**Perspectives on guidance and counselling as strategic tools to improve lifelong learning in Portugal**

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Abstract

This chapter presents a critical reflection about guidance and counseling structures and services in Portugal as a central dimension for the implementation of the European Area of Lifelong Learning. Counseling in Portugal constitutes simultaneously an emergent and an already established field of intervention, both with adolescents as well as with adults. In fact, as an educational and psychological practice it has contributed to create well accepted models and practices, encompassing information interventions, psycho-pedagogical interventions and career guidance and life-designing counseling. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the lifelong learning and guidance paradigm highlights the importance to attempt to integrate different services which are already in place into a coordinated structure that takes into account both the normative and non-normative transitions, voluntary or otherwise, that the citizens face throughout their entire life-span (Duarte, Paixão & Silva, 2007; Fouad & Bynner, 2008). Service users must be empowered to act upon an ever changing world by developing critical career management skills, although service providers must be very attentive to the diversity of career challenges across the life-span, when factors like age, gender, health and position in the workforce are taken into consideration. The Commission of the European Communities (CEC, 2000) underlines the fact that the main mission of guidance and counseling interventions is to help reframe the relations between education, school and the larger society, by targeting specific groups (e.g., unemployed adults, working adults and older adults), facilitating access to guidance and counseling services to potential clients, in general, and to underprivileged groups, in special, and promoting the quality of these services.

*Key-words*: Guidance and Counseling in Portugal; Lifelong learning; Access to guidance services for all

**Introduction**

This chapter focuses on guidance and counselling services and their coordination in Portugal, in the light of the Lifelong Learning (LLL) policies that are fostered in Europe, and in particular the Commission’s Memorandum as part of the broader initiative for the development of a European Area for Lifelong Learning. Although we embrace the need to provide to all citizens with access to “good quality information and advice about learning opportunities throughout Europe and throughout their lives”, as stated in the Memorandum (p.16), we will show that this objective is far from being fulfilled in Portugal.This can be partially explained by the services’ different origins, and also by the traditions of the two more relevant disciplines (psychology and education) that informed their creation, as well as by the current political and ideological context prevailing in Europe.

Guidance and counselling are umbrella concepts which have different meanings in diverse life and political contexts. Following Gysbers (2008) suggestion, after his thorough analysis of specialized literature on this topic, we will use the words *guidance and counselling* combined in order to encompass all the terms currently used in documents discussing lifelong learning policies (e.g. vocational guidance; vocational counselling; information, advice and guidance; career development).

For the purposes of this chapter we will refer to guidance as “a range of activities that enables citizens of any age and at any point in their lives (lifelong) to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make meaningful educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which these capacities and competences are learned and/or used (lifewide)” (CEDEFOP, 2005, p.11). Likewise, counselling “is a generic term that refers to a relationship between two or more people in which one person facilitates the growth and development of others in order to help them deal with their problems more effectively” (Glasser & Fine, 2004, p.519).

Guidance and counselling policies have a tremendous impact on individuals’ ability to adjust to both voluntary and involuntary transitions which citizens face throughout their entire lifespan. As Fouad & Bynner (2008) have pointed out, involuntary transitions are often accompanied not only by personal obstacles and difficulties, but also by obstacles in the form of opportunities, as well as by institutional obstacles. Thus, guidance and counselling services are expected to support citizens not only in their lifelong voluntary transitions, but clearly to help reinforce their internal and external resources during involuntary transitions, particularly in target underprivileged groups.

This chapter is organised in three main sections: we start by addressing the history of guidance and counselling services in Portugal, then we will discuss the implementation of lifelong learning and guidance structures and services within adult education in Portugal, and finally we will take a critical stance on a recent proposal addressing the creation of a comprehensive system of lifelong education and guidance policy.

**Notes on the context of guidance and counselling services in educational institutions and public employment services in Portugal**

The history of guidance and counselling in Portugal can be viewed taking into account two separate levels of analysis. If, from the theoretical point of view, the developments in Portugal were comparable to those of other international contexts, the established political power, from the mid 1920s until the late ’70s, never created the favourable conditions for the emergence of sound practice encompassing the needs of both children and adults (Duarte, Paixão & Lima, 2007). In fact the roots of guidance and counselling services can be found in an historical period that ranged from the mid-1800s to the beginning of the First World War. However, the events that occurred from the 1920s onwards were critical for the development of the guidance and counselling practice in Portugal, and especially of its career strand (Abreu, 2003), since it had a bright start during 1920s, in close connection with the creation of experimental psychology units within the higher education institutions of Coimbra and Lisbon.

