

# SLOVENIAN GUIDANCE CENTRES AND THE FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITY ASSESMENT AND QUALITY DEVELOPMENT IN ADULT EDUCATION GUIDANCE CENTRES

Between 2000 and 2005 the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE) **developed a network of 14 regional adult education guidance centres and a network of their dislocated units which operates alongside to the original network.** Guidance activities in these centres have two primary objectives:

- **provide all adults with quality, professional and wholesome information and guidance as a support for their education and learning;**
- **connect as many adult education and guidance providers on the local level into a network and thus guarantee quality, wholesome, and harmonised activities of all the subjects in informing and guidance in adult education.**

Guidance centres provide adults with:

- free, impartial, confidential, wholesome, and quality information and guidance at their education and learning,<sup>1</sup>
- informing and guidance **before** the enrolment in an education programme (choosing an appropriate programme and organisation that carries it out, familiarising oneself with enrolment requirements, the educational process, etc.), **during** the process (how to organize one's learning, how to overcome study problems, etc.), and **at the end** of the education process (evaluate what one has achieved and what other educational opportunities are still ahead, etc.);
- accessibility of information and guidance **in different ways**: guidance centres provide personal guidance, information and guidance by telephone, written guidance – by ordinary and electronic mail, and via information materials; if agreed, group consultations and counselling outside the guidance centre are also possible.

Ever since the establishment of the first guidance centres we have been aware that they would only be effective if their response to the needs of individuals and organisations in their area is fast and of high quality. In order to be able to follow their efficiency and the processes that caused it, certain fundamental indicators about guidance centre activities have been determined on the national level; these are monitored and analysed regularly. Based on the performed analyses, the policies and the practice of guidance centres' activities were adjusted and developed on the level of each individual centre and on the level of the entire network. However, the five- or six-year development demands a new development step in systematic monitoring of guidance centre quality. We wish to strengthen the

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<sup>1</sup> Guidance centres service all adults, but particular attention is given to those groups of adults in a particular area who are marginalised, have more difficulties accessing education, are less educated and less active about their education. Thus each guidance centre regularly analyses the data it collects during its activities and uses them to find out which groups of adults in their area need special attention, for example, senior citizens, unemployed women, young adults – school dropouts, less educated adults in full employment, the Roma citizens, etc.

experience we have with the monitoring of their activities, complement the goals and monitoring methods with new aspects and thus implement **systematic quality assessment and development in adult education guidance centres**. For this reason we have developed a special quality framework and based it on three primary objectives of counselling and guidance activities in adult education:

- on providing access to guidance for education and learning to all adults, especially to vulnerable groups,
- on providing quality guidance service for education and learning,
- on effective measures for better involvement and success of adults in lifelong learning.

First it is necessary to emphasise that two basic processes are included into the quality framework, and that they can at times be confronting each other: such dynamics makes the quality framework rather complex. **It is a process of decentralisation and increasing the providers' autonomy on one hand, and an increased responsibility for demonstrating the results of their work and the transparency of their activity on the other.**

In addition to the decentralisation processes, the transfer of autonomy, and consequently the responsibility for quality, from the national level to the levels of educational organisations, Europe and the world witness another process, manifesting itself in ever greater demands for “quality accountability”. One of the reasons for these demands to make the results, or effects, of education public can be traced to “the right of information”. The source of these processes is the conviction that the taxpayers (and other interested groups) have the right to check the quality of functioning of the educational system (education providers) and the results, or effects, of their work. The so called responsibility accountability systems today emphasise proving how the financial means have been spent etc. The procedures of assessing whether the minimal standards of knowledge and minimal standards of quality for particular activities are being met can also be included in these processes – especially those that are financed from the public budget. This happens to be the case with our adult education guidance centres.

The framework for quality assessment and quality development in adult education guidance centres hence has two main purposes:

### **1. demonstrating accountability for the quality of guidance**

### **2. development of the quality of guidance**

Such decision and definition influence the definition of the key holders in the assessment and quality development processes in adult education guidance centres, the definition of basic areas and quality standards and criteria pertaining to them, and above all the choice of the methods of quality assessment and development that are included in the model.

