



Between Institutional Frameworks and Professional Discourses – Career Guidance in the Norwegian Introduction Programme

COLLECTION:
MIGRATION,
INTEGRATION,
CAREERS AND
CAREER GUIDANCE
IN THE NORDIC
CONTEXT

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how tensions shape career counselling services within the Norwegian Introduction Programme. Drawing on the experiences of career counsellors and their work with drafting the 'career counsellor's note', these tensions are explored through the methodology and concept of disjuncture from institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005). I have identified two key disjunctures between different political and professional perspectives on the *purpose* and *role* of career guidance rooted in different discourses. The study demonstrates that, despite institutional constraints, career counsellors find ways to adapt the service to align with professional discourses, such as culturally oriented counselling perspectives and social justice.

ABSTRAKT

Artikkelen utforsker hvordan spenninger former karriereveiledningstjenesten i det norske introduksjonsprogrammet. Med utgangspunkt i karriereveiledernes erfaringer, og deres arbeid med å skrive «karriereveileders notat», utforskes spenningene med metodologi og begrepet bruddlinjer fra institusjonell etnografi (Smith, 2005). Jeg har identifisert to sentrale bruddlinjer mellom ulike politiske og profesjonelle perspektiver på karriereveiledningens hensikt og rolle, men røtter i ulike diskurser. Studien viser at karriereveiledere, til tross for institusjonelle begrensninger, finner måter å tilpasse tjenesten på i tråd med profesjonelle diskurser, inspirert av diskurser som kulturelt orienterte veiledningsperspektiver og sosial rettferdighet.

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This article examines how political and professional discourses shape career guidance for newly arrived refugees in the Norwegian Introduction Programme. Career guidance is seen as an effective integration measure as it contributes to an early emphasis on education and employment during the integration process of refugees (Flatø et al., 2023). As part of the 2021 reform, career guidance was introduced as a mandatory service within the Norwegian Introduction Programme (Integreringsloven, 2020). Ideally, career guidance is to be provided before the start of the Introduction Programme and is delivered by the public career centres in each county.

Career guidance within the Introduction Programme is typically conducted on an individual basis and with the assistance of an interpreter. Guidance usually consists of one or two sessions, with a significant portion of the time dedicated to providing career information (Flatø et al., 2023). The Introduction Programme is governed nationally through the Integration Act (Integreringsloven, 2020), while municipalities implement the programme. Municipal programme advisors coordinate and decide the content of each participant's programme and follow up participants. Career guidance is delivered by county-based public career centres. Although there are no legal regulations governing how guidance should be conducted, it is legally mandated that career counsellors "provide recommendations" regarding education or employment for each participant within the framework of the Introduction Programme (Integreringsloven, 2020). To facilitate this, a template called the 'career counsellor's note' has been developed, which career counsellors are encouraged to use for each participant undertaking guidance sessions. This note is then forwarded to the municipal programme advisor, who retains formal decision-making responsibility. This illustrates a sequential yet interdependent relationship and distinct forms of professional knowledge and accountability. As described above, the note functions as an intermediary document between career counsellors and programme advisors.

The career counsellor's note includes sections such as an assessment of education, employment, language skills, long and short-term job aspirations and opportunities, long and short-term educational goals, as well as recommended objectives and content for the Introduction Programme. The refugee and the Introduction Programme advisor are then to use these counsellor's recommendations and collaborate further to determine the content of the Introduction Programme. However, the recommendations in the note are not legally binding.

The new mandate has positioned career guidance more centrally within the integration apparatus. According to Mik-Meyer (2017), welfare professionals should be examined not only in the context of professional standards but also in terms of how political discourses influence their work. Previous research in career guidance demonstrates how government authorities frequently expect career counsellors to contribute to the matching of clients' competencies with labour market needs (Nilsson & Hertzberg, 2022) and, in the context of integration, to support the political slogan of "faster integration" (Slåtto & Toiviainen, 2025). In their discourse analysis related to the policies and legislation behind the reformed Norwegian Introduction Programme, Slåtto and Toiviainen (2025) highlight how career guidance is positioned as a tool to ensure that refugees "quickly" acquire the "right" competencies. They link this understanding to a technocratic discourse (Sultana, 2014, 2018), where the role of career guidance is to match the client's competencies with labour market demands. They argue that a matching discourse emerges as a central component of the government's governance apparatus for newly arrived refugees and point out the absence of a social justice discourse.

