

# **E-Career Guidance in Quasi-Markets for Education: Roles and Controversies**

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## **Abstract**

*Educational and career guidance consists of various forms of support to individuals considering their educational and professional future. During the last five years various types of quasi-markets have been introduced in Sweden at all levels of the educational system. This paper presents some recent Swedish experiences of how publicly financed Internet portals are constructed and used as a means to provide guidance ('e-career guidance'). The main question in the following is: what are the roles and controversies associated with the emergent construction and use of e-career guidance in quasi-markets for education? E-career guidance is more than anything seen as a source of opening up access to information. The most controversial aspects concern whether information should be neutral or not, and how it should be used. It is concluded that the aims with processes such as these are twofold: constructing a tool for e-career guidance as well as an intermediary between citizens and the quasi-market for education.*

## **Keywords**

Internet, guidance, quasi-markets, education

## **1. Introduction**

Information technology has been used in educational and career guidance for more than three decades (Harris-Bowlsbey & Sampson 2001) and several authors have dealt with the theoretical as well as practical aspects of this phenomenon and its effects (c.f. Offer & Sampson 1999, Tait 1999, Watts 1996). Put briefly, guidance consists of different activities aiming to create self awareness, opportunity awareness, decision learning and transition learning in a situation when an individual is considering his/her educational and professional future (Watts 1996). Therefore, guidance is of importance both from an individual as well as a societal perspective (Grubb 2002, SOU 2001). During the last five years various types of quasi-markets for education have been introduced in Sweden at all levels, from compulsory education to adult education. This paper presents some recent Swedish experiences of how information technology, or more particularly; publicly financed Internet portals, are constructed and used as a means to provide guidance ('e-career guidance'). The main focus in the following is on how e-career guidance is affected by the introduction of quasi-markets for education.

Leading theorists describe quasi-markets as follows: ‘Thus [...] there are independent institutions (schools, universities, hospitals, residential homes, housing associations, private landlords) competing for customers. However, in contrast to conventional markets, all these organizations are not necessarily out to maximize their profits; nor are they necessarily privately owned. [...]. On the demand side, consumer purchasing power is not expressed in money terms in a quasi-market. Instead either it takes the form of an earmarked budget or ‘voucher’ confined to the purchase of a specific service allocated to users, or it is centralized in a single state purchasing agency’ (Le Grand & Bartlett 1993, p. 10).

As a result of the introduction of quasi-markets there is an increased need for various forms of intermediary positions between citizens and public services some authors argue. Their role might be such as to scan the citizens’ preferences by means of information technology (Bellamy & Taylor 1998) or to provide information on the various options available to citizens (Grubb 2002, SOU 2001). As claimed by this author, a further consequence of the introduction of quasi-markets is the appearance of a broader target group for guidance in general, as well as for e-career guidance in particular. The emergence of a broader target group for guidance has been pointed out by previous research (Tuijnman 2002), but not with a special reference to quasi-markets. Also, research into e-career guidance has mostly treated higher age groups (Watts & Jackson 2000).

Further, the introduction of quasi-markets might be accompanied by features that are of relevance to the construction and use of e-career guidance. Previous research defines technology as a complement to human guidance (Watts et al. 2000). Offer et al. (1999) in turn discuss the issues of quality in the content and use of e-career guidance from the point of view of the users needs. As regards the issue of content they argue that there is the problem of reliability and validity of information, some of which are accentuated by the introduction of the World Wide Web with its many times uncontrolled information.

In a study Tait pursues a principal discussion about the consequences of using technology in guidance (Tait 1999). He suggests that: ‘Rather than assume that crucial elements are lost when human relationships are mediated by technologies, it seems more fruitful to examine how they have changed’ (Tait 1999, p. 118). This perspective can be contrasted with one in which certain effects and characteristics of technology in guidance are assumed (Watts 1996). Also, as concluded by Offer & Sampson, the introduction of e-career guidance: ‘[...] involves a process of mutual construction of roles, needs and purposes—a process that can be built in more or less to a computer program or website even where it is not mediated by guidance staff’ (Offer et al. 1999, p. 514). It is here argued that this perspective on e-career guidance has been used only to a limited extent in previous research. However, the emergent perspective on the construction and use of information technology as outlined here pertains to a certain tradition within the research field of information systems. Some of the more obvious examples are Ciborra (2000) and the description of gradual development and use but also to some extent Actor Network Theory (Akrich 1992).

