Digitalisation and Lifelong Guidance Policy in Hungary: Lessons to be learnt from the COVID-19 stress

COLLECTION: DIGITALISATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN GUIDANCE

POLICY ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus crisis of 2020–21 was a catalyst and an opportunity to adapt to the digital challenges in lifelong guidance. In many European societies, national/regional digitalisation strategies and policies provide an essential framework for career guidance services. Some countries have standalone policies for developing lifelong guidance systems (e.g., Finland). In other countries, this is a part of sectoral strategies (e.g., Estonia). In Hungary, the national government has overarching strategies for developing public services. This paper considers four relevant Hungarian national strategies in the context of some of the policy guidelines of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN, 2015), especially Guideline 9 – Information and Communications Technology in Lifelong Guidance.

We were particularly interested to see to what extent is this holistic policy approach is reflected in Hungarian policy documents on education, labour and digitalisation almost two decades (European Council, 2004) after the emergence of the European lifelong guidance policy idea.

ABSTRAKTI

Vuosien 2020–21 koronakriisi oli katalyytti ja mahdollisuus sopeutua digitaalisiin haasteisiin elinikäisessä ohjauksessa. Monissa eurooppalaisissa yhteiskunnissa kansalliset/alueelliset digitalisaatiostrategiat ja -politiikat tarjoavat olennaisen kehyksen ohjauspalveluille. Joissakin maissa on toimintaperiaatteet ja politiikat elinikäisen ohjauksen järjestelmien kehittämiseksi (esim. Suomi). Toisissa maissa tämä on osa alakohtaisia strategioita (esim. Viro). Unkarissa kansallisella hallituksella on yleiset strategiat julkisten palvelujen kehittämiseksi. Tässä artikkelissa tarkastellaan neljää Unkarin kansallista strategiaa, jotka liittyvät joihinkin Euroopan elinikäisen ohjauksen poliittisen verkoston (ELGPN, 2015) suuntaviivoihin, erityisesti suuntaviivaan 9 – Tieto- ja viestintätekniikka elinikäisessä ohjauksessa.

Olimme kiinnostuneita erityisesti siitä, missä määrin kokonaisvaltainen poliittinen lähestymistapa näkyy koulutusta, työvoimaa ja digitalisaatiota käsittelevissä Unkarin poliittisissa asiakirjoissa lähes kaksi vuosikymmentä (Euroopan unionin neuvosto, 2004) eurooppalaisen elinikäisen ohjauksen toimintapoliittisen idean syntymisen jälkeen.

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One of the key digital strategies of the European Union, the Digital Agenda for Europe (CEC, 2010) predicted that services would move into the virtual space within a decade. The Agenda points out that "services are converging and moving from the physical into the digital world, universally accessible on any device, be it a smartphone, tablet, personal computer, digital radio, or high-definition television. It is projected that by 2020 digital content and applications will be almost entirely delivered online." (CEC, 2010, p 4). This strategy described the key challenges: interoperability, development of high-speed internet (infrastructure), digital literacy, European software developments, and better governance in the field of digitalisation.

In 2022, based on the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) figures (European Commission, 2022), most of the member states were far from these targets settled a decade earlier. However, the COVID-19 epidemic starting in 2020 had an impact on the digitalisation and online lifestyle practices of the general population of Europe which was previously unimaginable. In career guidance, service providers were confronted with technical, methodological, and professional capability challenges that digital national strategies and professional protocols in most EU Member States had often addressed on paper (Bongardt & Torres, 2013) but less in practice. The onset of COVID-19 rapidly turned strategic objectives into immediate practical tasks.

The digitalisation of daily life is a consequence of technological development. Career guidance services are no exception. The degree of digitalisation of career guidance services in general are determined by the digitalisation level of society, including the digital literacy of the non-technological savvy career counsellors and clients. It only makes sense to talk about career guidance through digital channels or the role of social media in guidance when the digital space of society is mature enough to make it possible for new digital solutions to replace face-to-face and traditional telephone channels. During the COVID-19 pandemic this adaptation, or lack thereof, was observed worldwide (Ananiadou et al., 2020), including Hungary. In fact, COVID-19 can be seen as a kind of stress test (Budnik et al., 2022) which tested the availability and quality of digital career guidance in a country.

