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To cite this article: Nuala Whelan, Mary P. Murphy & Michael McGann (2021) The enabling role of employment guidance in contemporary public employment services: A work-first to life-first typology, *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 49:2, 200-212, DOI: [10.1080/03069885.2021.1879374](https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2021.1879374)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2021.1879374>



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Published online: 21 May 2021.



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# The enabling role of employment guidance in contemporary public employment services: A work-first to life-first typology

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## ABSTRACT

Employment guidance theory and praxis promote long-term career development and access to decent work and sustainable jobs, yet the focus of public employment services in recent times has been influenced by policy matters of activation, conditionality and rapid job placement. While effective for some, it has been less effective for workers exposed to negative impacts of social and economic development. COVID-19-related unemployment has highlighted the need for employment guidance mechanisms that facilitate inclusive and resilient labour forces. Drawing on previous developments in employability approaches, this paper presents a conceptual analysis of employment guidance, integrating it within a work-first to life-first employability continuum. We propose an expansion of theory-informed employment guidance in national public employment services towards work-life employability for all.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 July 2020  
Revised 14 January 2021  
Accepted 18 January 2021



## KEYWORDS

Employment guidance;  
employability; active labour  
market policy approaches;  
public employment services;  
enabling activation

## Introduction

The sudden shock of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on unemployment across the globe has highlighted the ongoing formidable risk to economic stability, livelihoods and well-being. Its impact has been abrupt with established careers disrupted, youth careers stunted and those in low skill work particularly affected. It differs from previous crises as societies are “on hold” in the short term, with a limited vision of a post-COVID-19 world, and increased uncertainty about how labour markets and careers will endure. It has highlighted the vulnerability of labour-related economic activity, questioned how work is organised and conducted, and drawn attention to sectors most vulnerable to this new societal challenge. During the first phase of lockdown many countries froze their public employment services (PES). As economies re-open, COVID-19 will test the capacity of governments across the world to respond to what unemployed workers need to enable them back to employment (Furman 2020; OECD, 2020). This highlights the need for a PES primed to deal with future societal challenges including not only the pandemic but those arising from climate change, globalisation and technological disruption.

The challenge in developing an active response to mass pandemic unemployment is to find mechanisms that support all unemployed people to find good jobs. The risk post-pandemic is that an “any job is better than no job” mantra may prevail due to political, economic and societal pressures to curb

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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welfare caseloads (McGann, Murphy and Whelan, 2020). The ambition should be decent work that enhances well-being and provides opportunity for all (Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016). This requires mechanisms to facilitate the development of inclusive and resilient labour forces, supporting and protecting workers at all career stages. The enabling potential of employment guidance in caring for a distressed labour force and responding to varying individual needs has never been more important.

Motivated to contribute to understanding the underdeveloped concept of employment guidance, and how it relates to different models of PES, this paper develops, from an employability continuum, an employment guidance typology, which we then contextualise as a set of employment guidance models nestled into a wider employability PES framework. We start by defining employability and employment guidance within a lifelong guidance context and outline its role within PES. We describe Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP) and the range of policy options available to policymakers and advocate for policies which promote decent work and sustainable labour market access, exploring the role of employment guidance within this context. Adding to previously developed typologies we then present a typology of ALMP options available to policymakers from work-first to life-first to support all unemployed on “a high road back to work” (Murphy, Whelan, McGann & Finn, 2020). The focus of our analysis then shifts to the use of selected career guidance models and theories that seek to explain how people develop and behave in their career development. These theories provide a framework for understanding career-related behaviours and experiences. Finally, acknowledging the post-pandemic pull on resources and intuitive appeal of a work-first approach in serving those most “job-ready”, we argue for the expansion, rather than reduction of employment guidance in PES.

### ***Distinguishing career guidance and employment guidance***

Career guidance has been found to have significant personal, social, economic and work-related benefits (OECD, 2004). It helps individuals reach their potential, makes economies more efficient and contributes towards fairer societies (Cedefop, 2019). Career guidance is lifelong and continuous, taking place within education and employment systems. It has been shown to be effective in re-engaging unemployed adults in the labour market and supporting young people to transition to the world of work (Hooley, 2017; Redekopp, Hopkins, & Hiebert, 2013; Sheehy, Kumrai, & Woodhead, 2011). In a recent joint statement Cedefop, the OECD, ILO, UNESCO, the European Commission, and the ETF encourage governments to invest in career guidance, understood as

services which help people of any age to manage their careers and to make the educational, training and occupational choices that are right for them. It helps people to reflect on their ambitions, interests, qualifications, skills and talents – and to relate this knowledge about who they are to who they might become within the labour market. (Cedefop, 2019, p. 2)

