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Coordinator Training Program: developing new qualifications in youth guidance

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Abstract

Within the framework of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) and its policy action process School to Work (S2W), the project partners from Denmark, Finland, Lithuania, and Sweden decided to define a new program for the profession as a coordinator and develop and test an education on a Baltic Sea Region basis. This was part of the Erasmus+ strategic partnership project called Coordinator Training Program – Multi-Professional Guidance for Youth (2021-2022). The partnership included both practitioners and educational providers. The CTP-project addressed the need for a new coordinator function that can work in a multi-professional environment with integrated services for youth by identifying the competences required. The project was divided into four phases: 1) defining key competences for coordinators, 2) developing a curriculum, 3) testing a one-year training program, and 4) evaluating and disseminating the results. This article focuses on the project, which involved 25 participants from the Baltic Sea countries.

Keywords: youth guidance, coordinator programme, Baltic Sea Region, one-stop guidance centre, multidisciplinary service, international project

Introduction

EUSBSR policy action process (flagship) is called School to Work (2014) addressing societal challenges related to early school leaving and to young adults not in education, employment or training (NEET). These vulnerable groups of young people face the risk of exclusion that also can lead to social problems and challenges to mental well-being. The flagship welcomes stakeholders that would like to contribute with experiences of working with this target group, for example municipalities, state agencies or civil society organizations. Policy-action processes are designed for macro-regional strategies where stakeholders are brought together for developing solutions to complex societal challenges.

As a part of the School to Work -action, the Integrate NEETs platform is dedicated to gathering and analyzing successful case studies from the Baltic Sea Region that focus on the transition and integration of NEETs into the labor market. Training has emerged as a critical component in the development of effective multi-professional collaboration among guidance services. This valuable knowledge serves as the foundation for the work of a thematic working group called Resource Centres with multi-competence teams, also known as One-Stop Shops. It was through this working group that the idea for the CTP was formed because training of these service coordinators is considered a crucial aspect in developing an effective service network.

To provide more comprehensive and coherent support for vulnerable youth, One-Stop Shops have been developed across Europe whereby multi-professional teams deliver integrated services to youth, especially those in NEET situation. By combining different professions and branches of the welfare system, "integrating all relevant services for young people, including social, health, family and housing services, makes support more accessible, more user-friendly, and more customer focused." (European Commission 2018)

The countries in the Baltic Sea Region have different experiences with establishing and running One-Stop Shops. There are many country specifics to take into consideration as all member states have their history, organizational culture, laws, culture, economy, how they prioritize the work with the guidance of young people, including those in NEET positions. Municipal and regional differences also influence how the work is done and carried out in practice across one country. Some countries have had and developed One-Stop Shops for several years, some countries are just starting their first. What they have in common is providing a wide range of services for young people in need of support.

Yet despite large-scale efforts, multi-professional services across Europe continue to encounter considerable challenges relating to forming, managing and coordinating their teams and providing truly integrated services, due to a lack of the competences among staff to handle these challenges. This has been emphasized by the ESF Youth Employment Thematic Network (2017), which identified as a crucial aspect the importance of implementing specific measures to form and coordinate staff from diverse professional backgrounds.

In Finland, the Ohjaamo (One-Stop Guidance Centre) service has been supported and envisioned as part of lifelong guidance and its strategy for ten years (MEAE, 2018). There are also research findings on the effectiveness of Ohjaamo services, which demonstrate that integrated services are desirable for clients and have positive economic impacts (Vauhkonen & Latvala 2023, Valtakari et al. 2020). Accelerating transitions and shortening service paths make sense for clients and increase trust in the entire service system among clients. However, the establishment of these services requires determined policy-making that also focuses on competence development in multidisciplinary services. Therefore, attention should also be paid to supporting and developing the competence of coordinators.

In this article we will look at Coordinator Training Program 2021–2022 with 25 participants from the Baltic Sea countries Finland, Denmark,

Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Germany. The CTP project was focused on producing training for coordinators working in One-Stop Shops. The project addressed the need for a new coordinator function able to fill the competence gaps, by identifying the competences required to work in a multi-professional environment with integrated services for youth. These are key competences that go beyond what professional staff have learnt in their previous training – specific to working in, coordinating, and offering services to clients through multi-professional co-localized teams. This need, as defined by the project partners and other organizations, exists across Europe but is highly significant in those member states that have achieved a high intensity of cross-sector collaboration and integration of services. Taken together, this allowed the CTP project to develop a professional profile and concomitant curriculum responding to concrete needs and transferable across national contexts yet sensitive to local and national variations in institutional setup and culture.