A growing body of Nordic research has examined the political and professional conditioning of career guidance for newly arrived migrants (e.g. Aldrovandi et al., 2024; Kekki, 2024; Linde et al., 2021, Sundelin & Lundahl, 2023) highlighting how career guidance is shaped by tensions between labour market integration, welfare governance, and professional ethics. Hertzberg (2023) has discussed how career counsellors may experience a conflict between recognising their clients' desires for immediate income security and adhering to professional principles that emphasise the exploration of longer-term aspirations. In this sense, career guidance as a welfare service finds itself under conflicting pressures from political expectations, client needs, and the field's professional principles.

Career counsellors are relatively new welfare professionals in the Integration Programme in Norway. According to Fossetøl and Andreassen (2010), there is a lack of systematic descriptions and analyses of the roles and tasks of new actors employed in welfare institutions. This study aims to fill this research gap by exploring the different political and professional dimensions and tensions arising within the new mandate accorded to career guidance as part of the Integration Programme. In my analysis, this is done by examining career counsellors' practices and experiences of using a template called the career counsellor's note which was introduced as a concrete tool for counsellors to use as part of the new career guidance service within the Integration Programme (Integreringsloven, 2020). Previous studies indicate that career counsellors feel compelled to write recommendations in the career counsellor's note, requires specific topics to be covered during the guidance session (Flatø et al., 2023; Sætermo & Dyrliid, 2024).

This article aligns with this strand of research in highlighting such tensions but contributes specifically by analysing how they are enacted through the concrete work practices surrounding the career counsellor's note, drawing on institutional ethnography. In this article, I aim to delve deeper into how the process of working with the career counsellor's note shapes the practice of career guidance in the Introduction Programme. I regard the career counsellor's note as a governance document that contributes to the co-ordination of career counsellors' work, making it essential to critically examine its role and function. This topic is explored through the research question: How does the career counsellor's note shape career counselling services for refugees, and what disjunctures emerge in this work?

INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY AS A THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is inspired by Dorothy Smith's institutional ethnography (IE) (1997, 2005, 2006), which is both a method of inquiry and a sociology for people (Smith, 2005). In IE, the aim is to understand how day-to-day experiences are connected to broader power structures in society (Smith, 2005). The methodology seeks to provide insight into how institutional governance shapes our experiences and what these experiences can reveal about the institutions themselves (Smith, 2005, 2006). IE can be used to examine how policies are implemented in day-to-day practices and therefore offers a prominent analytical framework to examine how the new Norwegian Integration Act has affected career guidance practitioners' daily practice. IE has informed my overall research design and methodology, as well as provided the main analytical concepts for this study, which will be explained in more detail next.

Work as a subjectively purposeful practice

Rather than investigating the world through abstract concepts, IE encourages an in-depth exploration of the actual *work* being done and experienced from the perspective of the actor, as well as how this work is socially co-ordinated through various governance relations, such as texts, laws, routines, and professional discourses.

In line with IE, the concept of *work* is used in this study in a broad sense, encompassing what career counsellors do intentionally and how they do it, in order to uncover their working knowledge (Smith, 2005, pp. 151–152). By examining the work of career counsellors, institutional features of career guidance can be identified. Such analysis provides insight into how the institutional frameworks set by welfare state policies operate in the day-to-day practices of career counsellors tasked with implementing them. This article analyses career guidance from the perspective of career counsellors, as new services should also be explored through the experiences of service providers (Fossetøl & Andreassen, 2010).

Governance through ruling relations and discourses

In IE, attention is directed towards *ruling relations*. Smith has developed the concept for a broad understanding of power and differing interests within institutional contexts, and it is defined as:

... that extraordinary yet ordinary complex of relations that are textually mediated, that connect us across space and time and organize our everyday lives – the corporations, government bureaucracies, academic and professional discourses, mass media, and the complex of relations that interconnect them. (Smith, 2005, p. 10)

Ruling relations refer to ideologies and discourses that are embedded in forms organising our social lives, and which are both material and relational (Lund, 2020). Ruling relations are materialised in institutional texts and become significant to us as we engage with them (Smith, 2005). In my analysis, ruling relations are authoritative documents as well as political and professional discourses.

In the field of career guidance, Sultana (2018) has identified three distinct discourses; the technocratic, humanistic, and emancipatory. The focus of the technocratic is on matching individuals and their skills to the needs of the labour market, while the focus of the humanistic is on personal growth and fulfilment of the individual. The emancipatory discourse questions the status quo and seeks to challenge unjust social structures through critical awareness and advocacy (Arthur, 2019; Sultana, 2018). In line with more recent scholarship in the field, I refer to this as 'social justice discourse'. While Sultana (2018) defines the technocratic discourse as a professional discourse within career guidance, it appears politically reinforced in the context of Norwegian integration policy, where matching, efficiency and 'faster integration' are central policy expectations (Slåtto & Toivainen, 2025). A culturally responsive professional discourse is also present in literature which addresses career guidance for diverse and migrant populations (Arthur, 2018; Arulmani, 2012). This approach has a strong social justice orientation and emphasises identifying barriers and adapting guidance to the client's cultural context (Arthur, 2018).

