

Conclusions of the National Audit Office

Cooperation for study and career guidance

Study and career guidance is being seen as a solution to problems related to education, the match between the demand and supply of labour and the social behaviour of adolescents. Expectations of guidance have constantly increased with new and multidirectional tasks and objectives, but no comprehensive information is available on the contributions to guidance activities, or on their quality and results. The content, services and methods used as guidance activities have expanded particularly with the realisation that this is a process that requires life-long learning and thus its implementation organisation has grown. The importance of guidance is directly linked to the structural and political objectives that facilitate the adolescents' educational paths and accelerate their entry into working life.

The audit covered the launch of a local and regional guidance network, organisation and functional models. In addition, the focal points included the cross-administrative cooperation of the central state administration, intended to encourage and guide cooperation between local operators and to create prerequisites for this cooperation.

The objective of the audit was to assess the current state and quality of the local cooperation network of the guidance services as well as the activities of the steering ministries in reinforcing the prerequisites for guidance services. The main question of the review was whether the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Employment and the Economy have created sufficient prerequisites for the local guidance service networks and whether the current cooperation networks are able to match services well enough to improve their coverage and quality.

Clarifying the contents of guidance services to facilitate local cooperation

In recent years, the importance of study and career guidance is being increasingly recognised while ensuring the functionality of the educational system and educational paths, in supporting the future plans and the choice of profession among pupils and students, in lowering drop-out rates and preventing the marginalisation of adolescence and in aiming at the availability of skilled labour force for the regenerating economic activity. According to some international evaluations, guidance has had positive effects on the progress of studies and on future employment. However, in international comparisons, for instance in OECD evaluations, the Finnish guidance system has mainly been commended. Among other things, the fact that the majority of the guidance has been integrated into teaching and takes place in educational institutions, has been considered one of its biggest strengths.

The contents of the guidance tasks of individual counsellors as well as the guidance service area covered have constantly expanded so that various areas are linked to each other in a conceptual and objective-oriented way, but on the level of operations, the entity has not been sufficiently defined. The field of youth work and traditional youth communication has become more versatile. Between social services and youth work, outreach youth work has been established, and workshop activities are building bridges at the joint stages of education and providing the means for developing working life connections for teaching, to support student welfare services and to vary teaching methods. As for preparatory educational entities, they have built a bridge from basic studies to secondary studies, enabling guidance that is more intense and of longer duration than traditional study guidance. With the youth guarantee approach, the rehabilitation of social and health services are increasingly being considered as part of the concept of guidance and guidance services.

The expansion of the concept of guidance has been justified, particularly from the point of view of the objectives for preventing marginalisation. Furthermore, the change in the contents and study guidance may be considered as part of a change in the needs of student welfare services and it can also be considered to be based on the development of the pedagogical requirements for guidance work. While the concept has become increasingly comprehensive, the review indicates that it has become so multidimensional that organising practical guidance work has become increasingly difficult. As the procedures and services expand and the number of potential counsellors rise, it has become increasingly difficult to determine the contents of the guidance services. As a result of this, there is uncertainty as to which guidance tasks require cooperation with other operators. Thus, the central challenge of local development work has been to determine the guidance needs requiring cooperation, as well as the concrete contents of cooperation between organisations and joint guidance services. For instance, the development work for lifelong guidance has indicated that the contents may be relatively different depending on whether guidance is interpreted as part of lifelong learning (often the interpretation of the educational administration) or regarded as support, for instance for changing jobs or for the transitional stage of changing one's profession (often the interpretation of labour administration).

Information on the adequacy and quality of guidance is insufficient

Report projects on guidance have often made observations on the adequacy of guidance services. In addition to personal guidance, study counsellors and students in particular have often assessed that the inadequacy is reflected in the small amount of time reserved for personal guidance and in the support of postgraduate study choices. Those in charge of guidance, regard the dearth of guidance resources and the lack of guidance itself as the main problem.