In the field of vocational guidance, the most important fact was that, in 1925, a professor of general psychology at the University of Lisbon, Faria de Vasconcelos (1880-1939), founded the Portuguese Institute for Career Guidance and Counselling (IOP) following the widespread theoretical and methodological movement of psychological testing[[1]](#footnote-1).

In the period following the Second World War there was a progressive delay of Portugal relative to other European countries and the United States of America. Career guidance and counselling in school contexts didn’t exist until the late sixties. It was not until the early 1960s that the political authorities started to foresee the need to provide guidance and career interventions, via the implementation of two political measures: training of former school teachers, during a brief period, to deliver vocational guidance services to pupils attending the third cycle of basic education, and the creation, in 1965, of the National Employment Service under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour.

During the 1970s these measures were further strengthened through two initiatives: 1) the creation, in 1979, of the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP, PES) by the Ministry of Labour; (2) the reintroduction of Technical-Vocational studies in the educational system (1982-1983). In this new system Occupational Guidance Counsellors (COP’s) began to carry out their activities, predominantly for the purposes of increasing vocational training and occupational opportunities among adults, as well as the production, classification and dissemination of occupational information for prospective career deciders and workers. These counsellors were mostly psychologists and others with major studies in social sciences. Later on, they focused predominantly on unemployed adults, and young people seeking first employment.

It was in the mid 80’s that school psychologists with a specialized training in career guidance and counselling entered the regular school system in Portugal for the first time. Following the publication in 1986 of a new Law redesigningan Educational System adapted to a democratic ideology (Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo) which extended compulsory education until the age of 15, *Psychological and Guidance Services* (PGS’s) were created, in 1991, under the Ministry of Education in order to provide information and advice to students facing critical decision points for their future educational path. In 1997 the career of PGS psychologist was finally institutionalized in schools.

In the last years of the twentieth century there was a huge increase in the recruitment of guidance experts. As Abreu (2003) commented, “these quantitative changes were not without influence on qualitative improvements in educational practice also relevant to many schools, in which psychologists could collaborate as catalysts of work teams, in developing projects of renovation of educational practice in schools and its relations with the surrounding community” (p. 155).

However, the staffing of PGS’s in schools slowed down in the first decade of 21st century and, consequently, the counsellor-student ratio is still very high and uneven, especially considering that compulsory education has been extended until the 12th grade, as a result of the *New Opportunities Initiative[[2]](#footnote-2)*, having as target population students in secondary education and the adult population without certification equivalent to that level.

Considering more specifically guidance and counselling services for the adult population in education and training in Portugal, solid roots seemed to be planted when the National Agency for the Education and Training of Adults [*Agência Nacional para a Educação e Formação de Adultos*, ANEFA] launched the first network of Centres for the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (CRVCC) in 2001. As we will see later, what looked like a bright beginning, at least in the field of Adult Education, has disappeared, a prisoner of a functionalist orientation that increasingly took place. The changes were very similar to those that happened in the European and international contexts concerning the increasing importance given to the concept of lifelong learning.As we know, although established as a priority by the European Commission (2001) to achieve the Lisbon political aim of a knowledge-based society, the concept of lifelong learning is not new. However, since the beginning of the 1990s a change in the meaning of this concept started to emerge. As is recognized in the Global Report of Adult Learning and Education (UNESCO, 2009), the Delors Report (1996), addressing the challenges posed by education and training policies, “marked the shift from the use of the term ‘lifelong education’ in the Faure Report to ‘lifelong learning’” (p.22), which was reinforced by several events and initiatives such as the meeting of the Ministers of Education of OECD countries, in 1996, under the theme “*Making Lifelong Learning a Reality for All”*. However, this shift, framed within the notion of human capital, has been developed and maintained “on principles of instrumental rationality that consider the outcomes of learning primarily in terms of use-value” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 22), reflecting a narrow and functionalist interpretation of the human being, certainly not oriented towards human liberation and critical awareness and reflection.

