines have been designed and structured allow for their use either as a self-assessment/benchmarking tool or as a reference quality framework for career services, subject to changes according to the specific needs and features of the HEI.

The Guidelines incorporate the perspective of HEIs (public, private, “traditional” and online), their career service staff, teaching staff, students as well as governance members. Discussion about the reference framework in the phase of Guidelines testing for validation has led many of the involved universities to wider reflections on the overall approach of the universities towards students, stimulating roadmaps involving changes within and outside the career service department.

Maybe these Guidelines will help other EU HEIs improve the quality of their career services on the one hand and start considering a new approach allowing for a more student-centred learning (and learning provision) model, on the other hand.

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