Career guidance services can be studied not in isolation (as a single policy silo or pedagogical activity), but within specific social sub-systems (e.g. labour, education policies, administration). Career guidance services operate as systems in their own right (Barnes et al., 2020; Vuorinen & Kettunen, 2022), as career development services have several sub-components such as service delivery-channels, professionalised staff, methodology and funding just to mention a few of its building blocks. Therefore, the digitalisation of career guidance services means more than solely moving the practitioners and end-users from offline to online (ELGPN, 2015).

By the time COVID struck, Hungary had had a century-long tradition of career guidance services (Borbély-Pecze et al., 2021) and a history of nearly two decades of national strategy-writing for the digitisation of public services. However, the pandemic and the resulting lockdown period in Hungary disrupted the functioning of traditionally face-to-face counselling models, and the challenges pointed to a divide between the vision formulated in digitalisation strategies and the reality of daily practice.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, the challenges of the Hungarian lifelong guidance sector during the COVID-19 pandemic are interpreted using a combined approach. First, relevant national digitalisation strategies are reviewed and analysed from a lifelong guidance policy perspective, using selected policy guidelines of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN, 2015) as benchmarks, to investigate how these aspects are reflected in the existing Hungarian digitalisation strategies.

This analysis is contrasted with findings from empirical research on the challenges faced by Hungarian lifelong guidance practitioners during the lockdown period (Tajtiné Lesó et al., 2020). The overall aim of this paper is to contribute to understanding the possible links between the national digitalisation policy context and lifelong guidance through the example of Hungary.

DIGITALISATION OF PUBLIC SERVICES & DIGITALISATION OF LIFELONG GUIDANCE IN HUNGARY

Regarding lifelong guidance policy in Hungary, since the dissolution of the Hungarian Lifelong Guidance Council operating between 2008–2012, there has been no integrated policy representation of the field of LLG (Cedefop, 2020). Rather, the development of career guidance services (not policy as such) were embedded in different sectoral strategies and development projects. Hungary has not had a comprehensive career guidance strategy since 2012. In the years just before the pandemic, the national government started planning and taking new steps towards the digitalisation of public services. Different strategies were prepared which, while not focusing on career guidance, contained some references to it. In the present paper, the focus is on the four main national strategies that have links to the field of lifelong guidance. Two of these strategies cover the general info-communication/digitalisation policy action plans of Hungary. The other two are more specific. One is about education, while the other is about vocational education and labour market transformation. Since at the time of writing no documentation is available on the implementation of these measures or from systematic impact assessments, analysis cannot extend to the implementation and monitoring phases of the policy cycle.

In our analysis, the European Guidelines for Policies and Systems Development for Lifelong Guidance (ELGPN, 2015) are used as benchmarks. Instead of the full review based on the original 18 ELGPN guidelines, the analysis relies on a selection of overarching elements relevant to the digitalisation of lifelong guidance, which are the backbone of any national system, following an approach used by different career/lifelong guidance system level studies by the International Labour Organization or the European Training Foundation over the last few years (Ananiadou et al., 2020; ILO, 2022).

The Guidelines chosen are the following:

- Guideline No. 2. Access to Lifelong Guidance Services
  It refers to the means and conditions by which citizens can engage with lifelong guidance services, tools and resources and participate in career development activities over their lifespan to enable them to make meaningful learning, career, and work choices. (ELGPN, 2015, p. 16)
- Guideline No. 6. Improving Careers Information
  It refers to any sort of information in any medium that assists citizens to make meaningful choices about learning and work opportunities. It includes information on occupations, the labour market, education, VET, higher education study programmes, and pathways between these. (ELGPN, 2015, p. 22)
- Guideline No. 7. The Training and Qualifications of Practitioners
  It refers to the initial preparation and continuous professional development of guidance practitioners, persons whose main work function is lifelong guidance. (ELGPN, 2015, p. 23)
- Guidelines No. 9. Information Communication and Technology in Lifelong Guidance
  Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in lifelong guidance refers to the products, infrastructure, and electronic content that enhances policy and systems development for lifelong guidance and the delivery of lifelong guidance services, resources, and tools. (ELGPN 2015, p. 26)

In addition to these guidelines, infrastructure elements of access (such as access to high-speed internet and digital devices such as laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc.) and access to digital career self-learning tools and educational platforms are reviewed.