The main contribution of this paper will be a discussion of e-career guidance in the light of aspects like e.g. the target group for guidance, the role or anticipated forms of use of technology and information with a special reference to a quasi-market situation. This means that, inspired by the research approach in the field of e-career guidance and information systems, the three cases will be analysed focusing on the following question: *What are the roles and controversies associated with the emergent construction and use of e-career guidance in quasi-markets for education?*

The paper proceeds as follows: First there is a short section on methodological issues in association with the study. Thereafter follows an analysis and discussion of the three cases. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn from the study.

## 2. Method

This paper is based upon the following three cases:

- Regional case 1: [www.infoteket.se](http://www.infoteket.se) is a website for guidance with broad categories of information aimed at clients from 16 years and upwards. It is owned by the agency for adult education in the city of Göteborg and the local division of The National Labour Market Board in Sweden (“Länsarbetsnämnden”).
- Regional case 2: [www.indranet.nu](http://www.indranet.nu) is a website for guidance in the form of information about schools aimed at students between 16-19 years that is owned by 13 municipalities in the west of Sweden. [www.gymnasieval.nu](http://www.gymnasieval.nu) is a website with a similar purpose introduced by Göteborg, which is the largest municipality in the region.
- National case 1: Siris on [www.skolverket.se](http://www.skolverket.se) is a website for guidance in the form of information and statistics emanating from all schools in Sweden aimed at students between 7-19 years of age. It is owned by the National Agency for Education (“Skolverket”). Further, [www.utvag.skolverket.se](http://www.utvag.skolverket.se) is a website for guidance with broad categories of information and target groups.

All cases provide experiences of websites or portals that are owned by public agencies and can be characterized as innovative in one respect or another. The cases provide important experiences of the relatively few people that according to the common judgement of informants are involved in the construction of e-career guidance in Sweden. Accordingly, they contain a significant share of current innovative experiences of the construction of e-career guidance with relevance to the quasi-markets for education in this country.

Fourteen interviews have been carried out with people representing the owners and/or the designers of respective website. The interviews took place in September 2001-February 2002. There was a second round of interviews in September-November 2002. The interviews treated such issues as the history of the websites, their anticipated forms of use or roles, as well as to some extent their actual use. The systems for e-career guidance have also been examined through direct inspection with a focus on their functionality. The next section tries to capture the processes where the emergent roles or anticipated forms of use of e-career guidance and associated controversies appear as described by the interviewees. In the following section these experiences are discussed in a more general perspective with a specific reference to issues like e.g. the target group for guidance, the role of technology and information in a quasi-market situation.

Apart from these types of data, a closer examination of the views of guidance seekers and guidance practitioners might also have been relevant. For practical reasons this has not been a part of the present approach in other forms than as described above.

### 3. The Emergent Construction of E-Career Guidance

#### 3.1 The Regional Case 1

[www.infoteket.se](http://www.infoteket.se) (henceforth referred to as 'infoteket') has a history that dates back to the pre-Internet era (1992). In this year an innovative local centre for guidance was started in the city of Göteborg. Guidance practitioners working as designers of information technology were in charge of the new centre. They had a special interest in moving information concerning education and career issues closer to clients.

*Intentions: The clients should have direct access to computers containing information about educational and career issues on the career centres premises.*

During this period these activities were financed by the agency for education at the city of Göteborg and the local division of The National Labour Market Board in Sweden ("Länsarbetsnämnden"). The attitude towards information technology was very positive among the designers, and they came very early into contact with visions of the potential of the Internet. As a result a rather primitive website was launched in 1994 with information about educational and career issues.

*Intentions: Infoteket and its website was seen as a tool by which clients could find information irrespective of time and place.*

At that time, the initiative can be characterized as a unique way of using the Internet to inform about educational as well as career issues. During the second half of the 90's similar initiatives were taken in other Swedish regions, while *infoteket* has been developed continuously. In the year of 2000 the ownership and localisation of *infoteket* in Göteborg was questioned. The physical centre for guidance was closed down in its previous form, and was taken over by other centres with a more direct focus on adults. The virtual *infoteket* was provided with means for its further existence by the municipal agency dealing with education for adults as well as by the local division of The National Labour Market Board as before.

