Flexibility and Security?
‘Flexicurity’ and Its Implications for Lifelong Guidance

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Abstract
This article sets out to trigger research and policy attention among the career guidance community to the increasingly important notion of ‘flexicurity’. It first explores the different meanings of the term, particularly as these have evolved in discussions across the European Union. It then goes on to consider why ‘flexicurity’ has attracted so much policy interest, particularly in its promise to both support labour market competitiveness, while protecting the interests of workers. Next, the article documents some of the key debates around the notion of flexicurity, highlighting the fact that any consideration of ‘flexicure’ arrangements need to be empirically grounded in time and space, and carefully contextualised. The article concludes by making a series of critical reflections on the need to ‘insert’ career guidance in the European discourse on ‘flexicurity’.

Keywords: flexicurity; labour market flexibility; worker security; lifelong guidance; new capitalism.

Introduction
This paper is organised in four sections. The first considers the notion of ‘flexicurity’, its meaning and manifestations, particularly within the European Union (EU) and its member states. In the second section, the focus shifts to a consideration of the status and attractiveness of flexicurity as a policy objective across the EU in terms of enabling economies to become more competitive through flexible labour market arrangements, while at the same time reaffirming and consolidating the European Social Model by offering the security of livelihood to workers. Next, the paper provides a brief overview of the contestations around the notion of flexicurity, suggesting that despite the fact that it has become increasingly inscribed in European Commission discourse, there are important issues that need to be critically addressed. The fourth and final section teases out some of the main implications that the notion of flexicurity has for career guidance, in terms of the way the latter is conceived and practised, and in the way it intersects with labour market and social policies, both in specific contexts and across the European space. A series of critical reflections are made on the need to ‘insert’ career guidance in the European discourse on ‘flexicurity’, outlining some of the opportunities as well as problems that this effort represents.

Defining ‘flexicurity’: the best of both worlds?

Put very simply, ‘flexicurity’ is a joining together of two words, ‘flexibility’ and ‘security’, to coin a new word. This term has increasingly been used in relation to social, economic and employment policies, and to what has been termed ‘regimes of regulated flexibility’ (Sciarrà, 2008), where flexibility is a precondition for security, and security a precondition for flexibility. While, as we will note later in more detail, we already find discussions of related ideas in the post-war period, the origins of the term are generally traced back to Dutch sociologist Hans
Adriaansens, and to debates in the Netherlands that led to a 1999 law on flexibility and security, and specifically on temporary agency work. Since then, flexicurity has increasingly been touted as a ‘new’ policy approach that promises to ‘resolve’ some of the tensions that arise out of the conflicts of interest between employers on the one hand, and employees on the other. Wilthagen & Tros (2004: 169) define flexicurity as:

“A policy strategy that attempts synchronically and in a deliberate way, to enhance the flexibility of labour markets, work organisation and labour relations on the one hand, and to enhance security—notably for weaker groups in and outside the labour market, on the other hand.”

This oft-quoted definition deserves unpacking. Given the way the economy is organised in today’s societies, employers favour relaxed employment protection legislation, which would allow them enough flexibility to swiftly hire or fire employees, or to make internal adjustment to the organisation of work in their firms (e.g. shortening hours of work, thus lowering wage costs) depending on the variations of demand in the business cycle. However, increased flexibility for employers can—and usually does—result in increased insecurity for employees. A policy of flexicurity strives to reduce and manage that insecurity through:

[a] measures external to the firm—i.e. external flexicurity (e.g. through income protection for unemployed people, and high levels of spending on active labour market policies, such as extra training in in-between periods, and information, advice and guidance services that help to match supply to demand in the labour market); and through

[b] measures internal to the firm—i.e. internal flexicurity (e.g. through guarantees to employees of a minimum salary that ensures an acceptable standard of living, in return for work sharing, for instance, or for accepting to take on tasks within the firm that were not included in the employment contract).

In other words, in a regime of ‘employment flexicurity’ or of ‘regulated flexibility’, employees might more easily lose their job, but less easily lose their livelihood. The latter is safeguarded during the consequent period of unemployment, where benefits are paid out at sufficiently high levels, subject to conditions being met (e.g. engagement with re-training). Furthermore, flexicurity redefines ‘security’ as being based on employment security, not job security. Its raison d’être is to protect workers, not jobs. Other terms that are sometimes used to cover much the same meaning as ‘flexicurity’—and which some analysts, such as Auer (2010) tend to prefer because they carry less rhetorical baggage—are ‘labour market security’, ‘protected mobility’, and ‘transitional labour markets’.