The project was divided into four phases, each with the following aim:

- Phase 1 – Competence definition
 - Defining the profession of coordinator in multi-professional Youth Guidance Centres (One-Stop Shop), and its key competencies.
- Phase 2 – Curriculum development
 - Developing CTP curriculum based on the key competences identified in phase
- Phase 3 – Training program test run
 - Testing the curriculum through a one-year program
- Phase 4 – Evaluation and dissemination
 - Presenting an evaluated and revised coordinator competence profile and curriculum and sharing it to relevant stakeholder
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Defining key competencies and curriculum (Phase 1 and Phase 2)

The coordinator's role falls between leadership and organizing, and its professional elements were defined together with project partners. The starting point for defining the learning objectives was to determine what multidisciplinary guidance and its coordination means, and what competences are needed in multidisciplinary guidance services. The tasks of the coordinator form the areas of knowledge and skills, which were established as the basis for the training program through collaborative work. The creation of the competence profile drew on the experiential knowledge of the partners regarding qualifications in the guidance field and international qualification frameworks related to career service management competences (e.g., NICE 2016). The key competences were produced together with the project stakeholders, based on three questions: What should coordinators know? (knowledge) What should coordinators be able to do? (capabilities/skills), and How to motivate stakeholders? (leadership).

Key competences include:

- Managing (things): Coordinating multidisciplinary services, coordinating service development, operational practices, knowledge management, division of work.
- Leading (people): Creating and supporting well-being in the community, fostering commitment and motivation, assigning responsibility, knowledge management.
- Networks and network collaboration: Creating and sustaining networks with background organizations and other service providers, collaboration and communication with decision-makers, marketing, public relations.
- Assessing and developing One-Stop Shop services and practices.
- Working multi-professionally with young people (clients).

The curriculum development was carried out in collaboration, and planning during the pandemic brought uncertainty and necessitated many changes compared to its original pre-pandemic implementation. As restrictions continued, the curriculum planning had to be conducted online, based on the modules formulated as the starting points. It was also validated to meet the needs and challenges imposed by the pandemic. In 2021, marketing efforts were directed towards coordinators of Youth Guidance Centres in the Baltic Sea countries to promote CTP. There were two main target groups for this education:

- Those already working as Coordinators of Youth Guidance Centres charged with responsibilities to manage the centre and with the strategic responsibility to further develop the centre including funding and engaging stakeholders.
- Those charged with responsibility to initiate and launch Youth Guidance Centres, assumed to hold positions as Head of Unit in municipalities. The key function in these centres is the coordinator charged with responsibility for managing the centre and its staff representing different organizational and professional cultures, often with varying mandates and missions. This is a demanding role that needs to be strengthened.

Training program test run (Phase 3)

The curriculum was described in accordance with the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) requirements. ECTS credits are used to indicate the workload of studies; one credit refers to, on average, 27 hours of work by the student. The duration of the training program was 15 credits, and it was conducted in four modules from September 2021 to May 2022.

Module 1. Building One-Stop Guidance Centre (5 Credits) 9-10/2021

Module 2. Delivering the services in a client-centered way (3 Credits) 11-12/2021

Module 3. Managing, coordinating and developing multidisciplinary services and team (4 Credits) 2-3/2022

Module 4. Creating and developing sustainable networks (3 ECTS Credits) 5/2022

The practical implementation of the program involved sharing and reflecting on experiences and knowledge through active participation and cross-context and cross-national dialogues. The program consisted of four modules. These modules included independent assignments, collaborative work in peer groups, online workshops, and the possibility for study visits. Due to pandemic restrictions, the program was carried out virtually using online connections. The virtual learning platform Moodle was utilized throughout the entire training program.

Module 1. Building One-Stop Guidance Centre

The first orientating module provided a general overview of the nation-specific and common features of OSGC (One-Stop Guidance Centre). It served as an introduction to the study group and included a pre-assignment to facilitate getting to know each other.