LIFELONG GUIDANCE ELEMENTS IN NATIONAL DIGITALISATION STRATEGIES

For a relatively long time, the development of information/digital society was a poorly institutionalised policy field without an overarching strategic framework in Hungary. The first substantial move forward, the antecedents of Hungary's current digital agenda, was made in the mid-1990 s with policies being devised to help Hungary enter the 'information society' (Magyar & Karvalics, 2001). As a first step towards e-government development, the 'Client

Gateway', the electronic identification system of the Hungarian state was made available through the Government Portal (www.magyarorszag.hu) in April 2005 (Egov Hírlevél, 2015). The first plans to launch a National Digital Utility Programme were announced in 2009 (Tóth, 2009). Since 2010 the government has prepared several structured digitalisation strategies. The first action plan in this series was the National Info-communication Strategy (NIS) 2014–2020 (Nemzeti Fejlesztési Minisztérium, 2014), followed by the National Digitalisation Strategy (NDS) 2022–2030 (Government of Hungary, 2022). In addition to these overarching strategies, the government accepted a Digital Education Strategy (DES) in 2016 (Government of Hungary, 2016) and a Digital Labour Market Programme (DLMP) (Government of Hungary, 2018) was added in 2018. The government also established a ministerial background institution (Digital Success Programme Institute – DSP) in late 2015. These overall strategies, however, have barely covered lifelong guidance at all.

The relatively quick policy developments partially resulted from mass protests against earlier government plans for internet taxation. In October 2014, the Minister of National Economy announced that the government had proposed a HUF 150 (app. EUR 0,50) tax for every gigabyte of electronic data traffic, starting in 2015 (Dunai, 2014). The tax would be levied on internet service providers (such as Telekom and Vodafone) but indirectly paid by customers. In reaction, mass protests took place in October 2014, aimed at getting the Hungarian government to withdraw its proposal to introduce an internet tax, claiming that the internet was a public utility in modern society. In response to the movement, the government eventually withdrew the plan for internet tax.

A few years later, during the 2017/18 school year, a compulsory administration and monitoring platform for all Hungarian schools was launched (Basic System for Registration and Study in Public Education). In the same period, the National Tax and Customs Administration services, including the tax administration for individuals, have completely moved to digital online platforms. The interoperability of different public digital systems is still missing, partly due to constitutional restrictions on the interconnection of personal data. However, the country has made a lot of progress in digital infrastructure and public services in the 2010s.

In the following, four national strategic digitalisation documents which are most relevant to lifelong guidance are reviewed more closely, as the country has no standalone career guidance or lifelong guidance strategies:

- National Info-communication Strategy for 2014–2020 (NIS) (Nemzeti Fejlesztési Minisztérium, 2014)
- National Digitalisation Strategy for 2022–2030 (NDS) (Government of Hungary, 2022)
- Digital Education Strategy (DES), 2016 (Government of Hungary, 2016)
- Digital Labour Market Strategy (DLMS), 2018 (Government of Hungary, 2018)

The first **NIS – National Info-communication Strategy (2014–2020)** (Nemzeti Fejlesztési Minisztérium, 2014), now replaced by its successor strategy (Government of Hungary, 2022, see below), had four main pillars: a) digital infrastructure development, b) digital competencies, c) digital economy, and d) digital state. It also had three horizontal pillars: a) e-inclusion, b) R&D&I (research, development, and innovation) and c) cyber security. However, it mainly focused on e-economic growth, contribution to productivity growth and the increase of business efficiency. As an overall assessment, it may be concluded that NIS, by its nature, was mainly an IT technical document which mentioned the role of a digital state, state services and public administration several times, but without any sectoral policy details.