It is important to emphasise that flexicurity is not about flexibility working out exclusively in the interests of employers, with the only trade-off for employees being security. Rather, flexibility in work organisation has implications for employees as well, some of which may be perceived as beneficial. Increased elbow room for firms to adopt atypical work arrangements may be welcomed by some categories of workers, who find that flexible work hours (flexitime), job rotation and job sharing, opportunities to shift from full-time to part-time work without losing security of tenure, or time off to study or to enjoy rest or leisure pursuits can help them find more
satisfaction at work, and to keep work, family and life commitments in balance, as well as to open up increased spaces for self-development and fulfilment.

While there is no country that can be held up as ‘personifying’ flexicurity, Denmark has “acquired ‘model status’ as the ideal-typical flexicurity country in the European Union, featuring a ‘golden triangle’ of relatively loose employment protection, generous unemployment benefits and ample active labour market policies” (Auer, 2010: 376). The Netherlands provides us with an alternative approach to flexicurity. Drawing on a number of sources (Keune & Jepsen, 2007; van Oorschot, 2004; Obadić, 2009), we can outlines the differences and similarities between these two models in the following manner

**The Dutch approach to flexicurity**

- Promotion of the use of atypical, flexible types of employment (by giving access to benefits to those on fixed-term, temporary, and part-time work contracts);

- While at the same time providing such flexible types of employment with similar rights concerning working conditions and social security as standard employment.

Such an approach is more likely to be attractive to those countries where there are large numbers of ‘non-standard’ (e.g. part-time, fixed-term, temporary) workers.

**The Danish approach to flexicurity**

Less concerned with atypical types of employment, and rather builds on:

[i] more flexibility for all workers through new ways of organising work, or through more diverse and flexible working-time arrangements, accompanied by relaxed employment protection legislation;

[ii] extensive unemployment benefits providing income security to the unemployed; and

[iii] active labour market policies aimed at skill upgrading and activation of the unemployed.

In both approaches, social dialogue is a central feature of any effort to design and legitimise flexicurity policies.

Most of the literature follows Atkinson (1984) in suggesting that, in searching for their own context-specific pathways to flexicurity, countries need to consider four kinds of flexibility, as follows:

[a] *Numerical/contractual flexibility*—referring to employment status, and hence to the types of contract that can increase flexibility, such as fixed-term contracts, temporary employment, work on call, and so on.

[b] *Temporal/financial flexibility*—referring to atypical working hours and time account schemes, and hence to overtime, part-time, weekend working, irregular and/or variable hours, as well as to the variation in base and additional pay according to the individual or firm performance.
[c] **Productive/geographical flexibility**—referring to production systems, and hence to subcontracting, use of freelance labour, and so on.

[d] **Functional/organisational flexibility**—organising flexibility within the firm by means of training, job-rotation, worker involvement, multi-tasking, and so on, based on the ability of employees to perform various tasks and activities. This calls for continuous updating of skills which makes workers more flexible with regard to their own skills.

These different types of flexibility arrangements are counterbalanced by different forms of security arrangements, namely:

[a] **Job security**, i.e. security that is based on employment protection legislation, which constrains employers from easily dismissing workers.

[b] **Employment security** (also referred to as ‘transitional employment security’), i.e. adequate employment opportunities through high levels of employability ensured by education and training, for instance.

[c] **Income security**, i.e. the protection of adequate and stable levels of income.

[d] **Combination security**, i.e. the security that comes from a worker being able to combine his or her job with other responsibilities or commitments than paid work.

The relations between different types of flexibility and of security are often represented as a matrix which suggests possible combinations. Each country combines the different elements of this matrix in ways that are most meaningful to it, with the pathway to flexicurity that is chosen depending on such factors as the nation’s specific history of industrial relations, the nature of its welfare state, the performance of its economy, and its place in the regional and international division of labour. Whether a country’s or region’s economy is mainly composed of large or of small and medium industries also has an impact on which of the combinations of matrix elements are feasible and desirable. Thus flexicurity acquires different meanings in national labour markets characterised by instability and very low wages, such as in those countries that have recently joined the EU (Sciarra, 2008: 8). There can accordingly be no ‘one size fits all’ strategy in relation to flexicurity, and the outcome of its implementation is difficult to predict, in terms of its impact on security and equity (Barbieri, 2009).