Based on such a conceptual starting point, the model for quality assessment and development in adult education guidance centres was created on the following principles:

- Distribution of responsibility for quality among the key holders.
- Inclusion of interest groups.
- The relative nature of quality.

- Transparency.
- Planned and systematic approach.
- Orientation towards development.
- The culture of learning and quality, networking and the exchange of good practices.

Below we explain the fundamental content structure of the framework for quality assessment and quality development in adult education guidance centres. The framework defines **a guidance centre's basic areas of activity** and their pertaining quality standards, quality indicators and criteria.

**Basic quality areas** are complete units in term of contents, and they fully integrate different aspects into the model, the aspects that we need to pay particular attention to when assessing and developing the quality of work in the adult education guidance centres.

The **standards of quality** for each particular area were then determined. For the purposes of determining quality in adult education guidance centres, the standards of quality can in broadest sense be defined as **statements describing expected/desired quality of the key aspects of the guidance activity and its results and effects**. On the most general level the formation of standards of quality helps us find the answer to **what kind of guidance activities for adult education we want**, be it on the level of an individual counsellor, guidance centre, or development of guidance for adults on national level.

Each standard has its own **indicators** and **criteria**. Quality indicators direct us to look into important aspects of quality, which determine the studied area, in more detail, while the criteria present the tool to “measure” the defined standard of quality. Depending on the nature of the standard of quality, the criteria can be either numerical or descriptive.

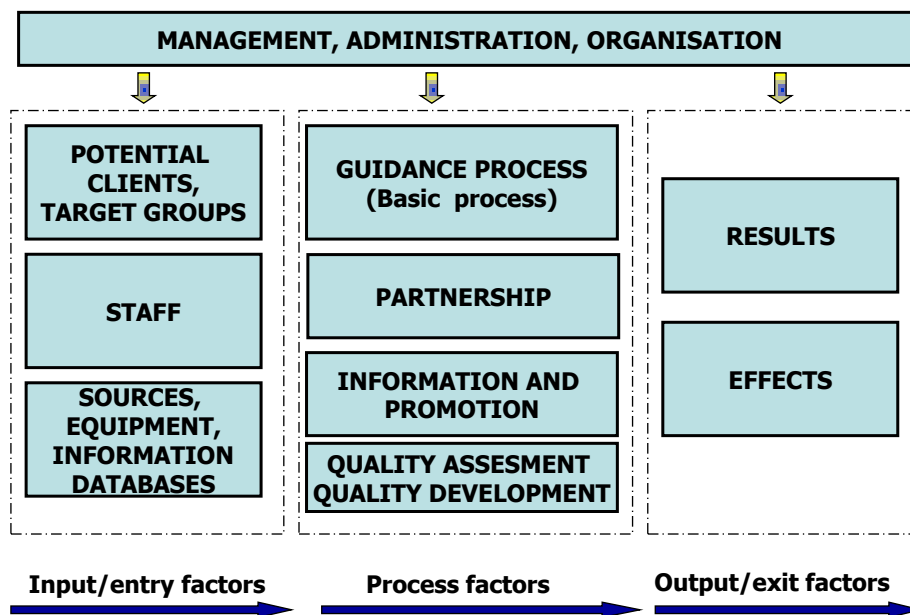
The approach we chose to define the model for quality assessment and development in adult education guidance centres stems from a methodological concept that the areas, the standards of quality, and their pertaining quality indicators – if they are to make sense – are **interconnected. Internal and external connectedness is important**. External connectedness explains that the standards, indicators and criteria need to be connected to the goals of the activity on which the entire model is based. Internal connectedness means that the standards of quality, quality indicators and the criteria to measure them have to be connected and must not be in opposition to one another.

Knowing the results, or the effects, of guidance activity is one of the basic pieces of information that tells us about the activity's quality, effectiveness and at the same time about our return of investment into the activity. When we discuss how to improve the quality of a guidance activity, just knowing the results – or effects – is not enough. The data about client (dis)satisfaction with the guidance service, the percentage of (un)successfully solved guidance cases, etc. tell nothing about what contributed to the successful solution or why the guidance has failed. It is only the insight into the entry and process factors and their quality that helps us understand the results and effects, while by influencing the improvement of entry and process factors we can also influence the improvement of exit factors (output), which we measure within results and effects.