The module focused on the following aspects:

- The concept of OSGC and the specific needs of the target group, particularly those who are in a NEET situation.
- Existing support structures and the services they provide to the target group, including the legal framework behind these services.
- Establishing an accessible guidance centre with tailored services and initiatives.

The module also included activities to facilitate getting to know each other and familiarizing participants with the program. Dialogical activities were conducted to introduce pedagogical principles and foster the formation of a peer group. The aim was to develop a shared vision of both the nation-specific and common features of OSGC.

Module 2: Delivering the services in a client-centered way

In the second module, the focus was on various aspects related to client-centered services and the professional role in OSGCs. The following topics were covered:

- Supporting the team to deliver client-centered services: This involved exploring ways to enhance the team's ability to provide services that prioritize the needs and goals of the clients.
- Ethical aspects when working with clients: The module delved into the ethical considerations and guidelines that professionals should follow when engaging with clients, ensuring a responsible and respectful approach.
- Presenting labor market information (LMI) and future trends: Participants gained insights into providing relevant information about the current job market, as well as anticipating future trends in the world of work and careers.
- Raising awareness of guidance centres among clients: Strategies for increasing awareness and visibility of guidance centres among potential clients were discussed, along with developing and coordinating marketing efforts.

Module 3: Managing, coordinating and developing multidisciplinary services and team

The module primarily focused on multidisciplinary services and multi-professional work in OSGC, with particular emphasis on the role of the coordinator. The following key areas were addressed:

- Managing and supporting multidisciplinary services, teams, and collaborations involving professionals from various fields.
- Planning, supporting, and facilitating dialogues involving multiple stakeholders, both internally with staff and partners, and externally with young people, decision-makers, and civil society.

- Setting indicators for services and actions, and understanding how to operationalize, monitor, document, and evaluate them, along with their significance.

Module 4: Creating and developing sustainable networks

The fourth module consisted of three workshops that focused on two main topics. Firstly, how background organizations can support the leadership and operations of the OSGC. Secondly, how OSGC coordinators maintain contact with background organizations and ensure alignment of guidance strategies.

There are several factors related to strengthening the commitment of background organizations. First and foremost, the competence of coordinators is crucial. They must be able to make decisions and lead the OSGC effectively. The module also focused on understanding the strategic choices of OSGC background organizations. The aim was to strengthen coordinators' understanding of how background organizations affect OSGC operations.

The module also emphasized the building of effective collaboration with background and partner organizations, including the use of local, regional, and national support structures. The goal was to increase awareness and communicate the added value of the OSGC to background and partner organizations. The aim was to strengthen the commitment of background organizations to the development and financing OSGC services and interventions.

At the end of the fourth module, feedback was collected, and participants emphasized the importance of sharing mutual experiences in youth guidance and especially in multi-disciplinary service management. Country comparisons provided new perspectives for national development work in service provision and organizational management. The final module also included a visit to the municipal Youth Guidance Unit in Aarhus (local OSGC) and the Preparatory Basic Education in Randers.

Evaluation and dissemination (Phase 4)

The participating countries (Finland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) held a final seminar in September 2022 in Stockholm, where experiences were shared and co-creation of possible solutions to common challenges took place. There seem to be multiple concepts for organizing multi-disciplinary guidance services in the Baltic Sea region countries. The challenges for service development and the need for customers to access multi-disciplinary services, however, are shared.

The significance of the Baltic Sea cooperation in international development and the importance of international cooperation in producing new practices and qualifications are emphasized. Coordinators gain new qualifications relevant to the contexts in which they work. The overarching framework is the various situations of NEET youth and their access to services, aiming to deliver quality services to youth in vulnerable situations.

The goal of the EU Baltic Sea Region Strategy (EUBSR) is to enhance the competitiveness of the Baltic Sea region, and one aspect of this is better addressing the needs of NEET youth by developing services as both preventive and problem-solving measures. One significant aspect could be the actions related to service management and co-development, in which service coordinators play a central role.

The group of young adults in NEET situation is heterogeneous, but there are challenges that are shared by most of them. In this project, experiences were shared, and possible solutions to those challenges were co-created. The training was attended by 25 individuals from eight different countries. It appears that such an approach is suitable for transfer to other network-based services.