Having defined flexicurity in its different forms and manifestations, we now turn to a deeper consideration of why it has attained such a high policy profile over the past years, particularly across the EU.

**Explaining the policy attraction of ‘flexicurity’**

The trade-off between flexibility for employers, and security for employees, has always been a preoccupation for the social and economic systems of industrially developed societies. At least two factors are having an impact on the nature of employment policies, with both rendering the
notion of ‘flexicurity’ increasingly attractive to policy-makers across Europe, whether at a national (i.e. Member State) or supra-national (i.e. European Union) level:

[a] The first is globalisation, which signals deepened competition and erratic business cycles that intensify pressures to lay off and take on workers in response to demands and opportunities as they arise. Flexicurity is also thought to enhance performance in a globally competitive environment since, as a policy, it transforms transition periods into opportunities for upskilling and re-skilling.

[b] The second relates to demographic pressures, particularly the realities of a workforce that is increasingly ageing, and increasingly feminised. More flexible work arrangements incentivise older workers and parents to remain active in the labour market, adjusting their input in ways that permits them to maintain a balance with other roles that they want to fulfil.

In response to the dual impact of globalisation and demography, the European Commission has increasingly seen the value of flexicurity, and has adopted the term in its institutional language. It has included it in its European Employment Strategy (EES), as well as in its implementation, monitoring and dissemination instruments, such as guidelines and targets, indicators, and the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). As several authors (inter alia Antoniades, 2008; Rogowski, 2009; Oliveira & Carvalho, 2009) and agencies (such as the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions—EFILWC, 2007) have noted, the term ‘flexicurity’ was already mentioned in 1996 in the Green Paper on Partnership for a new organisation of work. In 2006, the Commission published its Green Paper on Modernising labour law to meet the challenges of the 21st century, which was followed up by an expert group chaired by Dutch sociologist Ton Wilthagen. The group produced a report on ‘flexicurity pathways’ titled Turning hurdles into stepping stones, which in turn informed a Commission Communication, Towards common principles of flexicurity: more and better jobs through flexibility and security.

Since then, flexicurity has been addressed in various EU summits, including the Lisbon Agenda, with provisions being found in the European Treaty. The term was officially adopted by the European Council of Ministers of Labour and Social Affairs in December 2007 in Brussels, and research and policies on flexicurity have been increasingly funded under financial instruments of the Commission (Auer, 2010). In June 2009, the European Commission issued a communication endorsing flexicurity as a commendable approach to follow in times of crisis. Flexicurity has thus become “a useful and powerful discursive tool strengthening the Commission’s (soft) regulatory capacity towards the member states” (Keune & Jepsen, 2007: 9). Similar endorsement has come from the European Parliament, the European Social Partners, and the Council of Europe (2006), to the extent that a European flexicurity consensus seems to have emerged, resulting in mounting pressure to adopt flexicurity in national-level employment policy, and to crystallise it in labour laws.

The attempt to strike a balance between flexibility and security—thus giving the market a human face—is probably best seen within the context and tradition of the European Social Model, which is underpinned by a commitment to such values as respect for the dignity of the
individual, solidarity, social cohesion, equality and social justice. The welfare state has historically been the answer that Europe has given to the negative consequences of industrialisation, with flexicurity being seen by some as the most recent policy development in the evolution of new forms of work organisation, in line with that tradition, and in an effort to temper the negative effects of globalisation.

Flexicurity is also seen as a way to modernise the European Social Model in the face of new challenges, by strengthening the role of social policy as a ‘productive factor’ (Keune & Jepsen: 12)—in other words, not only are economic and social objectives reconcilable, but social policy is expected to play a role in achieving economic objectives (Antoniades, 2008). In this context, trade unions are encouraged to support the policy of flexicurity, which is presented as standing in marked contrast to US-type neo-liberalism. The latter favours flexibility at the expense of short-term security, and is committed to the notion that a more dynamic labour market will, in the longer term, bring about economic and employment growth and welfare for all. The US approach thus promises security as an outcome of an automatic ‘trickle down’ effect, due to gains made by flexible labour markets, while the flexicurity approach evokes the need for policies that purposefully address the employment security issue (Auer, 2010: 373). Political and policy actors and organisations with neo-liberal orientations have historically promoted extensive deregulation and flexibilisation of the labour market, assuming that most forms of employee protection and social security interfere with the ‘proper’ functioning of the labour market, and hence ultimately impact negatively on economic growth and employment creation. By the end of the 1990s, however, confidence in such an ideological stance was shaken, to the extent that it was conceded that “there is no clear relation between the level of employment protection in a country and its level of unemployment” (Keune & Jepsen, 2007: 6).