Employment guidance is a specific form of career guidance that addresses career and occupational decision-making, skill enhancement, job-search and employment maintenance through assessment, development and implementation of action plans (Jackson, 2014). It aims to help individuals improve their employability, that is, the ability to gain and maintain a job in a formal organisation (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004) and self-sufficiency in the labour market, and can consist of a wide range of activities (Sultana & Watts, 2006). These activities include (but are not limited to): assessment and development (individual attributes, competences, aspirations, preferences; psychological state; employability; informal and non-formal learning); screening and profiling; career management coaching (Personal Action Plans; managing job changes); individual employment counselling; job brokering and advocacy; individual and group job-search assistance (job-search techniques; applications; CVs; interviews; work tasters); labour market information; specialised employment counselling (addressing perceived barriers to re-employment, e.g. addiction, homelessness, care, financial problems); and working with particular disadvantaged cohorts (e.g. immigrants, ex-offenders) (Arnkil, Spangar, & Vuorinen, 2017a).

In many countries, employment guidance services are located within PES affording PES significant influence on the extent and nature of the career guidance available to citizens, particularly adults (Sultana & Watts, 2006). While generic structures and practices exist across countries, individual labour markets and settings require tailored approaches to meet their specific employability needs. Similarly, career guidance services vary according to national contexts and operational systems within PES. Arnkil, Spangar, and Vuorinen (2017b) argue for the increased role of PES in supporting, developing and maintaining people's abilities to make employment-related connections, and to "craft" their careers. As new societal challenges lead to more diversified careers within evolving labour markets, the challenge for guidance services to offer tailored supports to meet individual need, enhance employability and connect people to labour demand becomes more complex. Neglecting this challenge could lead to poor employment outcomes, contributing further to persistent and significant "decent work" deficits identified by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and to poor psychological health and well-being associated with unemployment and poor work (Butterworth, Leach, McManus, & Stansfeld, 2013; Paul & Moser, 2009).

Some critics argue that many PES have been singularly focused on employment outcomes rather than a broader focus on career development. For example, Borbély-Pecze and Watts (2011) describe PES employment guidance as predominately labour market focused, targeting short-term outcomes related to immediate entry into employment. It is activation-orientated and directional tending to focus on particular target-groups, especially the unemployed. Arnkil et al. (2017b), however, recommend partnership-oriented PES offering holistic services that foster relevant skills and enable job-seekers to secure rewarding career pathways. They favour a wider career counselling approach within PES which aims for longer-term outcomes including the development of employability and career management skills, leading to sustainable employability across the lifecycle. This client-centred approach is already more widely available in education settings and to those who purchase private career advice (Borbély-Pecze & Watts, 2011). However, within PES, employment guidance is often blended with functions of gatekeeping and policing of public resources, both helping the individual make career choices while also making "institutional decisions about the individual" (OECD, 2004, p. 58) and thus weakening and diluting its very purpose. This suggests that clients of PES who are generally unemployed may be at a disadvantage, and questions the democracy of employment guidance which does not respect individual autonomy (Murphy et al., 2020).

The place of career guidance within PES has always been problematic (Sultana & Watts, 2006). Tensions exist between the longer-term focus of career guidance towards sustained employability and the short-term focus of PES in supporting jobseekers into employment as quickly as possible. Brante (2014) identifies those working in the field of career guidance in PES as belonging to "human service professions" who manage and deliver services of the welfare state while guided by a "professional logic" which justifies their focus on social justice and allows them to act for the individual.

The level and range of guidance provision in PES is generally related to PES organisational goals, with some services provided in-house, while others may be contracted or outsourced (Borbély-Pecze & Watts, 2011). While limited employment guidance may have suited PES organisational goals heretofore, the rapid pace of societal change is impacting how people access, maintain and transition in employment, creating a far more complex labour market environment. In responding to these challenges, employment guidance will require a conceptual shift in how it supports individuals to withstand new risks, such as dealing with periods of unemployment, loss of income, deskilling and social exclusion. As Barnes, Bimrose, Brown, Kettunen, and Vuorinen (2020) remind us "those without the resources or prepared for changes are vulnerable".