This is the reason why the basic areas, and standards, quality indicators and criteria pertaining to them, are structured depending on whether they represent:

- **entry**, or **infrastructural** quality indicators,
- aspects of quality of **guidance activity processes** and **support processes**,
- **results**, or **effects**, of guidance activities.

Figure 1: A schematic overview of the fundamental quality areas in the framework for quality assessment and quality development for adult education guidance centres



**INPUT/ENTRY FACTORS:** consist of all the resources (human and material) needed to carry out the activities of an adult education guidance centre, in other words, all those resources that enter into a guidance activity and have an important influence on it. Input/entry factors are: potential guidance clients (target groups), staff, sources, equipment, databases.

**PROCESS FACTORS:** a reflection about process factors helps us clearly define **the basic process in the guidance centre** and its characteristics. At the same time, we can define the **supporting processes** among the process factors; these are the processes that can importantly influence the quality of the basic process and support it. The process factors are: the guidance process (basic process), partnership, informing and promotion, quality assessment and development.

**OUTPUT/EXIT FACTORS** are manifested as results and effects of the activity, as the final objective of the entire activity. **Result** in our case means all direct results of the adult education guidance centre activities, while the effects mean measuring the consequences = effects that the achieved results have for the individual client of guidance services and her/his immediate and broader environment. Because the effects are subject to a variety of factors, it is rather difficult to define them in the areas of guidance activity and education,

and it is especially difficult to measure them. However, despite such methodological predicaments it makes sense to examine the fundamental effects caused by the adult education guidance centre activities and try to define them.

**TRANSVERSE FACTORS.** In addition to entry, process and exit factors it is necessary to mention the factors we have named “transverse factors”. These are activities and processes that cannot be put into a single group of factors mentioned above, because they touch all of them. In the model of quality assessment and development we have named the area of **management, administration and organisation** as transverse.

Building on the principle we have stated in the introduction, namely that the quality of the guidance services is a shared responsibility of all the key holders – both on the national and the local levels – we have developed (within the model) a so called combined method of quality assessment and development, which distributes the responsibilities and competences for the quality assessment and the effectiveness of guidance at the adult education guidance centres among the project coordinators on the **national** and **local levels**.

**National level:** on the national level, two holders are particularly important in terms of responsibility for defining and assessing the quality of guidance activities in adult education guidance centres. These are the **Ministry of Education and Sports**, which places this activity into a system of adult education and is its principal funder, and the **Slovenian Institute for Adult Education** as the central national institution that established the concept of adult education guidance centre network, was instrumental in their promotion and takes care of their coordination and development.

**Regional/local level:** Central holders of the processes of defining, assessing and developing quality in the adult education guidance centres are the **guidance centres** on their own (their managements and expert staff) and all other subjects connected to them or showing interest in their activity (strategic and professional partners, other interests groups from their milieu).

In accordance to the distribution of responsibility of the adult education guidance centre (as described above), the quality framework presumes an interconnected combination of four approaches to assess and develop quality. The combination includes:

- **accreditation<sup>2</sup>** – external evaluation of the quality provided for certain basic criteria, deemed necessary by experts and financiers for the operation of the guidance centre,
- **monitoring** – incessant monitoring of the criteria that provide basic information about the work of the adult education guidance centre and the whole guidance centre network. Main emphasis here is on internal monitoring, carried out by guidance centres staff and only a smaller part is external monitoring done by the SIAE.

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of this study the guidance centre accreditation has not yet been implemented in practice, therefore one of the purposes of the study is to encourage the systemic implementation of such accreditation. In the model we present accreditation as one of the integral parts of the quality model, so that it is possible to get the insight into the wholesomeness and co-dependence of individual approaches; it is possible, that when the model begins to be used, accreditation will not (yet) be systemically implemented.

- **external evaluation** – external quality evaluation of certain criteria that are important from the aspect of the national politics and the system of education, or criteria especially important in a particular time interval,
- **self-evaluation** – self-assessment and quality development of all those criteria that are important from the point of view of the guidance centre to achieve the determined national standards of quality and those the centre has set on its own.

Figure 2: The way of quality assessment and development, as described in the quality assessment and development model in the adult education guidance centres