The importance and usefulness of guidance activities has also been recorded in many central administration documents. In spite of this, the information on the contributions to guidance, its adequacy, quality and the results and effects of guidance are still highly deficient. After a report on the state of study guidance published in 2002, no comprehensive or systematic information on features such as differences between municipalities or schools in the availability of guidance services has been made available. In connection with national development projects, through educational assessments and based on reports commissioned by organisations, for instance, there is scattered information available on the state and quality of guidance. Currently, there is no information available on the extent to which the basic indicators for quality or quantity have changed or how close we are to the Finnish Parliament's Education and Culture Committee's objective of study counsellors guiding no more than 250 students.

If the counsellors' assessment on the increased need of guidance among certain groups is correct, then their prerequisites for individual guidance for all students are flawed rather than improved. The risk is that guidance must excessively focus on the so-called risk groups at the expense of the entire age group.

More recent information on guidance services was received from the PISA 2012 student survey which mapped features such as career planning skills. The differences between schools in both, student inclusion and the versatility of the skills learned were minor in Finland and among the smallest in the countries included in the comparison. In contrast, diverse participation in various work forms were detected within schools. The survey indicated that nearly one in 10 ninth-grade comprehensive school students had not spoken with a study counsellor.

Working groups established by ministries and definitions of policy repeatedly present theses on the differences in the availability of guidance services between regions and municipalities and particularly on the adequacy of individual guidance. However, the central administration data on the amount and quality of guidance are relatively deficient, and little is known of the extent or depth of local differences.

Factors impeding guidance cooperation

Firstly, local cooperation is slow due to the fact that the need for cooperation has not been determined with sufficient clarity and concreteness. On all levels, the basis for launching cooperation have been expressed so loosely, that networks settle for maintaining regular meetings between guidance experts instead of filling the potholes of guidance services or allocating the most essential tasks to guidance activities. Cooperation may also be slowed down by the fact that operators do not have a clear idea of whether the service network should be established or the assembly of guidance services be carried out on a municipal or regional level. The municipal entity of the community of municipalities for professional education or the jurisdiction of TE offices does not follow municipal boundaries, which means that for them, a regional service network may be a justified starting point.

For this fundamental question, the central administration should outline a sufficiently clear framework of solutions which takes into consideration the possibility of various fields of administration and expert groups that can participate in activities. For instance, they could describe the type of role that should be given to regional guidance plans, the extent to which guidance tasks could be assembled according to features such as the TE office jurisdictions or the guidance tasks that could be gathered around a professional community of municipalities for professional education. In this connection, the status of future guidance facilities in the guidance service entity should also be clarified. The purpose of the guidance facilities is to operate as low threshold service points, assembling guidance services from various fields of administration.

As a factor slowing down local cooperation, the review also indicated the fact that the work contribution required by the plans encumbers those carrying out concrete guidance work, such as study counsellors, youth workers and career choice counsellors the most. Those in charge of communications, the exchange of information and problem-solving feel that the cooperation takes away resources from their fundamental work. The increased need for guidance and the increasingly scarce resources add to their pressure of concentrating on their own work.

The national development work has supported a pattern of thought according to which challenges and solutions are mainly determined at a local level. As the development work has aimed at giving space and encouraging local variations, one may not always feel the need for joint definitions of policy, operating instructions or measurements. However, many local level operators were hoping that different variations could be assembled and framed in order to create models, for a minimum level of basic service and the contents of the responsibilities. Many municipalities have developed various forms of support, particularly for the area between basic and secondary studies and for those in danger of being left without education, but there is often uncertainty about their coverage or adequacy.

The results of national development work often remain scattered and local

The central administration has worked diligently to develop study guidance and the youth guidance, carried out in municipalities. Many working groups have drawn up definitions of policy on the needs to develop guidance and given recommendations. In many national projects, the objective has been to develop cooperation, both within educational institutions and externally. Projects have developed practices assessed as good on the local level, and in final project reports, results have been presented. However, there have not been sufficient resources to spread and establish good practices in the guidance procedures of all municipalities. Active municipalities have learned from each other and developed new services.