The **NDS – National Digitalisation Strategy 2022–2030** (Government of Hungary, 2022) is the successor strategy of the first NIS (Nemzeti Fejlesztési Minisztérium [Ministry for National Development]), 2014). It has more concrete elements about e-government, building on several finalised public service developments and e-services made available for citizens over the last decade. NDS interprets the strategic element of human resource development as part of a digital strategy implementation: "Since the specific weight of the components in the DESI Human Capital dimension is (only six factors make up the dimension with a weight of 25%), and the digital literacy of the population and the workforce is a key factor for the success of all other interventions in this dimension, citizens' digital literacy is a prerequisite for success. This is one of the main objectives of the target system." (Government of Hungary, 2022, p. 7). This represents an important shift in emphasis from the technical focus of the previous strategy.

The **Digital Education Strategy** (DES) was launched in the summer of 2016. It was the first high-level strategy under the general digital society agenda to address the human development dimension exclusively. Surprisingly for our field, it only mentions the role of career guidance as part of higher education development, as follows: "existing university career centres are being turned into competence centres where personal career guidance, career orientation, international mobility, and language teaching to be based (the Videotorium)" (Government of Hungary, 2016, p. 88). As an overall assessment, DES only mentions some elements of career orientation and development in a segmented way and does not identify the strategic role of career development, nor does it even use the term "lifelong guidance". DES mainly deals with vocational secondary education and highlights STEM orientation. The newly developed Career Orientation Measurement and Support Tool (Hungarian abbreviation POM) (Office of Education of Hungary, n.d.) shows limited support towards general secondary education learning pathways of primary school 7 and 8 grade students.

Finally, the **Digital Labour Market Strategy** (DLMS) (Government of Hungary, 2018) is the most recent relevant document. This strategy was drafted before the COVID-19 pandemic, in a tight labour market with low unemployment and significant labour shortages. The document focuses on the "well-qualified, motivated, available and digitally literate workforce" as a prerequisite for the country's digitalisation (Government of Hungary, 2018, p. 4). Career guidance is mentioned in this strategy several times, mainly as a recruitment tool "in order to increase the number of people enrolled in IT jobs or digital vocational training" (Goverment of Hungary, 2018, p. 7). Also, the monitoring and career tracking elements of guidance are highlighted: "Comprehensive sectoral monitoring should be able to monitor the overall level of VET, adult education, adult learning skills and their labour market take-up, and support the institution of career guidance, counselling and socialisation" (Government of Hungary, 2018, p. 17).

Access to lifelong guidance services (ELGPN, 2015, Guideline 2) is either not directly addressed in these documents, or it is interpreted less from a citizens' perspective and more as a tool for channelling citizens towards specific jobs and fields (STEM, IT) the development of which is a current national policy priority.

The issue of improving careers information (ELGPN, 2015, Guideline 6) is also approached restrictively in Hungarian documents, linked to the promotion of STEM or to the field of higher education only. The training of practitioners (ELGPN, 2015, Guideline 7) can be enhanced by the overall raising of digital literacy levels among all citizens and public employees, and by digital education for all, including future teachers, which are objectives set in these reviewed documents. At the same time, they do not mention the role or the digital literacy/training needs of career professionals in particular. As regards ICT in lifelong guidance (ELGPN, 2015, Guideline 9), the focus of most Hungarian strategies is broad (infrastructural parameters, internet usage rates at the population level) and the sector-specific strategies which contain references to lifelong guidance take a fragmented approach, focusing only on LLG in a subfield (higher education) or consider guidance/career services as a method of recruitment to VET and to address labour shortages.

The strategies discussed (for an overview, see Table 1), while they include references to lifelong guidance, do not provide answers on the methods of guidance in the digital age, nor do they address the changing competences of guidance practitioners. A systemic approach covering major fields of policy and practice relevant to lifelong guidance, and the needs of the targeted citizen groups, is found missing. Rather, the documents appear to rely on the traditional concept of supply-driven vocational guidance, the main role of which is to support enrolment in vocational training and higher education.

EXPERIENCE FROM THE FIELD: CAREER GUIDANCE PRACTITIONERS DURING THE COVID LOCKDOWN IN HUNGARY

Turning from the policy level to the actual practice of career guidance, findings from empirical research Tajtiné Lesó et al., 2020) conducted during the COVID lockdown period highlight the daily challenges faced by career guidance practitioners in Hungary. Hungarian career guidance caseworkers around the country, when asked about their experience concerning the COVID lockdown in a field research using a questionnaire (n = 106) and interviews (n = 11) reported

Table 1 Overview of the content of Hungarian digital strategies launched between 2014–2020 from the perspective of career guidance using ELGPN 2015 guidelines.