The field of Nordic professional career guidance has increasingly shifted towards a social justice discourse, emphasising structural conditions and systemic efforts to improve opportunities (e.g. Hooley et al., 2018). In Norway, these discourses can be identified to varying degrees in integration policy and expectations for career guidance within the scope of the new Integration Act (Integreringsloven, 2020). Within IE, governance is understood as relational rather than solely top-down. It is dynamic, as career counsellors activate various texts, theories, and routines in their workplaces, demonstrating that they are not passive victims of these ruling relations (Lund, 2020, p. 169). In my analysis and discussion, I have limited the focus to authoritative texts and discourses stemming from integration policies and the field of career guidance.

Disjunctures

Another concept from IE is *disjunctures*, which refer to gaps or contradictions between the authoritative texts and ruling relations that govern people's lived experiences (Smith, 2005, p. 187). Disjunctures can arise between people's subjective experiences and institutional practices and procedures. In other words, disjunctures manifest in situations where governance logic 'from the top' misaligns with people's day-to-day experiences. In my study, I approach disjunctures as tensions between the authoritative texts that govern the specific field of career guidance in the context of integration and the experiences of career counsellors. These disjunctures shed light on moments where the governing logic stemming from authoritative texts of integration policies misalign with career counsellors' subjective perceptions on the purpose of their work relating to newly arrived refugees. These disjunctures may manifest in areas where career counsellors do not recognise themselves in certain ruling descriptions of the role and function of career guidance or where they express that something feels 'off' regarding the expectations placed on their work. Such a disjuncture may align with what Sultana (2009) describes as tensions between different dimensions of the concept of competence in career guidance, such as the tension between a job focus and a role focus. Disjunctures can also exist without being explicitly perceived as problematic by career counsellors, as much of how we act or work is taken for granted (Smith, 2005). Although career counsellors are provided with some guidelines for their work, they are also afforded a degree of professional autonomy to exercise discretion (Wallander & Molander, 2014).

EMPIRICAL DATA AND ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

I conducted fieldwork between the autumn of 2022 and autumn of 2023 at two career centres, spending two weeks at each centre. I observed how counsellors prepared for and conducted sessions, and how they subsequently worked on the notes. I also attended office meetings, professional development meetings, and collaborative meetings with municipalities. In addition,

I interviewed career counsellors and managers from the two centres where I conducted fieldwork. To enrich the dataset, I also interviewed career counsellors and managers from career centres in two other counties. In total, I conducted interviews with 21 career counsellors and three managers. During both fieldwork and interviews, I collected texts including routine descriptions, templates, training materials, and collaboration agreements with municipalities. The data material of the study is summarised as follows (Table 1):

Observations	11 office meetings and 14 career guidance sessions
Interviews	Interviews with 24 career counsellors and managers across six counties
Collected materials	31 documents/images, including nine completed career guidance notes

Table 1 Data material.

The field notes were transcribed and anonymised, and the interviews were transcribed using AI from Nettskjema and subsequently reviewed and refined by myself. Excerpts included in the article have been transcribed verbatim by me and anonymised. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article. The study adheres to the guidelines of the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH, 2022), and all participants provided informed consent.

In IE, the research focus can be somewhat open at the outset, allowing for the identification of issues to be pursued further as the study progresses (Smith, 2005). During my fieldwork, I observed that career counsellors started their guidance sessions in substantially different ways when presenting the purpose of career guidance. This variation extended to the topics they prioritised during the sessions. Some counsellors introduced the career counsellor's note at the start and followed the template's sections systematically, while others adopted a more open approach, exploring the client's guidance needs before addressing specific topics.

In the subsequent interviews, I therefore asked how they initiated their guidance sessions, what they perceived as being the purpose of the service, and what specific tasks they performed before, during, and after the sessions. Several career counsellors expressed criticism of the requirement to complete the career counsellor's note, citing concerns that it was too early for clients to formulate career goals and that it raised professional ethical issues to make recommendations on clients' career goals.