### ***Employability and labour market policy approaches***

Often described as a "slippery" concept (Green et al., 2013, p. 11), employability – a central strategic pillar and goal of the European Employment Strategy – remains difficult to define. Much of the

vagueness derives from a focus on either supply-related factors, reflecting the characteristics of the individual, or wider demand-related factors which influence the labour market. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) argue that employability should be defined more broadly than supply or demand as it is influenced by both these factors. Likewise, Green et al. (2013) conceptualise employability as “gaining, sustaining and progressing in employment” (p. 11), thereby supporting Kellard et al.’s (2001) notion of sustainable employment and Van der Heijden and De Vos’ (2015) sustainable careers, which go beyond simply getting people into work.

The activation literature on employability approaches typically distinguishes between two ideal types of ALMP: “work-first” and “human capital development” (Bonoli, 2010; Dean, 2003; Lindsay, McQuaid, & Dutton, 2007; Peck & Theodore, 2000; Värk & Reino, 2018). Drawing on the seminal work of Peck and Theodore (2000), Lindsay and colleagues (2007) advance this dualistic typology comparing “work-first” and “human capital development” across five dimensions: rationale, programme targets, intervention models, relationship to the labour market, and relationship with individuals (see Table 1).

Bussi (2014) further developed this typology by going beyond work-first and human capital, adding a capability approach to envisage further the objectives and principles underpinning employability approaches. She goes beyond the macro objective of “more people into employment” as sought by the “work-first” and “human capital” approaches, focusing instead on individual needs, aspirations and functions, and aiming at human flourishing and individual’s capabilities to achieve valued beings and doings (Alkire, 2008; Bussi, 2014). In Table 1, we build upon the dualistic typology and the work of Bussi to conceptually expand the notion of employability and to realise its potential breadth.

### ***An Employability Continuum***

Work-first approaches prioritise *rapid* labour market attachment based on the assumption that any job is better than none (Dean, 2003). More than this, they emphasise individual job-search effort as the key pathway to employability, leading to the criticism that such approaches individualise and mischaracterise the nature of workforce exclusion by reducing unemployment to “a simple matter of labour market supply and demand” (Goodwin-Smith & Hutchinson, 2015) and locating the source of labour market exclusion in a lack of motivation or effort on the part of individuals. The Human Capital Development model by comparison moves beyond work-first thinking, aiming to facilitate skill and competence development, thus improving sustainable access, long-term employability and in-work transitions (Peck & Theodore, 2000). It emphasises links to well-funded education and training and recognises the importance of integrated services (e.g. links to health providers, care) to address work-related barriers (Lindsay, 2014). Dean (2003) highlights its social inclusion function as it “reinserts” those marginalised from the labour market into employment and society.

A further development of employability approaches is the Work-Life Balance model informed by the capability approaches of Sen and Nussbaum. It recognises the need to work as an essential need within an individual’s life, but only insofar as it is capability and well-being enhancing. It recognises participation in *meaningful* work as a key component of well-being for most people but in doing so prioritises well-being over employment. This entails a focus on empowering people “to lead the life and perform the job they have reason to value” (Orton, 2011, p. 356) which, in turn, depends on ALMP contexts that allow people freedom to choose. Respecting the agency of individuals becomes a central component of employment guidance, motivating co-production approaches in which employment pathway plans are co-designed with clients who retain a right to refuse to participate in activation programmes. While skills and knowledge may be exploited in the Human Capital approach, the Work-Life approach promotes capabilities as choice and well-being enhancing. Moreover, its multi-dimensional nature sees the individual within a life context, understanding employment participation needs as integrated with participation in other spheres of life. Thus it uses