In Portugal, precisely in the seventies, the perspective of lifelong education was conceptualized as a framework to guidethe transformation of the educational and training systems, encompassing several dimensions, including guidance. Simões’ model (1979) envisioned education as continuously accessible to every human being across their lifespan and at the same time oriented towards the promotion of personal autonomy and empowerment. Such a system was conceived as integrating the following four key elements: the permanence of education, equal opportunities, guidance and self-direction.Therefore, some of the dimensions mentioned in the model have been considered by the European policies of this new century (CEC, 2000), like the emphasis on valuing non-formal and informal learning by its formal accreditation; others are still in need of being further developed and implemented either in Europe or in Portugal.

**Implementation of lifelong learning and guidance structures and services within adult education in Portugal**

A huge step toward the implementation of lifelong education and guidance in Portugal happened in the domain of adult education when, in 1997, the Secretary of State for Education and Innovation asked for the creation of a task force of Portuguese specialists to present a “strategy document for the development of adult education” (Melo et al., 1998). This valuable paper recommended that the State must take on various responsibilities, and among several proposals it strongly highlighted the creation of an organizational structure specifically for adult education – ANEFA. Among other tasks assigned to ANEFA was the setting up of a system of formal validation of prior learning for adults that was meant to be a truly innovative public structure in Portugal, which had been lacking for a long time. Indeed, in 2001 the National System for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of prior learning (NSRVCC) was created by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security under the coordination of ANEFA, giving rise to the first network of Centres (CRVCC).

Despite the dissolution of ANEFA in 2002, with the corresponding dilution of the adult education identity, the NSRVCC has been maintained and enlarged and it continued to function from 2007 onwards under the responsibility of a new agency (National Agency for Qualification, ANQ) in the context of the *New Opportunities Initiative*. Launched in December of 2005, this initiative presented a strategy for national education and training in Portugal aiming to increase the qualifications level of the population based on two goals: 1) to strengthen vocational and technical paths as realistic options for young people; and 2) to develop basic and secondary education and vocational training for the active population. However, the sound principle stressed by ANEFA of cooperating and establishing strategic liaison with several partners and institutions at different levels has been maintained. For instance, the activities developed by the ANQ have been organised in strong cooperation with social partners and organizations from the civil society as well as with the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training.

Thus, from 2005 onwards, a process of vast reforms takes place in Portugal covering basic, secondary and higher levels of education and training. One of the main components of this ongoing process is the National Qualifications System (NQS) which has reorganized vocational training within the educational system and the labour market to give rise to the national qualifications framework, following the European Qualifications Framework principles. The NQS intends to “ensure that all Portuguese citizens will achieve education at 12th grade level” and its purpose is “to integrate all qualification systems and all sectors, and to establish a national qualifications framework to improve access to qualifications and progression, in order to respond to the needs of civil society and the labour market” (Pires, 2011, p. 3).

One of the main axes of the NQS is the New Opportunities Centres (*Centros Novas Oportunidades*, NOCs), which replaced the previous NSRVCC. In 2005 there were only 98, and in order to implement the government goal of qualifying one million adults up to 2010, they expanded rapidly, reaching in April 2010 a total of 454 centres scattered throughout the country. As will be seen later, this expansive movement has represented an important step towards making guidance services continuously and locally accessible to NOCs adult target population, as recommended in the memorandum. Thus, in terms of basic and secondary education and training and regarding validation processes serving the adult population, NOCs are still the national structures that provide guidance and counselling services as well as skills assessment and certification at a local level for adults, although another transition is taking place just now to replace them with Centres for Qualification and Professional Training at the end of 2012.

In spite of the recent extinction of many NOCs, it should be stressed that the work of the technical teams in these structures is developed in an integrated manner: all the centres are using a digital platform which enables information to be constantly updated regarding education and training offers, the validation processes at national level and the situation of each adult benefiting from the Centres activity. Thus, the Integrated System of Information and Management of Education and Training Offer SIGO is the current political device developed to support information, advice and guidance networks. Therefore, in the context of the NOCs, guidance staff provide advice and guidance locally to all adults who want to reach a certification of basic or secondary education. They aim “to establish the candidate’s profile and to determine adequate follow-up steps as part of the intervention” (Pires, 2011, p.8). The possible paths are twofold: guidance towards further education and training, or towards a process of accreditation of prior learning. However, concerning the first path the problem arises when the legal regulations emphasize the orientation to a course of qualification achievable at a local level, but the education and training offerings are not sufficient to address the interests, characteristics and expectations of adults, resulting in an inadequate orientation to the second path (process of accreditation).