Smith (2005) encourages researchers to analyse how texts function within an institution in order to understand the institution itself. In my study, I chose to examine how the bureaucratic template – the career counsellor's note – functions as a text that co-ordinates the work of career counsellors and how the counsellors choose to engage with it. The concrete work practices and career counsellors' reflections concerning the career counsellor's note were further analysed using an approach inspired by Rankin's (2017) analytical strategy, following these two steps: 1) Describing career counsellors' engagement with the career counsellor's note and identifying tensions (disjunctures) and 2) Moving iteratively between field notes, interview material, and authoritative texts to analyse how the counsellors are positioned within ruling relations, how the note shapes practice, and to explore disjunctures in their work. To analyse these disjunctures, I endeavoured to carefully identify which political and professional discourses informed career counsellors' perceptions of their work and how these related to the discourses embedded within the ruling relations (analysis of disjunctures in relation to ruling relations). The analysis does not introduce new discourses, but draws on established professional discourses, including technocratic, humanistic, and social justice discourses (Sultana, 2018). In the context of Norwegian integration policy, the technocratic discourse is closely aligned with policy expectations, such as 'faster integration', which means that counsellors must navigate both professional and politically reinforced versions of this discourse (Slåtto & Toiviainen, 2025; Sultana, 2018). I identified the disjunctures both through the career counsellors' own statements and reflections and through my own observations, particularly when I noticed differences in how they worked within the same service.

The analysis is empirically grounded, with a focus on how career counsellors perform and reflect on their work, but it also contributes to the establishment of a broader understanding of the internal disjunctures present in the career guidance service which has now become a more integral part of the Norwegian Introduction Programme.

The results chapter presents two identified disjunctures along with the corresponding ruling relations that conflict with one another, and how these conflicts are made visible in the work of career counsellors.

A DISJUNCTURE BETWEEN POLITICAL AND PROFESSIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE PURPOSE OF CAREER COUNSELLING

This section presents the first empirical theme: how the purpose of career guidance is constructed in practice. In the observations and interviews, I focused on how the requirement for career counsellors to write the career counsellor's note with recommendations influenced their *work* and the guidance process itself. The note seemed to shape how they initially explained the purpose of the guidance, their choice of topics during the session, and how they summarised the session.

Some career counsellors started the guidance session by asking the client "How can I help you?" while others expressed that they found this approach unproductive, as most clients did not know what kind of assistance a career counsellor could provide. Counsellors observed that refugees with a higher level of education or more advanced formal qualifications tended to have a better understanding of the career guidance context and more specific guidance needs. For these clients, counsellors adopted a more open approach, exploring their guidance wishes at the outset.

Below is an example of the varied use of the themes from the career counsellor's note in structuring the conversation. The following examples illustrates this tension in practice:

Like Cathrine, the career counsellors typically began guidance sessions by clarifying their role and the purpose of career guidance. They explained this purpose in terms closely aligned with the objectives of the Integration Act: supporting informed decision-making and developing a tailored Introduction Programme. They also clarified that, after the session, they would write the career counsellor's note, outlining the client's short- and long-term goals, topics to be addressed, and recommendations for the goals and activities of the Introduction Programme.

Many career counsellors chose to structure the session by following the section structure of the career counsellor's note. They began with a competency assessment, discussed the client's career aspirations, provided career information on job and educational opportunities, and deliberated on the goals that the career counsellor would recommend within the framework of the Introduction Programme, along with appropriate measures to achieve them. While some counsellors kept the structure of the note in mind, others printed it and filled it out during the session.

Several counsellors confirmed that they structured the guidance sessions around the themes in the note, and some said that the note helped them to structure the conversation. When I asked the counsellors how they usually concluded the sessions, one counsellor, Jens, responded: "Eh... I suppose I wrap it up, right? I often say something like, 'Now I have gathered the information I need', and then I open the floor for further questions or additional topics if relevant." Here, the career counsellor indicates that they have an agenda for the session, namely, to collect the information needed from the client to complete the note and formulate recommendations.

It becomes evident that the career counsellor's note functions as a ruling relation that shapes the practice of career guidance, influencing both the selection of topics and the structure of the session. While the counsellors expressed that they were attentive and exploratory regarding the client's story, they maintained a focus on the themes outlined in the note and emphasised the importance of not "forgetting" any of them during the session.

Based on the empirical data, I formulate the disjuncture as follows:

Career guidance for newly arrived refugees exists at the disjuncture of political and institutional ruling relations surrounding the career counsellor's note and professional discourses on guidance, which are shaped by the guidance needs of the client. This disjuncture pertains to differing understandings of the *purpose* of career guidance, rooted in the reliance on distinct discourses within the field of career counselling (Sultana, 2018).