**Table 1.** Expanded features of employability approaches.

		Work-First (Thin)	Human Capital (Thick)	Work-Life (Thorough)	Life-First (Expanding possibilities)
Lindsay et al. (2007)	Rationale for employability programmes	Facilitating quick return to the labour market Lowering the number of benefits recipients	Improving long-term employability through improved education, skills, health and personal development to contribute to increased economic return at individual and aggregate level	Improving long-term individual employability, achieving sustainable labour market access for all, building resilient labour forces, promoting wellbeing and quality of life	Improving personal, professional and social integration Promoting favourable and sustainable labour market transition, considering needs and aspirations. Targeting social justice objectives and social cohesion. Real opportunities
	Program targets	Immediate emphasis on job entry; getting people into work quickly	Sustainable transitions into work; in-work transitions and progressions	Short-term career goals, longer-term career plans, building on strengths and choice, enabling life and work choices	Flourishing through work and life; Agency, Freedom to choose; longer-term career plans, building on strengths and choice, enabling life and work choices
	Intervention model	Constant Job search; short-term training; immediate activity Low cost; standardised practice	Long-term training; integrated with health, education and social services; Individual job-coaching (job search and personal plan)	Holistic tailored support, co-production, use of triage and needs identification, coaching, professional employment guidance practitioners, access to a range of interventions and supports, interagency; Attention to people's work needs, life-balance and aspirations	Supporting enrolment on long-term quality training Holistic approach Adequate amount and duration of benefits throughout transition periods which shelter from poverty and social exclusion. Flexible arrangements, reshaping plans according to changing personal, social and environmental conditions
	Relationship to labour market	Responsive to demand side; seeks to move jobseekers into available jobs	Upskill jobseekers so they can access a wider range of opportunities; in-work career development/transitions	Upskill jobseekers enabling access to a wider range of opportunities; increase choice and adaptability; life-long learning and career development/transitions	Providing sheltered employment opportunities if necessary; access to professional or training activities; life-long learning; social inclusion role of employers; enable social capital
	Relationship with individuals (engagement)	Conditionality, use of sanctions, mutual obligations, compulsion	Encourages voluntary participation, emphasises trust	Encourages voluntary participation; built on trust and relationships; encourages co-production; impartial	Completely voluntary
Bussi (2014)	Locus of control	Passive recipients of activation, expected to comply with what has been prescribed	Shared responsibility (individuals/institutions/society), mutual obligations, mutual control	Shared responsibility. Identifying individual/social /institutional/ environmental barriers hindering agency and choice.	Responsibility shared among individuals/institutions/society. Responsibility assessed in terms of available resources and environmental barriers that hinder real agency and freedom in choice.
	Conceptualisation of the individual	Lack of motivation, poor work ethic, lack of meaningful working experience Deficit model	Lack of skills and qualifications (skills-mismatch) Expected to value education and training in terms of life-long learning and adapting to labour market needs	Multidimensional individual Achieving individual agency and being (capability for work) Considered as a person with "thick needs" required to flourish vs "thin" needs linked with survival. Considered a person capable of practical reasoning	Multidimensionality of causes, lack of access to certain resources and conversion factors. Achieving individual agency and being (capability for work) Intrinsic and instrumental role of work and education.

	Institutions involved	Short-term collaboration with other institutions providing other services. Some collaboration with private companies /agencies/NGOs dealing with job search and short training activities. Strong top-down approach and objectives, performance-oriented management. No integrated policies with other services	Cooperation with other local institutions providing different services Training shaped according to market needs	Co-production and co-creation, possibility to create new partnerships to answer people's training, social and personal needs. Trust from top down with limited/no constraints. Performance targets based on a range of work-life related outcomes used for monitoring and not for sanctioning	Possibility to easily create new partnerships to answer people's training, social and personal needs No constraints from top-down or internal performance targets. If they exist it's for monitoring not sanctioning
	Time	Short term (service provided and benefit duration)	Medium to long time perspective (service provided and benefit duration)	Forward looking on needs, aspirations and on benefits duration – realistic agreed time frame to implement career plan	Depends on people's needs and aspirations (forward looking) and on benefits duration
	Employability type	Market/functional employability	Fostering employability	Enabling employability	Empowering employability
Whelan et al. (2020)	'Missing middle' implementation	Administrative, linear, managerial process	Training, education and work related hard and soft skill needs assessments, development and upskilling through matching, linear progression	Exploration of relationship with the world of work, identification of strengths, interests, dreams and aspirations. Occupational choice, labour market knowledge, supported career decision making, career planning, barriers and problem solving	Fluid, holistic, interagency support, whole-of-life exploration, life-long engagement, pace decided by individual
	Role and extent of employment guidance	Limited, short- term, adheres to monitoring and sanctions. Focus on job matching (some use of person –environment fit)	Limited to those who need it, time bound, monitored, driven by an understanding of the self (person – environment fit)	Available to all, goes hand-in-hand with good triage/needs assessment, driven by understanding of the self and context (narrative and developmental)	Widespread availability, recognises intersectionality, driven by understanding of self and context, belief in transforming contexts (life design/ psychology of working)

Source: own elaboration based on examples and theoretical developments in Dean (2003), Dean et al. (2005), Lindsay et al. (2007), Peck and Theodore (2000); Lindsay (2014) and Bussi (2014).

holistic and tailored individual coaching to attend to people's work-life balance needs and (career) aspirations, promoting life-long learning and long-term career development (Murphy et al., 2020).