*Intentions: The infoteket was seen as an important tool for e-career guidance that should be more closely tied to adult guidance seekers, which were its main group of clients.*

In March 2002 a report was published by the educational agency at the city of Göteborg. Its main line of argument was, that due to the multitude of choices that are opened to younger students by means of e.g. the quasi-markets for education there is an increased need for guidance. The need for independent e-career guidance in the form of quality information as well as facilities for self-reflection was emphasized (Backlund & Asplund 2002). However, the idea to provide also the youngest students with guidance was seen as unrealistic primarily due to limited resources.

*Intentions: Infoteket should be tailored according to the particular needs of students between 13-19 applying for different educational programs in the quasi-market for education. There was a controversy concerning other possible alternatives as for example a closed groupware systems directed towards the pupils in the municipality, as well as in the form of indranet (see next section).*

The final political decision in this respect has not yet been taken.

## 3.2 The Regional Case 2

A majority of the young people in Sweden continue their studies between 16-19 years of age. The prospective students are in a position to choose from a variety of theoretically and practically oriented programs, some of which can be found in their own municipality or in another municipality in the region. In 1995 a discussion among 13 municipalities ('GR' or The Göteborg Region) took place in the region featuring how computers could improve the application process as well as provide information about the process. As a result from this discussion a computerized information system ('Indra') was implemented with the help of a designer appointed by the 13 municipalities in collaboration. This system was aimed at guidance practitioners that handled the application process. As a next step, the guidance practitioners could pass this information over to the prospective students.

However, the Internet was more and more seen as a means to provide some of these resources directly to the students and their parents. The designer supported this idea and managed to get some financial support from the municipalities to pursue it. In the autumn of 2001 a website [www.indranet.nu](http://www.indranet.nu) (henceforth referred to as 'indranet') was ready to be used in the application process for educational programs beginning in the autumn of 2002.

*Indranet* provides information about different programs, types of schools, and in which municipality they can be found. Some of the information is neutral in character (where to find a program, information about the application process), but there are also links to information produced by the various schools.

*Intentions: Students and parents should use the system to get an authoritative view of the possibilities in the whole market for education in all of the municipalities as well as to carry out the application itself except for the final confirming signature.*

However, the manager of the education in Göteborg has perceived the competition between schools that are being run by the city and by other agencies as harmful.

*A counterclaim from the manager of education in Göteborg considered the common website for information about educational options as less fortunate from the point of view of its own municipal schools.*

This has led to the launching of [www.gymnasieval.nu](http://www.gymnasieval.nu) as a specific website that should be accessed as a previous step before *indranet*. It was launched through an advertising campaign in connection with the application process in the winter of 2001-2002, and contained information with the purpose of marketing schools situated in the city of Göteborg that are run by the municipality.

*Intentions: The municipality of Göteborg by means of an advertising campaign recommended that [www.gymnasieval.nu](http://www.gymnasieval.nu) should be used to find positive information about the municipal schools in Göteborg, as well as a first step in the application process.*

In October 2002, in due time for the new application process, a similar website presenting the schools that are run by the city of Göteborg was launched in an advertising campaign as well as by other means.

### 3.3 The National Case

During the 90's the Swedish system for compulsory education for students between 7-19 years of age has undergone several types of changes. One type of change is the introduction of quasi-markets as described above. As a consequence, students and their parents have, much more than previously, the right to choose among the various schools that are available. A further goal is that the education provided by public as well as private agencies should be of equal quality. This makes it more important to closely follow the activities in the Swedish schools in the form of grading, costs, staffing etc. The National Agency for Education ("Skolverket") is in the centre of this process, thus receiving the bulk of information on these issues from the 289 municipalities.