It is nevertheless important to highlight the fact that the attractiveness of flexicurity as a policy option is not always equally strong for all the social partners, and the latter in fact do not necessarily share the same understanding of ‘flexibility’ and its benefits. While employers see flexibility as a way of increasing their competitiveness, worker movements tend to also see it as a new form of social risk, even if, as indicated earlier, employees can benefit from flexibility in employment contracts, such as in having better opportunities to manage a work-life balance. The response by social partners in the different EU member states has been varied. Austria, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden have supported flexicurity—with Austria, for instance, creating a severance pay fund, which is transferable and not linked to only one employer. Belgium, France, Germany and all southern European countries have been more cautious, while Ireland and the UK have tended to opt for US-style flexibility rather than for flexicurity (Auer, 2010). Such caution or outright rejection, as intimated earlier, is due to a range of different reasons, including [a] the costs that are incurred to guarantee employment security—costs that can only be met by high levels of taxation and such forms of ‘redistributive solidarity’; [b] the historical balance of power between the social partners, which can undermine the trust and cooperation that is needed to avoid exploitative scenarios; and [c] the nature of the labour market, and the extent to which those with atypical work contracts (e.g. part-time, temporary, work on call) are exposed to precariousness.
There is some evidence (Auer, 2010) that the cluster of five flexicurity countries performed better than the ten non-flexicurity countries on several economic indicators before the recent global financial crisis, leading to strong incentives to re-think the balance between the employment and social protection policies in the latter group, even though causality is of course difficult to establish. In 2005, the highest employment rates were to be found in Denmark and the Netherlands, leading the Commission as well as other observers to see a connection between flexicurity and a key indicator of successful economic performance. However, if one considers the full economic cycle and integrates data from 2008 and 2009, the picture changes, suggesting that countries that adopted stricter employment protection together with protected internal adjustment have done better than flexicurity countries that adopted looser employment protection together with protected external adjustment. If flexicurity is effective, one would expect that the increase in unemployment in the downswing to be quickly followed by employment growth and a quick decrease in unemployment (Auer, 2010: 377). Not all countries associated with flexicurity have followed this pattern, and indeed, during the recent crisis, some have experienced worse unemployment increases than non-flexicurity countries (Auer, 2010: 378). It would be interesting to see whether different models of flexicurity, as outlined earlier, have weathered the economic storms more successfully than others.

Flexicurity: issues and concerns

If there is general agreement that ‘flexicurity’ is high on the European agenda, the jury is still out when it comes to not only ‘guaranteeing’ its effects, but also as to whether it truly represents a paradigmatic policy break with the past—or whether it is, in fact, merely ‘old wine in new bottles’. Some authors point out that similar compromises between flexibility and security had already been proposed in the post-war period, including the so-called ‘Rehn model’, which set out to show how flexibility (easy dismissal of employees, and high worker geographical mobility) could provide security (full employment, and strong active and passive labour market policies in place during periods of unemployment, providing workers with a secure income till they found a new job). More recently, Sorge & Streek’s model (1988) of diversified quality production (DQP) sets high job security for workers as a goal, a factor that motivates employers to adopt high functional flexibility within their firms—which is supported by continuous skills upgrading as a way of achieving competitiveness.

Reflecting on these earlier models, Keune & Jepsen (2007) argue that the current fashionable policy thrust towards flexicurity as a way of addressing social and economic policies in general, and employment policies in particular, can be explained not because such a policy is especially innovative, but because it links with, and supports, the EU’s European Employment Strategy (EES). ‘Flexicurity’ crystallises several aspects of the EES, given the latter’s concern with full employment, quality and productivity at work, and social cohesion. It moreover provides a strategic policy objective that promises to implement these goals, within the context of strong social partnership involvement. The Commission’s role in steering member states through ‘soft regulation’ measures—i.e. through establishing common objectives, through EU-level guidelines, recommendations and indicators, and through policy learning and policy transfer—has been invigorated, with its agenda to promote policy pathways to flexicurity helping it fulfil its mission as a broker between interests, as a proponent of the European Social Model that seeks
trade-offs between competitiveness and social cohesion, and as a disseminator of ‘best practices’. “This multiple compatibility”, conclude Keune & Jepsen (2007: 9) “makes flexicurity a useful and powerful discursive tool strengthening the Commission’s (soft) regulatory capacity towards the member states.”