During the last ten years, many development projects have been carried out, focusing directly or in directly on study guidance, career guidance or professional guidance. When the projects for youth work, youth inclusion or the prevention of marginalisation are included, it can be said that a large number of national projects have touched on the need to develop guidance. At best, their good practices have been compiled in separate publications, but the projects have often

ended without their results being more extensively used. Good practices have not been modelled or spread systematically though an attempt has been made to develop data banks. This means that development projects have often focused on the same objectives.

Since the assembly and assessment of results have often remained deficient, and local experiments have proved to be partial solutions, the projects have not always promoted the establishment of cooperation networks or their entrenchment in the desired way. The municipalities contributing locally to development work may have created beneficial forms of corporations, but the sectoral nature of national projects may not have supported the assembly of guidance services. The abundance of development projects and their piece-by-piece implementation may have increased the diversity of the guidance services and even the differences between guidance services, either locally or between municipalities and educational institutions.

The assembly and integration of guidance services has also been rendered more difficult by the fact that various cooperation networks have been developed in connection with separate laws or objective entities. For instance, cooperation groups for youth welfare strategies, guidance and service networks under the Youth Act, cooperation groups for implementing the youth guarantee and the development networks for youth counselling and communication may result in duplicate activities or decrease the motivation to develop new forms of cooperation.

Deficiencies in ministry cooperation despite good developments

Cooperation between ministries seems to have improved in recent years, but the ministries admitted that closer cooperation would be needed. Particularly the systematic assembly, assessment and modelling of good practices could support the development of a local guidance network. For instance, a modelling procedure agreed on nationally could define the most crucial service entities and the necessary work forms.

A great deal of development work has been carried out to improve the quality of guidance and to increase the cooperation between ministries and cooperation groups between ministries have been established. In particular, joint working groups between MEC and MEE have been used for a few decades, and they were established with relative regularity until the mid-2000s. For instance, a development group for lifelong guidance is a useful committee-type tool for mapping development needs. In its current form, the capacity of the group may not be sufficient to systematically guide comprehensive planning and preparations, though guidance activity and service experts have been gathered from ministries to support the group.

The audit indicated that though a great deal of development work has been carried out to increase the cooperation between ministries, the cooperation is still deficient and the preparations for modernising or developing the guidance services is still largely ministry-specific or sector-specific. However, the implementation of the youth guarantee has improved features, such as the joint communication between ministries.

In ministries, the need for cross-administrative cooperation was identified long ago, and in some development projects, joint steering groups have been established. It has been possible to implement many of the working group recommendations, but many suggestions have also been repeated in reports. For instance, several working groups have given recommendations to ensure the adequacy of the guidance resources, but ministries have not systematically monitored the development of the resource situation or drawn conclusions on the necessary measures.

In development projects in the most active areas and municipalities, cooperation practices have been created to largely support the establishment of future guidance facility solutions. In these localities, the assembly of guidance services need not start from zero. As for the entire country, the problem lies in the large regional and municipal differences, and in the establishment of cooperation networks. Despite good individual practices, the development of permanent cooperation networks and service points, the concentrations assembling guidance

services has been relatively slow. Each ministry still primarily attempts to manage and develop guidance services in their own jurisdiction.

The concern for the divergence of guidance services has been stated as perhaps the most significant guidance-related problem in various reports and assessments. The essential administration has no strategy or plan to decrease level differences. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture assessment, the central administration has no means of decreasing the differences in the guidance services found in the municipal educational work or youth work. Nor is it considered necessary to specify norm-based steering. Good guidance criteria and features such as basic education quality criteria have been established in information steering. However, at the municipal level, it is not believed that they will significantly decrease local differences.

The Ministry of Employment and the Economy emphasises the independence of the TE offices and the fact that the ministry is mainly in charge of the guidance of the Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment. The management of TE offices ultimately decides how guidance resources are targeted and how the offices may participate in local guidance cooperation. Since there is little systematic monitoring of the service quality and since there is no national assessment system, the central administration has no means of producing information such as comparative data for education providers.