An expanded notion of Work-Life is the Life-First approach defined by Dean, Bonvin, Vielle, and Farvaque (2005) as a holistic approach, prioritising the life-needs of individuals above an obligation to work (Dean, 2003). It promotes the right (not) to work, rather than the obligation to work, and emphasises human capabilities as ways to realise this right. It acknowledges time (long-term and sustained) and space to realise potential and to resolve life problems as they arise, and recognises the fundamental issue of care (to be cared for and to care for). Appreciation of the life needs of people who face multiple challenges, who may be vulnerable and marginalised in the labour market and in society, is balanced with the importance of work. Viewed from this perspective, ALMPs should aim to minimise "involuntary unemployment" and provide "opportunities for those who want to work", but "without actively promoting employment as the best choice for individuals" (Laruffa, 2020, p. 6).

Using an employability continuum, we position the dominant Work-First model at one end and the Life-First capability-informed model at the other. Between these models are the Human Capital Development and the Work-Life Balance models (see Figure 1).

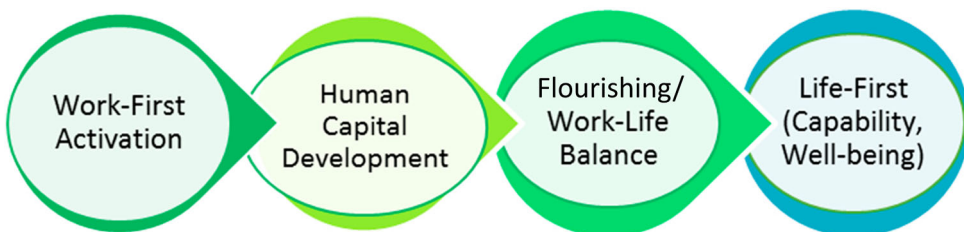
While these typologies provide macro-level descriptions of discrete employability policy approaches, they are limited in explaining the variety of programmes and their often-nuanced implementation. Influential frameworks allow further examination of these approaches in terms of the extent of policy use (i.e. enabling, regulatory, and compensation policies) (Brodkin & Marston, 2013) and policy impact (incentive reinforcement, employment assistance, occupation, up-skilling) (Bonoli, 2010). However, the international trend has been towards reinforcing more regulatory and disciplinary aspects of policy, while de-emphasising their enabling aspects (Brodkin & Marston, 2013).

### **Implementing labour market policy**

In most countries, PES provide employment assistance in the form of welfare payments and active labour market supports with the aim of enabling re-employment. Policy makers have a range of options and strategies available to them to support employability but considerable variation in how unemployment is understood and characterised can lead to fundamentally different ALMPs and programmes (Lindsay, 2014).

In the current COVID-19 context people need immediate supports to cope with the distress of sudden unemployment and the phased resumption of the economy. Waddell and Burton (2006) highlight the risk posed by unemployment to occupational and overall well-being. Others emphasise the negative health and societal impacts of unemployment, with both psychological well-being and subsequent re-employment shown to be negatively affected (Paul & Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012). These unemployment effects are often multiple and include decreased well-being, loss of confidence, low self-esteem and decreased self-efficacy, all of which can act as barriers to re-employment as they affect levels of motivation and job-seeking strategies (Eden & Aviram, 1993). Warr (1987) describes

**Figure 1.** An employability continuum from work-first to life-first.





unemployment as a type of anxiety-provoking existence, as periods of unemployment create uncertainty where it is difficult to predict and plan for the future.

For these reasons, we must carefully consider the range of policy options available and their implementation through PES in terms of impact on well-being and employability. The post-COVID-19 challenge for PES is how to refocus, to support people through this and future transitions, into potentially more uncertain labour market environments, as they consider the implications of returning to work and, for some, the reality of longer-term job loss.