While some of the less radical trade unions have been cautiously open to examining the notion of flexicurity, the crisis has increased fears that flexibility becomes the monopoly of employers, and that flexicurity becomes in fact nothing but flexibility in disguise, a wolf in sheep’s clothing. The European Trade Union Council president, for instance, expressed concerns that ‘flexicurity’ would become ‘exploitation’ (ETUC, 2007), with inappropriate trade-offs between flexibility and security, leading to an erosion of workers’ rights. The European Social Partners agreed to call upon Member States to “design a right mix of policy measures addressing flexibility and security dimensions ... for workers and employers in a holistic and balanced way” (cited in Auer, 2010: 379), but as the crisis deepens, so too do labour movement concerns, with enthusiasm for the concept being expressed by employers in the main (Auer, 2010; Keune & Jepsen, 2008). This in turn feeds suspicions among militant unionists about what is seen to be yet another component of a ‘new labour’ ‘third way’, and capital’s ingenuity in surviving, if not benefiting from, economic crises.

These suspicions are also rooted in concerns about the way flexicurity feeds into the Commission’s preference for ‘competitive’ and ‘productive’ rather than ‘redistributive’ solidarity as a way to “...adapt to the new economic circumstances, [whereby] national communities seek to defend their solidarity, less through protection and redistribution than through joint competitive and productive success—through politics, not against markets, but within and with them, gradually replacing protective and redistributive with competitive and productive solidarity” (Streeck, 1999: 4). Labour movements and critical social theorists working from within this perspective challenge the Commission, which is seen to promote a style of flexicurity that accommodates capital (Preece, 2009).

At the heart of these critiques lies a fear that increased flexibility is not matched by increased security, “but rather a change from ‘old’ to ‘new’ types of security, obviously implying a decrease in the ‘old’ types... The emphasis is evidently on increasing flexibility”, and on “reconceptualising security from protection against risk to the capacity to adapt to change” (Keune & Jepsen, 2007: 15). The Commission’s flexicurity position reiterates its emphasis on economic instead of social goals, and “even the social policy side of the equation seems to be aimed at making labour markets more flexible rather than at providing types of security that make increased flexibility acceptable or mitigate its negative effect” (Keune & Jepsen, 2007: 15). Furthermore, compared to ‘old-style’ job protection and income security, the benefits accruing from the ‘new’ security are somewhat intangible, for while the better qualified are indeed less likely to be unemployed, “access to education or training does not provide enforceable guarantees to the individual” (Keune & Jepsen, 2007: 15). These concerns are shared by the International Labour Organization (ILO) which, while acknowledging the need for a better balance between flexibility and security in labour markets, and noting that several European countries have departed from a situation where flexibility creates insecurity to one
where security promotes flexibility (Sciarrà, 2008: 7), has nevertheless challenged the concept, reaffirming the importance of employment stability (Auer, 2010: 379).

Those representing workers’ rights also tend to highlight the dangers of the creation—or reinforcement—of a dual labour market, with a core of workers on permanent contracts (hence enjoying security and strong protection from dismissal), which encourages employers to make increasing use of atypical workers in order to increase their flexibility. As a result, security is concentrated in one section of the labour market, and flexibility in another section (‘flexibility at the margin’)—reinforcing the differences between those with permanent and non-permanent employment status, with some speaking of the dangers of ‘flexicurity traps’ that result in more in-work poverty (EFILWC: 15). There are also concerns that, in the way the Commission is articulating the issue, there is a slide towards an emphasis on employability security rather than on employment security (Keune & Jepsen, 2007). The Commission presents the former as a ‘new’ form of security, whereby security is not understood as much as protection against risk as the capacity to adapt to change by means of constant learning (Keune & Jepsen, 2007: 15). In contrast, employment security refers to a situation of ‘internal flexibility’, where workers are protected from redundancy through redeployment to other work with their current employer (hence ‘employment’ rather than ‘job’ security). Employability security raises concerns for trade unions, who want to defend employment, not the more vague potentiality of holding jobs in the economy (Auer, 2010: 380). The ILO similarly prefers to use the term ‘labour market security’, seeing this as the latter end of the historical evolution of workers’ security on labour markets, starting with, first, job security (i.e. the protection of a specific job/task), to, second, employment security (i.e. the protection of employment but multiple jobs/tasks), and most recently labour market security (i.e. the protection of employment plus protected mobility or transitions through labour market policies and social rights) (Auer, 2010: 381).