The awareness that Introduction Programme advisors should continue working with the notes created a sense of pressure for some career counsellors. They expressed that they adhered to the template out of fear of overlooking something important. The note is, however, in disjuncture with professional discourses regarding the topics to be addressed in the counselling sessions. This is evident in the following account. As career counsellor Sonja put it: “I thought something was important, but it’s utterly irrelevant to everyone else. And then I think, I just have to accept that I can’t be as free as I’d like to be. So, I stick to the template.” Because career guidance is co-ordinated with the municipality’s Introduction Programme, career counsellors *adapt* their work to align with the topics outlined in the career counsellor’s note. However, some career counsellors expressed little concern about not addressing all the topics outlined in the note during the sessions. The topics in the notes remained in the background during the counselling and, like Hanna in [Table 2](#), many counsellors sought to make the sessions resemble a regular career guidance session that is conducted at the career centre with other clients. In these sessions, the client is invited to more freely define their own career guidance needs, aligning with humanistic perspectives in which the client’s interests and values are central to the counselling process ([Sultana, 2018](#)). The counsellors found that while they often addressed the topics in the career counsellor’s note anyway, this was done in a more organic manner, guided by the client’s needs.

Table 2 Excerpt from field note and interview.

EXCERPT FROM FIELD NOTE	INTERVIEW EXCERPT
Cathrine is the career counsellor and Amina is the client: Cathrine begins the counselling session by stating that she will explain its purpose. She explains that they will engage in a conversation about employment, education, and goals related to the Introduction Programme. Cathrine emphasises that the session is intended to support Amina in making informed decisions. Periodically, Cathrine pauses for the interpreter to translate. During these moments, everyone directs their gaze towards the telephone as the interpreter speaks. Cathrine proceeds by mapping out Amina’s prior experiences, glancing down at the career counsellor’s note as she asks questions.	Career counsellor Hanna: “And then I have this kind of checklist, you know. Language, authorisation, recognition of prior learning – things like that, which you just have to check yourself: does this person need to know about these things? And then there’s the short-term and long-term goals for education and employment, so that I make sure, in a way, that I address these topics. So that’s essentially what’s on my sheet [the career counsellor’s note template]. But over time, I’ve probably moved away a bit from strictly adhering to those specific points, and I try to focus more on the individual person – what do you think, and what are you interested in?”

Several career counsellors who had worked on this assignment over time reported that they gradually liberated themselves from the template. Some introduced additional topics such as family circumstances, interest exploration, or reflection, and sought to avoid turning the guidance session into a ‘hearing’ setting. They critically reflected on the implications of adhering to a predefined template for their work as facilitators of the guidance process. The following example illustrates this tension in practice. One career counsellor, Sonja, expressed a desire for greater freedom in their interactions with clients, stating: “as soon as I step in and decide what we’re going to talk about, I’ve... already compromised the exploratory space a bit. Because I’ve pre-defined what’s important. And is it important to you, really?”

From an IE perspective, this reflects that career counsellors’ notes are enacted differently in the work of different practitioners, resulting in varying effects as ruling relations. Drawing on Smith ([2005](#)), ruling relations are materialised through institutional texts that gain significance as counsellors activate them in their *work*. It is primarily the more experienced career counsellors who lean on professional discourses, like the social just discourse ([Sultana, 2014, 2018](#)), rather than strictly adhering to institutional templates. This highlights a disjuncture, where the governance logic imposed ‘from above’ misaligns with the counsellors’ day-to-day working practices.

The counsellors viewed the service as an opportunity to familiarise the target group with the career centre and informed clients that they could return to the centre later if needed. The career counsellors expressed a desire to ensure genuine access to career guidance tailored to clients’ individual needs. These perspectives are clearly aligned with the social justice discourse ([Sultana, 2014](#)). By introducing clients to the concept of career guidance and establishing an initial point of contact, the counsellors facilitated an environment where clients could independently seek the service when they perceived a need for it.

Career guidance is organised to support the municipality's Introduction Programme, with the career counsellor's note serving as a written document that co-ordinates this collaboration. Such an organisational structure can be seen as having an instrumental aspect, whereby career guidance aims to achieve external objectives that may come at the expense of the client's needs and wishes. A similar instrumentalist technocratic discourse is prominent in integration policies, where refugees, through the Introduction Programme, are shaped to become employable and productive citizens (Slåtto & Toiviainen, 2025). In this context, career guidance is expected to support a tailored and efficient programme rather than prioritise the client's expressed needs. The mandate for career counsellors at the regional career centres to operate within these parameters differs from the career guidance they typically provide to other clients at the career centre. The frameworks imposed on this service also shape the role that the counsellors are assigned or take on within the service, which is explored in the next disjuncture.