The idea of guidance facilities assembling local guidance services, also seems to be supported by the experiences of previous development projects. It can be considered a justified direction for development. However, when examining the need for guidance services as a whole, the planned model is insufficient, since it only assembles the guidance services for adolescents in a certain situation. In the guidance facility model, the intended main target group includes drop-outs or those left without a secondary study place. It is also a major question whether the prioritisation of guidance tasks and the targeting of the scarce guidance resources can be dealt with in connection with the solutions.

The fact that the basic question of professional choice and the selection of an educational career for adolescents has been left in the fringe area of the objective, prevention of adolescent marginalisation can be considered as one of the challenges of guidance support. The supporting principle for guidance is the identification of individual adolescent needs, hopes and capacities. At the same time, the guidance should support the justified expectation of an educational system which, along with its transitional stage, supports processes, ensures the appropriate choices for all adolescents and ultimately, the functionality of the labour market.

Recommendations of the National Audit Office

The following recommendations are aimed both at the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Employment and the Economy:

1. The development of an education supporting guidance and its groundwork, should be monitored and planned in conjunction with the development of other types of guidance work. Increasing attention should be paid to features such as rendering educational paths more flexible, integrating preparatory education in basic studies and alternatives to degrees. It is important to introduce guidance-orientation to educational planning as a permeable principle.
2. For developing guidance services, ministries should examine simultaneously all guidance-oriented work and its alternatives as well as the efficient combinations, since the procedures and services may not only be mutually supportive but also potential alternatives to each other. In the view of the National Audit Office, the planning and preparations for guidance-oriented activities, education and information, counselling and guidance services are still too scattered in various ministries and in various sectors within the ministries. When

modernising systems supporting and affecting the transition from one educational level to another (for instance, joint application practices, student selection and the approval of studies) as well as solutions supporting the transitions (guidance-oriented education, workshops etc.), the effects the decisions will have on the need for guidance, or how the solutions in question may facilitate meeting the need for guidance or even decrease the need for guidance should also be assessed.

3. The preparatory work carried out in ministries and the expert resources should be assembled into a more compact network or a joint expert pool. This may not necessarily be a separate unit but rather the joint use of resources based on an agreement between the ministries, and joint preparations. Joint preparations could equally well cover the guidance for basic studies and secondary studies, youth work counselling and guidance services, the development of workshop activities as well as the guidance services scattered in the various service lines of labour administration. The joint expert pool would also ensure the assembly of the management expertise and coordination groups for guidance development project.
4. Due to the deficiency of the knowledge base on the need and quality of guidance, a new national assessment of the state of guidance should be carried out, but this time, the assessment should cover the entire field of guidance. For a general overview and for outlining sectoral guidance services in the mapping, the guidance services of labour administration and youth work should be included.
5. Along with a thorough state assessment of guidance, ministries should develop tools suitable for the continuous monitoring of the development of guidance needs, resources, the availability of services and quality assessment. This would also enable the comparison between local and regional differences so that the state of guidance services and the local service network may be assessed in a sufficiently systematic way in the future. In this case, it would also be easier to comment on the direction in which service forms should be developed and at the same time, the equal availability and quality of the guidance services could be guaranteed in various regions and municipalities.
6. Ministries should jointly agree on the means of unifying the diverse local guidance work while benefiting from the experiences of good practices. This requires the establishment of a joint data bank which systematically assesses the benefits and downsides of the solutions created in the development projects of recent years, as well as the coverage of the solutions and the needs for guidance, left without a solution.
7. To support the future guidance facility project, an attempt should be made to assemble the information and experiences produced by the development work carried out so far and where necessary, to model them by assembling the characteristics of the good practices of the previous development projects, as the minimum markers of the guidance facility activities. In this connection, it must be ensured that the resulting guidance-oriented cooperation is embedded and established as part of the so-called normal activities. This is why it is necessary to estimate whether a single operator or several operators should be normatively liable for the continuity and maintenance of the guidance facility activities.