In 1997 a governmental proposal with a specific focus on the Swedish school system highlighted the value of finding new ways of improving the access to this information. As a result of this discussion the Internet was defined as a tool for connecting the various types of information and on the other hand making it accessible to a larger audience. In the autumn of 2001 *siris* and *salsa* were introduced as special features on their own website [www.skolverket.se](http://www.skolverket.se). The new facilities gave on-line access to various reports and statistics that previously were presented on paper. *Siris/salsa* also contain a database with statistics focusing on the costs of schooling, the staffing, but also the grading in the schools. It is possible to compare one specific school with other schools, or to compare schools in one municipality with other municipalities etc according to ones own choice.

*Intentions: Siris/salsa should be used as a flexible and open access to all the information about Swedish schools that is collected by this agency. Professional users as well as parents and pupils should use it to reflect about the activities in the schools of today, but it might be of use also for parents and students in their choice of education as a help to compare different schools.*

However, ranking lists comparing different schools were produced and published in the newspapers in connection with the activities when *siris* was launched.

*There was a counterclaim emanating from the National Agency for Education saying that the statistics in *siris/salsa* should be used by professionals as well as pupils and parents as a ground for discussing and comparing the schools of today, but not for producing ranking lists.*

Furthermore, in 1996 the National Agency for Education was given a leading role in an initiative to create a portal that connected all websites with information from every level of the educational system ([www.utvag.skolverket.se](http://www.utvag.skolverket.se)) denominated *Utväg*. The website *Utväg* was launched in 1998 in a very modest way, and its information has been almost static during the last years.

*Intentions: The website should be used as an infrastructure that provides parents and pupils access to information about the educational system as a whole. Controversy: The role of the website was unclear, and it never got an active role as a provider of e-career guidance.*

The National Agency for Education still has an interest in the issue of providing a national platform for e-career guidance. Interestingly, a governmental report (SOU 2001) suggested that a national website should be introduced that covers all aspects of guidance on educational and career issues. At present, the agency has instigated a project in which they have a leading role in such a mission.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 The Emergence of an Enlarged Target Group for Guidance

In the introduction it was argued that the quasi-markets for education have resulted in an increased need for intermediary positions between citizens and services as well as the appearance of a broader target group for e-career guidance. Therefore it is interesting to notice that all our three cases represent attempts to provide e-career guidance directed towards a quasi-market situation. Quasi-markets exist in many countries and might vary concerning fundamental features (Le Grand et al. 1993). Despite this, it is argued here that in cases where there exists a more direct option to affect the choice of, for example education by the parents and pupils themselves one can expect a similar enlargement of the target group for e-career guidance as seen here.

More specifically, in Sweden there seems to be a target group for e-career guidance consisting of children (6-12 year old) and their parents, as well as systems for e-career guidance that at least partly cover these issues (c.f. *siris/salsa*). At the same time, the actors that are involved in the construction of e-career guidance seem only to partially recognize these new needs in the sense that they are defined as a task that guidance professionals should handle. According to practitioners this is partly a consequence of a lack of resources that are dedicated towards guidance, as well as an unclear organization of guidance (SOU 2001). This means that at present in practice the somewhat higher age groups are prioritised among the broader target group for guidance.

As noticed above, previous research into e-career guidance has focused on the somewhat higher age groups than those at interest here (Watts et al. 2000). However, in case very young clients for some reason need guidance e.g. in connection with the quasi-market for education in Sweden, the more likely it is that his/her parents are active participants. The consequence of this type of change is an issue for further research.

### 4.2 E-Career Guidance as a Stand-Alone Provider of Guidance

As indicated in the introduction, previous research argues for the value of using information technology in guidance as a complement to human guidance. In two of our three cases there is an intention that e-career guidance should be seen as the most important form of guidance. For example, from its very beginning the intention with the activities in connection with *infoteket* has been to create an independent user of e-career guidance, both as a source of information and for creating self-awareness and decision learning. In the case of *indranet* the intention of some of the actors is very similar, but there also exists an intention to supply an infrastructure of guidance professionals. This judgement to some extent also applies to *siris/salsa*, albeit as noticed previously the infrastructure for human guidance is marked by insufficient capacity and unclear organisation (SOU 2001). Interestingly, in February 2003 for the first time a municipality promoted their own website as the outstanding form of support in the choice of schools for children between 6-15 years of age.