A DISJUNCTURE BETWEEN BEING PART OF A NATIONAL INTEGRATION SYSTEM AND FULFILLING ONE'S PROFESSIONAL ROLE

While the first disjuncture concerns the purpose of career guidance, the second disjuncture addresses the professional role of the counsellor and how it is shaped by institutional responsibilities. These two disjunctures are closely related but analytically separated here to highlight different dimensions of the same overarching tension. The element of the service that career counsellors were most critical of was the work of writing recommendations as suggested by the template. Formulating recommendations at such an early stage was described by the counsellors as a "guessing game, based on thin grounds, a balancing act, and a tricky matter" while they simultaneously expressed a desire to expand and support their clients' opportunities. The counsellors were critical of the fact that career guidance takes place at an early stage in the refugees' integration phase, a concern also highlighted in earlier studies (Flatø et al., 2023). The following example illustrates this tension in practice. Career counsellor Linnea explained:

They come here and sometimes don't even know what career counselling is. They haven't had the chance to speak with their programme advisor. And then you have to explain. So now I've actually started by asking the question: "Why are you here today? Do you know why you're here today?"

The career counsellors emphasised to their clients that the career counsellor's note constituted only a preliminary plan and that they could change their minds later. According to my analysis, the counsellors were focused on safeguarding the rights and opportunities of their clients and took a clear stance that their loyalty lay with the client. They took their clients' career aspirations seriously, exploring and counselling them based on these aspirations. The counsellors felt committed to supporting their clients' autonomy in making their own career decisions and used the opportunity to empower the client in this regard. This is evident in the following account. Career counsellor Ingrid shared her concerns about writing recommendations for another person's career path:

What is very difficult for me is seeing so many adults who have been overruled and had decisions made on their behalf. So that's something that really stays with me, and I think a lot about it when I write the notes and when I meet people. Because here in Norway, they could actually be at risk of having a counsellor who overrules them later and decides their goals for them. So, at least for my part, I try to phrase things in such a way that I don't reinforce that.

This disjuncture reflects what Sultana (2009) describes as competence-related tensions, highlighting the conflict between differing perspectives on professional role understanding and actual tasks assigned as part of the integration services. Based on the empirical data, I formulate the disjuncture as follows:

There is a disjuncture in the counsellor's professional role, arising from the tension between institutional responsibilities and professional discourses emphasising autonomy and client advocacy (Arthur, 2019). This tension highlights the challenge of balancing institutional expectations with a commitment to acting in the client's best interest. Several career counsellors expressed uncertainty in their work of writing recommendations, particularly regarding the level of detail required. One manager called for clearer guidelines from the state

on how to write the recommendations. Some counsellors wrote brief notes, reasoning that it was unnecessary to invest significant effort into notes from sessions where the programme advisor had been present and had heard the discussion about the recommended career goals. Other career counsellors invested considerable effort into writing longer, high-quality notes, so that the client would recognise themselves in the document and feel proud of its content. In addition, these counsellors included extensive information and links to relevant websites that the programme advisor and client could use for further work. One career counsellor who put significant effort into the notes received feedback that the municipality appreciated the detailed notes and used the recommendations to identify suitable internship placements for the clients. The analysis of this disjuncture reveals that some career counsellors wrote the notes more out of obligation to institutional routines than because they viewed it as an essential part of professional counselling (see Table 3). Example:

WORKING ON THE CAREER COUNSELLOR'S NOTE AS PART OF PROFESSIONAL CAREER GUIDANCE	WORKING ON THE CAREER COUNSELLOR'S NOTE AS PART OF INSTITUTIONAL ROUTINE
Career counsellor Michelle: "I try to write a good note, including many, many tips with links and suggestions for what can be done in the Introduction Programme, how they can... what they might start with, such as language practice, what kinds of volunteer activities or leisure activities they can engage in. Yes, and so on and so forth. Family contact. Refugee guide. Driver's licence. All these tips that vary from one individual to another."	Career counsellor Hanna: "I feel like it's very... I feel like it becomes a bit of blah blah blah. Because it ends up being that you write that the person must meet the language requirements in Norwegian and English, and then it just feels like it's the same for every single person. And at the same time, it's a bit reassuring not to write too much detail in one direction or another, because then it leaves room for adjustments, in a way. But I don't really know how much of this is actually read. There's little motivation on my part to write these notes. The conversation is valuable, but the notes just feel like something that has to be done as part of reporting work."

Table 3 Examples from career counsellor notes.

The analysis shows that career counsellors viewed the work of writing the career counsellor's note as a way of documenting the information provided to the client and invested significant effort in describing pathways towards the recommended goals. Few of my informants sent the notes directly to the clients, but they explained to them that the programme advisor would review the notes with them afterwards.