### ***Defining approaches to employability***

Labour market programmes across the western world have increasingly shifted towards a common “work-first” approach prioritising job search and job placement, with some element of compulsion (Dean, 2003). More recently this singular “workfarist” orientation has been driven by discourses and politics of austerity following the last financial crisis (Heyes, 2013). Characterised by intensive job search, it aims to move people from welfare into unsubsidised jobs in the shortest time possible, proposing that any job is better than no job (Mead, 2003). It uses short education, training and work experience to overcome barriers to employment while also monitoring jobseekers’ levels of activity and compliance, using sanctions rather than trust (Sol & Hoogtanders, 2005).

Of course, “work-first” support may benefit some people displaced by the pandemic unemployment crisis to the extent that it helps them to “maintain contact with the labour market and move back into work as quickly as possible” (Wilson, Cockett, Papoutsaki, & Takala, 2020). However, it has proven less effective for more vulnerable workers who are often exposed to the negative impacts of social and economic development, such as low wage and precarious work. Its critics argue that it does little to systematically assist those with complex barriers focusing instead on sanctions and compliance (Dean, 2003; Lindsay, 2010). Martin (2015) observes that even when work-first approaches have proven effective, continuing doubts remain about the kinds of career opportunities that work-first approaches lead to. Therefore, we must be mindful of how we use work-first assistance, with whom, and to what end. While it may be intuitively appealing, applying “work-first” to all unemployed people requires careful implementation, focusing on transitions to decent work. The quality of the support is critical, and many will need additional assistance beyond job-search support. With this in mind, we present our expanded model of employability and employment guidance which opens exploration of alternative options available within ALMPs.

### **Towards an expanded model of employability and employment guidance**

In this paper, our analysis is conceptual and analytical. We contribute to the model described above by expanding the traditional dualistic typology to emphasise a broader range of ALMP choice. Table 1 presents the theoretical and practice developments outlined in existing research on work-first, human capital and capability-informed activation policy and employability approaches (Bussi, 2014; Lindsay et al., 2007) and includes the capability-informed work-life and life-first approaches proposed by Dean (2003) and by Dean et al. (2005) respectively. We add to current understanding of the “how to” of employability approaches by analysing the potential role of employment guidance within each of the four types. The typology combines the five dimensions proposed by Lindsay et al. (2007) and the additional four offered by Bussi (2014). We advance the typology by including two further “employment guidance” oriented dimensions; the “missing middle” and “the role and extent of employment guidance”.

The first additional dimension relates to what Brodtkin and Marston (2013) calls the “missing middle” of policy implementation. Existing approaches tend to focus on inputs (the policy), or outcomes (job placement), with very little, if any, investigation of processes occurring in between. Our analysis provides an overview of implementation practices across the four employability types. It outlines, for example, the highly administrative mechanisms of the Work-First model, focused on responsabilisation and compliance, and influenced by New Public Management where attempts to marketise

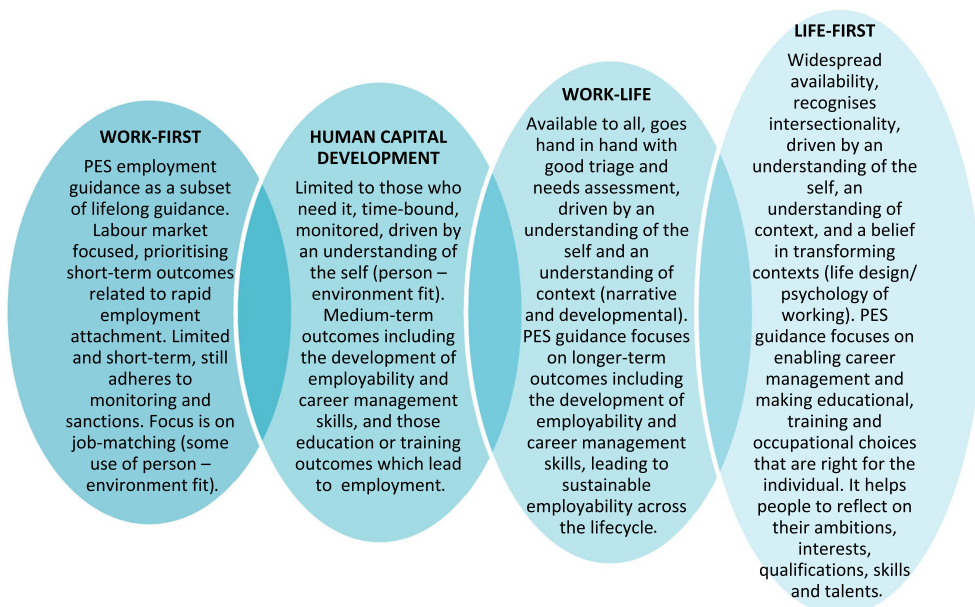
services result in reducing availability, narrowing objectives and eroding professionalism (Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2018). Moving across our continuum, implementation broadens in scope, allowing for self-reflection and self-knowledge creation, building individual biographies, and providing tools to enable people to realise well-being and their career potential (Hooley et al., 2018).