	OVERARCHING DIGITAL STRATEGIES		DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL & LABOUR MARKET STRATEGIES	
	NATIONAL INFO-COMMUNICATION STRATEGY, 2014–2020 (NEMZETI FEJLESZTÉSI MINISZTÉRIUM, 2014)	NATIONAL DIGITALISATION STRATEGY, 2022–2030 (GOVERNMENT OF HUNGARY, 2022)	DIGITAL EDUCATION STRATEGY, 2016 (GOVERNMENT OF HUNGARY, 2016)	DIGITAL LABOUR MARKET STRATEGY, 2018 (GOVERNMENT OF HUNGARY, 2018)
Access ELGPN (2015) Guideline 2	Generic aim to "develop services that improve the quality of life of citizens"	Regular internet usage rate in 16–74 age group to reach 100% by 2025	Development of career orientation, with special attention to Maths, Science, Technology and IT skills and competences in the public education system	Goals include "full employment" and handling labour shortages such as in STEM occupations
Career information (incl. labour market intelligence) ELGPN (2015) Guideline 6	Not mentioned; however, in principle the "digital state pillar" could include career information	Digital development of public services, with emphasis on further developing eHealth solutions, but no special focus on labour market or educational e-public service developments	Developing an online career orientation website for higher education is part of the strategy	Career information is understood as part of the promotion of STEM occupations
Training and qualification of practitioners ELGPN (2015) Guideline 7	Raising the digital literacy of citizen, public officials, and employees as a direct objective	Digital education as a general objective for all citizens	Digital education to be part of general higher education and teachers' training The strategic role of career professionals in education is not recognised	Not mentioned
IT infrastructure (hi-speed connection and ICT tools)	By 2020, min. 30 Mbps internet access must be available for all households. At least 50% of households should have 100 Mbps or faster internet access. Digital illiteracy rate to be reduced below 30%. At least 75% of the adult population should become regular Internet users. 50% of the adult population to shop online By 2016, all educational institutions should have a minimum bandwidth of 20Mbit/s	By 2025, 1 Gbps bandwidth network connection for all schools Households covered by Gigabit connectivity.	Providing high-speed internet access to all schools and equipping them with ICT tools as part of the first pillar of the strategy also to provide ICT tools and internet access to families without Internet access or proper ICT tools	Not in the scope of this strategy

(Contd.)

	OVERARCHING DIGITAL STRATEGIES		DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL & LABOUR MARKET STRATEGIES	
	NATIONAL INFO-COMMUNICATION STRATEGY, 2014–2020 (NEMZETI FEJLESZTÉSI MINISZTÉRIUM, 2014)	NATIONAL DIGITALISATION STRATEGY, 2022–2030 (GOVERNMENT OF HUNGARY, 2022)	DIGITAL EDUCATION STRATEGY, 2016 (GOVERNMENT OF HUNGARY, 2016)	DIGITAL LABOUR MARKET STRATEGY, 2018 (GOVERNMENT OF HUNGARY, 2018)
Access to digital career self-learning tools	Students' ICT skills need to be developed and monitored based on the PISA measurement.	Hungary puts digital services at the heart of its competitiveness and modernisation efforts economy, education, and digital public services.	Focusing on higher education Suggested use of the national video-sharing platform "Videotorium" The public education part of the strategy exclusively focuses on vocational secondary education and STEM occupations.	Career guidance needs to support recruitment to VET, especially in IT and digital professions; career services need to support dealing with labour shortages and recruitment to VET.

mixed experiences. On the positive side, many of them mentioned that it was easy to switch to digital methods with young people, and some adult clients and parents benefited from flexibility in time and location. Many respondents were positive about the co-operation among counsellors and their colleagues' helpfulness in a situation in which they were all forced to look for creative solutions and produce their own games and online exercises. A lot of caseworkers made career guidance tools available online. Some participants welcomed the possibility of moving some elements of group counselling, such as the job-search club, to social medial platforms, notably closed Facebook groups.