The counsellors believed that many of the recommendations were self-evident, such as advising young individuals without formal education to begin primary education. Most refugees start the Introduction Programme with Norwegian language training, so many do not make career decisions until later in the programme. However, very few counsellors had knowledge of how the wishes and recommendations were followed up on in practice by the municipality. They were concerned that the recommendations could limit the clients' future opportunities if they if they later changed their minds.

One career counsellor expressed concern about clients who were solely focused on getting a job as quickly as possible, fearing that writing a recommendation for immediate employment could narrow their future possibilities. She argued that career guidance should instead contribute to expanding the range of opportunities and was therefore sceptical about formulating goals so early in the clients' integration process.

Career counsellors reflected on the realities of their recommendations. The programme advisors had provided feedback that some of the recommendations were unrealistic for the clients to achieve, while the career counsellors, in turn, sometimes perceived the programme advisors as lacking ambition on behalf of their clients. The following example illustrates this tension in practice. Career centre manager Karianne stated: "I notice that our career counsellors become a bit... When they react, they react because they feel that the municipalities are, in a way, hindering and suppressing the clients' ambitions or wishes, such as for education."

The career counsellors viewed their role in the assignment as *different* from that of the programme advisors. As counsellor Ingrid expressed: "We have the luxury of being able to

suggest whatever we want, and then the NAV [Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration] advisor [the programme advisor] has to deal with the reality, the budget, and the whole package”. Career counsellors described their role as being the ‘client’s advocate’ or ‘the client’s voice within the system’ and they saw their role as more impartial than that of the municipality. They expressed that they had a freer role and were not as constrained by the need to consider the economic implications of their clients’ wishes. They believed this positioning helped to ensure that the clients could access the longest possible Introduction Programme, educational opportunities, or measures tailored to their individual needs.

Taken together, these examples indicate that, although the career counsellors perceived their role as freer than that of the advisors in the Introduction Programme, they still found it challenging that career counselling within the Introduction Programme is more directive and structured than the counselling they typically provide at the career centre.

From an IE perspective, this reflects how the constrained position they experienced can be linked to the dilemma inherent in the work of categorising clients (Smith, 2005). Career counsellor notes are designed to require counsellors to sort clients into the ultimate goals of either employment or education. Ruling relations such as legislation and routines reflect how, at the policy level, certain understandings of career guidance – such as informed decision-making, categorisation, and skills mapping viewed in light of local labour market opportunities – align with the technocratic discourse within career counselling (Slåtto & Toiviainen, 2025; Sultana, 2018).

The fact that career counsellors dedicate a significant portion of their guidance sessions to mapping and matching individuals to labour market needs in Norway highlights how the technocratic discourse is enacted within the service. The technocratic discourse is often oriented towards measurable outcomes (Sultana, 2018). Jens’ statement, “Now I have gathered the information I need,” reflects this technocratic orientation, emphasising information gathering, documentation, and preparation for measuring outcomes. This understanding of career counselling for integration is at odds with the career counsellors’ own professional discourses. Hanna’s focus on the individual and Ingrid’s emphasis on ensuring that career guidance does not contribute to the disempowerment of the client align more closely with the humanistic and social justice discourses (Sultana, 2018). Statements from career counsellors about ‘being the client’s advocate’ and ‘ensuring opportunities for them within the system’ resonate with the discourse of social justice and culturally oriented career counselling (Arthur, 2019; Hooley et al., 2018).

Norway has a national quality framework for career counselling to support the quality development of career guidance services (Bakke et al., 2020). It is argued here and in other studies (Arthur, 2018; Hooley et al., 2018; Sultana, 2014) that career guidance should contribute to social justice and that this must be translated into practical measures and activities. An example of how career counsellors in career centres worked according to such perspectives was that they often chose to write somewhat ‘broad’ recommendations or included recommendations to ensure the client’s rights to a longer Introduction Programme. Career counsellor Tove explained that when she had clients who had not completed primary education and whose ultimate goal was employment, she would include a sentence in the career counsellor’s note: “He/she may need education.”

The social justice discourse is evident in the career counsellors’ work, as they are highly focused on ensuring that their clients have the opportunity to pursue education and social mobility. Charlotte said: “But very often, we will recommend some form of education. Very often. Because there’s no way forwards without it. Otherwise, it’s just endless fast-food jobs and cafés.” They spoke about clients who focused only on learning Norwegian and had few perspectives beyond that. In such cases, some career counsellors included education as a recommended ultimate goal, with formulations such as: “It is recommended that they are ensured the opportunity to complete primary education, as this will open up possibilities for them later if they wish.”