Conclusions

CTP as the development of guidance services in national strategy

The European lifelong guidance policy guidelines emphasize the cross-sectoral nature and coordination of guidance (ELGPN 2012). This leads to new kinds of needs in terms of both organizing guidance and developing competences. Multidisciplinary services for young people are linked to guidance policy, which determines the guidelines for local multidisciplinary services. CTP contributed to a shared understanding in the development of national strategies. The starting point for CTP implementation was to support the emergence of new professions in new structures by strengthening transnational learning between people working in the centers.

By paying attention to the development of coordinators' competence, the appreciation and recognition of multidisciplinary services will increase. Developing the competence of coordinators also raises the profile of One-Stop Guidance Centres and improves the quality and credibility of services. In the long run, this would increase accessibility to services and trust in public institutions among vulnerable youth. This, in turn, can contribute to better transitions in the labor market.

CTP as sharing practices in multidisciplinary guidance service

CTP can be seen as a platform for sharing practices in multidisciplinary guidance services. It provided an opportunity for professionals from different backgrounds and organizations to come together, exchange their experiences, and learn from each other's practices. In the implementation of the program, one key intention was to become acquainted with different ways of organizing youth guidance services in the Baltic Sea countries. This would have been possible to a greater extent if the implementation had allowed participants to have more benchmarking events in different countries. In the conditions of the pandemic, this was not possible.

In these conditions sharing practices meant online expert lectures and active participation in peer groups and online discussions on service development in different countries. However, sharing practices means more than just hearing or getting acquainted with the practices of other

countries. It is primarily about learning and questioning one's assumptions, as well as experimenting with new services in one's context. Ideas from other countries' practices can provide initiatives to support one's own service guidelines and decision-making. Coordinators could have opportunities for this type of practice renewal both at the national and local levels and can get inspiration from the experiences of other countries.

CTP as a training process and competence development

The purpose of the training was to define and provide participants with the competences needed for managing multidisciplinary services. Until now, there have been no significant national efforts to train coordinators, but the training has been dispersed into various vocational training programs. It is a great need therefore to consolidate cohesive educational frameworks to support coordination work. National forms of guidance training include content that focuses on multidisciplinary work, but not as much on its management and organization. The discussion regarding the need for developing training in network leadership is strengthening. For example, in Finland, it is possible to study Interdisciplinary and Collaborative Leadership at the master's level, but it is limited to the fields of health care and social services. In this sense, it is evident that long-term training is also needed in the field of guidance, which is a crucial prerequisite for service development.

CTP was a significant experiment that required the definition and testing of competences related to coordination in guidance and assessing their validity in the training of actual professionals. It appears that the definition of competences was successful and has brought new content to competence discussions. Furthermore, we need education for all workers responsible for service provision and practical work. This includes the competence to design targeted service paths, provide integrative services, and collaborate effectively. We can view the CTP process as an educational intervention that raises awareness of the curriculum among stakeholders in youth guidance within member states.

This program could also have a transfer effect on the development of competences of other multidisciplinary services.

CTP as development and networking of training expertise

A significant aspect of implementing the CTP was the transnational collaboration, which involved multiple stakeholders throughout the program, including JAMK University of Applied Sciences in Finland and VIA University College in Denmark for piloting the training program. In this sense, CTP served as a learning process for the participating organizations and actors. Collaborative development of the training fostered cooperation and networking among higher education institutions, creating added value for guidance education and introducing new elements to meet the qualification requirements in the field of guidance.

The conclusion of the CTP is that the coordination of multidisciplinary services represents a new profession, in which competence requirements lie somewhere between leadership and practical guidance. Competences can be acquired in many ways, and a training program like this, which brings together peers from different units and even different countries, clearly increases the coordinators' understanding and competence, and provides support for their professional growth. In the future, in addition to the coordinators, representatives of the service network's management should also be involved in the training program of multidisciplinary services. However, a prerequisite for network cooperation is a shared vision of the objectives, methods of action and commitment to their implementation at all organizational levels.

Partners:

- KL, Local Government, Denmark
- Lithuanian Employment Service
- SALAR, Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions
- Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences, Finland
- VIA University College, Denmark
- City of Jyväskylä, Finland
- Ohjaamo (One-Stop Guidance Centre)

Jyväskylä, Finland • Municipality of Östersund, Sweden • Norden Association in Sweden

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