Also from a critical standpoint, it should be stressed that the qualification requirements for counselling and guidance staff are very general. The regulations establish that guidance staff should have, in addition to a degree in higher education, knowledge about educational and training on offer to the adult population and about techniques and strategies for diagnostic evaluation and guidance. In the case of validation practitioners, the regulations vaguely require that they have knowledge about methodologies appropriate for adults as well as experience in the adult and training domain. Although many of these professionals have a degree in psychology or in educational sciences it should be highlighted that in most cases the specific training in guidance and counselling principles and techniques is clearly insufficient, since there are no formal requirements beyond any higher education degree.

Concerning access to guidance and counselling services for all in a perspective of lifelong learning, Portugal is far from having reached the necessary articulation or integration of its various structures and services. Although for the active population without a formal certification, the structure and services were well developed at national, regional and local levels, the qualification requirements of the counselling professionals, as was said above, are inadequate and the adults in need of a deeper psychological counselling support have not been adequately guided to suitable services, since the system was not meant for that purpose. Furthermore, since we are now facing a step back with the significant reduction of the CNOs as a consequence of the recent political changes, we may say that not only are the professionals’ qualifications inadequate, but also that they are indeed very few.

In the case of higher education, each institution is completely autonomous concerning the creation and organisation of guidance and counselling interventions, as well as in their definition, meaning that liaison with other structures at different levels of education is very poor or even absent.

Regarding guidance and counselling services for older people, including those entering retirement, there are also no official structures under the lifelong and lifewide framework to give them support, which compromises the accessibility of guidance and counselling services for everyone as stated in the memorandum. Senior Universities[[3]](#footnote-3) and Universities for older people have been in an process of expansion in the last decade in Portugal and still are growing. However, the initiatives came out of the grounding in the civil society and the seniors that benefit from them are mainly those in more favourable positions in society, better educated and with a good socioeconomic position and status. Thus, an effective dimension of guidance and counselling services should be available, safeguarding equal opportunities for all, supporting the process of growing and learning beyond the retirement frontier up to the end of life, in a perspective of a lifelong integrated education system. Such a system would considerably improve the opportunities for an active, wise and fulfilled aging process but still needs to be constructed.

**Towards a system of lifelong education and guidance policy in Portugal**

According to Watts (2005), a need is evident in many countries for stronger mechanisms to provide co-ordination and leadership in articulating a vision and developing a strategy for delivering lifelong access to guidance and counselling. That is clearly the case for Portugal, where responsibility for guidance and counselling services is often fragmented across a number of ministries and governmental entities, some of which are created and dissolved according to strictly political and governmental (and not expert) views.

As a matter of fact, regarding our national guidance and counselling services, we are currently faced with distinct services, operating in different ways, as mentioned above, with almost no intercommunication (ANQ, 2011a, b). To overcome this situation, the ANQ presented a proposal of a Lifelong Guidance System (LLGS) to a panel of guidance and counselling experts (Van Esbroeck et al., 2011).

This proposal, although quite innovative, has some serious limitations in its scope, once it is quite ambiguous in relation to the main objectives as well as to the preferential target groups of the guidance and counselling services (Guichard, 2003), namely to what social questions these services will mainly respond, and also who formulates them (politicians, employers, educators...?). As is stated in the experts’ report, “the goals and frame of reference acknowledge both sides of the two alternative visions for guidance, one focused on humanistic sensitivities and the other focused on economic/technological realities. However, it should be noted that the documents lean toward emphasizing the economic needs of the state over a humanistic vision of the individual” (p.5). As a matter of fact, if we carefully analyse both the content and the language used in the proposal, it becomes quite evident that the supply-side approach clearly dominates the demand-side approach of the LLGS to be created: the importance ascribed to the construction of a more realistic view of the labour market in Portuguese society is overemphasized in relation to other relevant societal goals, such as the reduction of existing social barriers and forms of discrimination, the reinforcement of social cohesion and citizenship education, personal development promotion, etc.