The second dimension focuses on the potential use of employment guidance across the four employability approaches. Having an understanding of how people make career choices provides a system to help people find work and build careers (Sharf, 2013). Career theories provide a framework for understanding career-related behaviour and the human experience of careers. We argue for the inclusion of career theory in the development of appropriate, inclusive, employment guidance within national PES. The challenge now is for a broadening of employment guidance from traditional Person-Environment Fit models to the more holistic and lifelong approaches underpinning career counselling. Figure 2 offers a deeper understanding of where and how employment guidance fits into employability continuums.

Many influential career theories (e.g. Person-Environment Fit, Person-centred) have shaped career guidance practice in the last century, focusing largely on internal and individual-level factors. More recent theories (e.g. the Psychology of Working Theory, Social-Cognitive Career Theory) recognise the importance of contextual and structural factors, for example, the changing world of work, the life needs of workers, workforce demographics, the employment relationship and the “new realities” of careers (Tomlinson, Baird, Berg, & Cooper, 2018). Jobseekers must have the skills to survive and adapt within an increasingly changing labour market, where traditional linear careers (i.e. bounded within the same organisation) are steadily being eroded.

While we know the negative impacts that unemployment unleashes, career theories offer a way of thinking about people in careers and how they can be supported back into work. Employment guidance in PES could benefit from these theories, offering more tailor-made approaches which recognise the psychological and well-being impacts of unemployment and poor work, the complex interactions of individual (e.g. personal attributes) and environmental (e.g. opportunities, resources) variables that form career trajectories, and the supportive conditions (e.g. impartial guidance) that facilitate career development over the life course.

**Figure 2.** An employment guidance continuum.



Bimrose (2013) reminds us of the old adage “Theory without practice is meaningless, but practice without theory is blind”.

For example, Savickas’s narrative life design paradigm reflects a shift towards a more holistic Work-life approach where “people use stories to organize their lives, construct their identities, and make sense of their problems” (2015, p. 9). Applying this approach, we move beyond states or traits, and emphasise context, processes, complexity, meaning making and life-long authoring of careers.

Similarly, employment guidance practice in Work-life and Life-first approaches could be strengthened by the Psychology of Working Theory (Blustein, 2013; Duffy et al., 2016) which acknowledges the work-based experiences of people on the “lower rungs of the social position ladder” (p. 127) and enables adaptive framing of the causes of work struggles. Blustein recommends a theoretical and praxis shift towards inclusivity of the experiences and psychological needs of economically vulnerable groups, advocacy for decent work, and sensitivity to diversity and socioeconomic disadvantage.

## Conclusion

The current predominately work-first informed ALMP, focused on productivist short-term labour market outcomes, is limited in its capacity to meet the more urgent post-COVID-19 needs of all unemployed or to adequately support workers to tackle new societal challenges. Labour forces globally are being radically transformed by processes of globalisation, new forms and patterns of work organisation, and technological disruption. While a work-first model may be intuitively appealing, it needs to be exercised cautiously and targeted at transitions to “high-quality” rather than any employment. A work-life approach for those more distant from the labour market would require a shift in policy which could have significant implications for current administrative systems. It would also require a shift in ideology favouring workers and families over the economy and business. Achieving the right balance between caring for the labour force and re-igniting economies will require a careful and delicate strategy. Barnes and colleagues (2020) recommend giving “fresh policy impetus” to career guidance policy and practice in education, training, youth and employment policies, emphasising professionalism and quality. Developing a wider range of employment guidance practices nestled in employability approaches might serve as an example of the policy stimulus required to build sustainable and inclusive labour markets into a riskier and more uncertain future.

## Acknowledgment

The views expressed are those of the authors alone. Neither Maynooth University, the European Commission nor Irish Research Council is responsible for any use that may be made of the information in this article.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the Irish Research Council under Grant IRC/COALESCE/2019/56/MURPHY. This research has also received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, Grant Agreement No. 841477.

## Notes on contributors

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