A pragmatic view on the increased role of technology in guidance is that it represents a strict necessity against the background of the scarce resources available to guidance despite the increased need. This means that it gives at least some support to the broad groups with relatively simple needs that for economic reasons never will be met by guidance professionals. In general terms, the policy to limit the access to guidance to specific needy group versus defining it as a universal right is a problematic and partly political phenomenon in itself (Watts 2001). However, irrespective of ones

view on the strict necessity of these arrangements the actual consequences of the changed role of technology is an issue for future research.

### 4.3 The Simplicity and Complexity of Providing Information

The most simple and clear-cut anticipated role of technology as presented by the interviewees indicates that e-career guidance should be used to provide open access to information irrespective of time and place.

This relatively simple view can be contrasted with what Offer & Sampson describe in more principal terms as the risk of '[...] bias on the part of the information developer [that] may have influenced the presentation of the data—e.g. organisations wishing to portray an occupation or institution in the most positive manner possible' (Offer & Sampson 1999, p. 502). As a contrast, this study emphasizes what can be characterised as different views in regard to the roles the provided information should have (more neutral as opposed to information of a more marketing character). Also, the issue as such can be characterized as a mix-up of roles of being an actor that provides guidance and information as well as one that provides information about its own educational activities (Grubb 2002).

A phenomenon that adds to the complexity of providing information is the controversy concerning using statistics for ranking that appeared in connection with *siris/salsa*. It is the view of this author that the controversy reflects not only the use of the technology but also aspects related to the activities of the service providers (the schools, universities etc.). Facilities for ranking can be characterized as a very direct and seemingly exact way of evaluating the service providers that, for this very reason, are perceived as deeply controversial by some of the actors involved. This is also supported by other experiences (Norén 2001). Also, in relation to publicly financed schools in many countries, there might be a contradiction between, on the one hand the goal of exposing the differences in quality in services and the goal of equal quality in the educational system (Levacic & Ross 1999). As such, the facilities for ranking are not only yet another facility that is made available. For some service providers in quasi-markets, differences in quality *per se* are perceived as controversial.

Last but not least, the question of bias as discussed above is not only present in the form of information of a more positive character than what might have been reasonable (Offer et al. 1999). Some authors argue that all kinds of markets, including quasi-markets, are *constructed* in the sense that for example facilities to provide information about available alternatives must be available as well as tools by which to evaluate these alternatives (Callon 1998). This in turn means that e-career guidance has a new and very specific role as a bearer of significant features of the quasi-market. As a consequence, in the particular situation of providing e-career guidance in quasi-markets the design of the technology is in effect a part of the construction of the market (Callon 1998, Ranerup 2002). The simplest example is the information about available options, which is a necessity in a market. A subtler example is the statistics that are sometimes used for ranking, a procedure that by some actors is perceived as highly controversial, but from a market point of view is characterized as a relevant feature (Callon 1998).

As a guideline for design it must be remembered that *in practice* the aims with processes like these are twofold: constructing a tool for e-career guidance as well as what can be characterized as an *intermediary* between the citizen and the quasi-market for education. This means that the anticipated behaviour the technology aims to support as well as the models (theoretical and

practical) that lies behind it must be carefully considered. For example, as a basis for the construction e.g. practice-oriented, unreflected models or, on the other hand, models of calculative consumers (Callon 1998) or models of individuals that are capable of planning their lifelong learning by means of technology (Tuijnman 2002, Watts 1996) might be used. A careful consideration of these matters is even more important against the background of the increased use of technology in guidance. What is detected here is an aspect that goes beyond 'the distinctive nature of guidance' and into the 'the ebbs and flows of political processes' (Watts 2001, p. 173). It is here argued that this is, for better and for worse, a built-in quality of the construction of e-career guidance within quasi-markets.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has introduced the complexities or controversies that are associated with e-career guidance in quasi-markets markets for education. The result supports the emergence of an enlarged target-group for e-career guidance, which in turn more than previously is seen as a stand-alone facility rather than a complement to human guidance. It is also seen as a source to open up access to information. The most controversial aspects found are those associated with different views concerning the aims with the information, as well as how it should be used. Admittedly, the features of quasi-markets vary but are characterized by a strong option for direct choice of citizens in Sweden (Norén 2001). However, it is the view of the author that the wider effects of these and similar experiences are of relevance to the future of e-career guidance in quasi-markets.

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