We should also underline the fact that tensions between the experts operating within different systems are quite visible in the presentation of the above mentioned proposal, since it integrates three distinct and mutually exclusive organisational models (integration, articulation and coordination), each directly linked to the dominant views and presumptions of the different guidance and counselling providers. Nevertheless, it represents the first comprehensive and consistent effort to create a National System of LLGS not directly focused on specific transitions and their short-term outcomes, with a common competence framework allowing intercommunication among subsystems.

However, issues and aspects to be improved are, for instance, stronger recognition of the diversity of career challenges across the lifespan, the competence framework, which needs further elaboration, and the consideration of ethical issues. The intentional and systematic incorporation of ICT in guidance and counselling services, as recommended in the Memorandum*,* although widely considered a relevant and mandatory tool to provide good quality and timely career information and to assist citizens in the decision-making process, is not sufficiently addressed in the proposal. Concerning terminology, the panel proposed the term guidance to be replaced by a more comprehensive term such as *career services.* This new term would also improve communication and networking among specialists to achieve an integrated perspective and functioning of coordinated career services at a national level. An ambiguous issue, already alluded to, concerned the specific training that should be provided to the career professionals operating at different intervention levels. Also, the question of quality assurance mechanisms was not mentioned in the proposal.

Very recently, in February 2012, the National Government restructured the ANQ, creating the ANQEP, whose mission is to coordinate vocational training both for young people and adults with the accreditation of prior experiential learning procedures. One of the main attributions of this Agency is, once again, to assure the management and articulation of the network of providers of career information and guidance services. Taking into account the political developments that have been lately taking place in Portugal as well as the European Union, it is not surprising that of the two main aims for lifelong learning envisioned in the Memorandum - promoting active citizenship and employability – this newly created Agency has clearly privileged the latter (in a supply-side logic, as explained above), precisely via the creation of new formal learning structures in big and concentrated school groupings, sometimes encompassing more than 20 different schools which are almost always located in medium-sized cities. Gradual osmosis between structures of guidance provision, as advocated in many guidance and counselling policy making documents (and in the Memorandum itself), is far from being a reality. In many ways, the successive scattered measures which the last governmental offices have been inclined to implement show the state of confusion caused by the recent paradigmatic changes, both in terms of how the policies are adapted and the structures developed, and also on how language is used to create new realities in the already existing ones. This current state of affairs, where reaching towards satisfying the guidance needs of large groups of citizens is becoming more difficult, can, in the long run, undermine access to guidance and counselling services to potential clients, in general, and to underprivileged groups, in particular. Looking back to main achievements regarding guidance and counselling in Portugal in the last decade, we realize that there is a long way to go in order to implement the innovative ideas presented in the Memorandum. We are currently facing many political and structural challenges, and uncertainty prevails on the horizon. We hope (but are also very sceptical!) that the measures adopted to solve the pressing problems in the short term (e.g., very high unemployment rates) do not blind political decision-makers in their commitment to strengthen lifelong guidance services for all.

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1. During Vasconcelos’ leadership a number of important activities were undertaken, in accordance with the theoretical and methodological tenets of the vocational guidance, then dominant, namely (1) the publication of a large series of occupational monographs; and (2) psychological assessment and guidance of pupils attending formal education whenever required, mainly within a research focus.

In fact, his model of career guidance and counselling was similar to the one operationalized by Parsons (1909) in its Vocational Bureau: “Knowing the skills that characterize an occupation and the aptitudes that an individual has, it must be determined whether this individual is suited for the job he wishes to follow, and if not, what profession he should pursue instead. Therefore, the problem lies in the knowledge that we have about an individual and in what is known about occupations and the labour market” (Vasconcelos, 1928, quoted by Pinho, 1986, p. 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This initiative was launched in 2005 by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These institutions have as target population people over 50 years old and are usually created, managed and organized by seniors. The topics studied are very diverse depending upon the seniors’ interests and the teachers are volunteers. Currently there are 175 in the entire country comprising 30000 senior learners. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)