DISCUSSION

Working within a system does not preclude working against certain aspects of it (Sultana, 2018). In IE, it is acknowledged that we are both part of and creators of ruling relations

(Lund, 2020, p. 169). The career counsellors in my study were not passive recipients of these relations but actively influenced the service. As in earlier research on counselling in the Introduction Programme, they were critical of predefined topics and the expectation to write recommendations (Flatø et al., 2023). They demonstrated professional autonomy and exercised discretion within the boundaries they interpreted as defining their mandate. While they adapted their work to the topics outlined in the career counsellor's note and categorised clients towards predefined end goals, many also chose to challenge what they perceived as an overly restrictive discretionary space. At the same time, their room for manoeuvre was constrained by limited time and resources. Aldrovandi et al. (2024) point out how limited resources often reduce guidance to short-term solutions for the counselee.

Career counsellors were deeply concerned with refugee opportunities and rights, especially regarding access to education. In this sense, they were not positioned within discourses that promote "faster integration" and income security but instead steered the service towards addressing long-term career opportunities, as called for in previous studies (e.g. Hertzberg 2023). They opted to focus on long-term opportunities beyond immediate income security, sought to safeguard their clients' future possibilities, and steered assignments in a more professionally oriented direction. Sundelin and Lundahl (2023) similarly show that career support in critical transitions rests not only on formal counselling activities, but also on largely invisible advocacy, relational and emotional work.

A similar issue is identified in other studies, where counsellors face a dilemma between recognising their clients' short-term desires for income, even within insecure and low-paying occupations, and their professional aspirations on behalf of their clients for improved quality of life through education and more secure or meaningful employment opportunities (Hertzberg, 2023; Linde et al., 2021). This need not be an either/or choice. Drawing on culturally responsive perspectives (Arthur, 2018), counsellors can acknowledge clients' immediate income needs while simultaneously opening space for longer-term educational and career possibilities."

In the preparatory work for the Integration Act, there was a clear emphasis on strengthening refugees' opportunities to pursue education (Prop. 89 L, 2019, p. 89). However, in practice, the proportion of individuals transitioning to education after completing the Introduction Programme in 2024 was four percent lower than in 2023 (IMDi, 2025). This has been attributed to the high educational level of Ukrainian refugees, for whom the policy prioritises a rapid transition to employment. Nevertheless, a similar trend was observed among participants in the Introduction Programme with low formal qualifications in the study by Sætermo and Dyrliid (2024). In this case, the low transition rates to education were explained by integration policies prioritising 'time-efficient' introduction programmes and legal constraints on the duration of each individual's programme. The design of integration policies and introduction programmes that fail to account for the time required by the target group to acquire formal qualifications contributes to steering refugees into precarious lives, both in terms of working conditions and financial self-sufficiency (Sætermo & Dyrliid, 2024). Consequently, education and social mobility may appear more as policy-based aspirations, without the institutional frameworks required to adequately support this target group being sufficiently present in the service I have examined.

CONCLUSION

My analyses highlight how several career counsellors were critical of the service's framework and utilised the discretionary space they perceived they had to adapt their work according to their own professional judgement. Some focused on the intention behind the legislation rather than strictly adhering to the policy-based ruling relations. They sought professional justifications for their work rather than rigidly following the topics outlined in the career counsellor's note. In doing so, they developed the service in a more professional direction, particularly aligned with the humanistic and social justice discourses in career counselling (Sultana, 2018). I observe a greater degree of autonomy among the career counsellors in my study compared to what is evident in other studies of counsellors within welfare state institutions, such as those by Kekki (2024) and Mik-Meyer (2017). One notable finding was that more experienced career counsellors leaned more toward professional discourses such as social justice (Hooley et al., 2018; Sultana, 2018) and were more critical of institutional templates.

My empirically grounded analysis provides insights into a career guidance service that has transitioned from the periphery of the welfare system to occupying a central role within integration services. This service is shaped by multiple political directives that co-ordinate how career guidance is to be carried out. My analysis reveals disjunctures between the ruling relations embedded in these political directives and the professional practices of career counsellors. Within these disjunctures, career counsellors engage in various strategies to navigate and manage the tensions arising from these conflicting relations.

IE has been criticised for its limited transferability beyond the specific context of a given study. The career guidance service I have studied is subject to frequent legislative changes that influence the work of career counsellors and would likely yield different analytical results over time. Nevertheless, the aim of IE is to uncover the social processes that produce generalising effects and to “generalise from actual local experience” (Smith, 1997, p. 154). In this study, the relevance lies in the analysis of the ruling relations and disjunctures that shape the work of career counsellors as this work has become a more clearly-defined service within the Integration Programme in Norway. While local differences may exist, the broader analytical insights gained through IE on how ruling relations operate within career guidance services creating different disjunctures can be transferable to other state-governed career guidance services.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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