However, on the negative side participants reported several factors making e-counselling difficult or impossible. These included technical difficulties such as the installation and use of equipment, software, and apps. Counsellors struggled particularly due to the unavailability of validated, online self-assessment procedures and the lack of uniform, updated online career information systems. Fresh, up-to-date information and validated self-assessment procedures would be available mostly through paid platforms which were not funded by the providers in most sectors. There was no continuously maintained and updated national career guidance portal available. That is despite the fact that since 2007, three different national career guidance portals have been launched using EU-funds, which were characterised by continuous restructuring instead of being fully operational.

DISCUSSION

As demonstrated, career guidance is currently not treated as a field in its own right in the digital strategies of Hungary, but lifelong guidance policy and service design are embedded in the vocational education and digital education policy implementations. The latest example of an integrated approach to career guidance was the first national Lifelong Learning Strategy adopted after Hungary's EU accession (Hungarian Government, 2005). The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns boosted the digitalisation of career guidance services, access to career information and the development of co-careering in many countries (Cedefop, 2020). However, this was not the case in Hungary. Based on a combination of the review and analysis of relevant national digitalisation strategies and empirical findings from the field of lifelong guidance during the pandemic (Tajtiné Lesó et al., 2020) the following questions can be seen as important for moving forward in the field of career guidance services in Hungary:

Access to career counselling services in each strategy is based on the needs of the policy sectors and does not follow the lifelong approach. For example, guidance provided at the end of compulsory elementary schooling focuses less on careers and perspectives, but rather on enrolment in secondary level I-VET.

The further development of the **methodology of digital counselling and career guidance** deserves as much attention as hardware and technical platforms (which are partly still incomplete), and this takes more time than replacing hardware. Experience from the pandemic highlighted the need for a comprehensive, maintained and publicly available national career guidance portal for distance guidance, remote support, and digital guidance in general, including an extensive career information and labour market intelligence database.

As our experience from Hungary shows, digital guidance provision can be hindered by the inadequate **development of digital content** for career guidance and counselling, the services associated with it and the **attitudes of professionals towards the use of ICT** (Borbély-Pecze, 2020). The attitude shift can be partly supported by access to supervision, targeted continuous professional development and case discussion groups for professionals.

The contents and methodology of career guidance in Hungary showed great diversity during the forced transition to digital service provision, ranging from a few minutes of providing information and replying to questions through e-mails to several hours of counselling over a series of meetings. It seemed unclear what was available to advice seekers in which organisation, with wide variations even among the same type of organisation. This phenomenon indicates the necessity of a **professional protocol** defining career guidance and its sub-systems (career guidance/pedagogy, career counselling, career information) from a quality assurance perspective, in a sector-neutral way, for both in-person and digital service provision. For such a protocol to be effective, it would need to be accepted and applied in by the ministries responsible for the sectors involved in career guidance (public education, higher education, VET, adult education, employment).

CONCLUSION

In this article, a selected number of European Guidelines for Policies and Systems Development for Lifelong Guidance (EGLPN, 2015) were used to map the lifelong guidance-related elements of relevant Hungarian national digitalisation strategies.

Upon analysis little evidence was found of a systemic approach to lifelong guidance service design, while most strategies reflect a traditional, face-to-face, demand-driven approach of vocational guidance. From a practical perspective, counsellors in Hungary faced challenges during the COVID lockdown period primarily because most of their services were designed for face-to-face presence only, thus during the lockdown they lost most (or even all) of their clients. Many of them had to bear the cost of equipment and the operational cost of teleconsulting themselves, while self-studying the use of new digital tools and software on their own in the absence of assistance and training (Tajtiné Lesó et al., 2020).

These findings are in line with the key outcomes of international reports on career guidance policy and practice in the COVID-19 pandemic (Anadiadou et al., 2020). In the context of Hungary, considering the digitalisation trends in the world of learning and work, it seems necessary and worthwhile to develop a new Hungarian career guidance service concept, with the possible development of digital skills of the different user groups and career counsellors in mind, as well as the shift of the service system towards a demand-driven approach.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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