Flexicurity has also been criticised for being ‘gender blind’ as a model and a policy concept. While, as noted earlier, flexibility with security can be attractive to employees, opening up opportunities to reconcile work and family life, it is also true that it does not attend directly to several inequality issues. As Hansen (2007) notes, flexicurity does not take into account the gender consequences of the labour market model, which are related to part-time jobs and the care system. She argues that the Danish flexicurity model focuses only on state-market relations and on social security, and not on the state-family relations or on services—to the extent that the term ‘flexicurity’ is inappropriate and should be replaced by the term ‘flexicarity’. She suggests that, beyond the ‘golden triangle’—[a] a high level of numerical flexibility with a low level of employment protection, [b] economic security provided mainly by the welfare state, and [c] active labour market policy financed by the welfare state, supporting both the flexibility of the labour market and the security dimension by up-grading the skills and qualifications among the unemployed—a fourth dimension should be incorporated, namely [d] gender, and particularly public care provision, which would bring more women to the labour market, given that the right to their own time and to economic independence is more adequately recognised. In her view, it is only by combining the economic and the social it possible to achieve gender equality. As a comparative report on gender mainstreaming of employment policies in 30 countries concluded: “A gender mainstreaming approach to policies in the area of flexicurity would recognise the role of gender in reinforcing inequalities associated with flexible working and in shaping flexible
working patterns, and would address the reconciliation needs of employees with care commitments while recognising the risks of extending working hours or unsocial work schedules. In addition a mainstreaming approach would support pathways out of non-standard work and working times to avoid the risks of long-term traps and segmentation of women in disadvantaged employment forms” (Plantenga, Remery & Rubery, 2007: 9).

**Implications of ‘flexicurity’ for career guidance**

In some ways, the implications that one can deduce from the overview of flexicurity for the conceptualisation, practice and policy development of career guidance services are intimately tied to the broader discussion in the field about the impact of globalisation and the changing nature of work in the ‘new economy’. This link is important to make, to avoid giving the impression that flexicurity represents a major conceptual and policy break from trends that have long been on the horizon, and which have been implemented, with greater or lesser alacrity, and to a greater or lesser degree, in different contexts, whether national, regional, or supra-national. Considerations of the intersections between flexicurity and career guidance should therefore acknowledge and draw on the previous work done by the career guidance research community, at the heart of which are a set of inter-related and fundamental concepts which have been articulated as a shift to a new understanding of careers—what Watts (1996) has referred to as a ‘careerquake’—and to a new career guidance paradigm, the ‘lifelong guidance paradigm’ (Sultana, 2004, 2008). Among these concepts are the notion that career paths are dynamically ‘constructed’ rather than ‘chosen’ with any degree of finality: that, consequently, one invests in fitting work into one’s life, rather than fitting oneself into a ‘job’; and that lifelong career development requires the ability to manage a series of transitions, within and between different forms of employment contracts (full-time, part-time, temporary), education and training, as well as outside the labour market, either as unemployed, or in pursuit of other interests.

Some of the terms that have been generated within the guidance research community that are relevant to our discussion of flexicurity include ‘portfolio’, ‘boundaryless’ and ‘protean’ careers, ‘life projects’, ‘career self-management’ and ‘career management skills’—all in the lifelong quest to construct the best possible future/s for oneself. Strategically, however, and particularly in view of the discursive appeal of flexicurity within the European space, it is important ‘insert’ career guidance in the flexicurity policy discourse, and to articulate the field’s important insights and concerns within that discourse. With that view in mind, and in an effort to stimulate further reflection and research, seven broad observations are made below. In considering these points, it is crucial to keep in mind the contentious issues surrounding the concept, and to recall that there is necessarily and inevitably a strong normative, political element, even though (and possibly precisely *because*) proponents of flexicurity present it as a way to *resolve* the conflict of interests between capital and labour.

**Career guidance within the flexicurity frame**

The notion of flexicurity frames the discussion of careers and of career guidance in particular ways. Before one engages with this important debate, it is important to consider whether the frame or lens that we are being invited to use, or the ideological terrain we are being asked to
occupy, jeopardises fundamental values underpinning the career guidance profession, and about the relationship that career guidance workers—whether policy developers, service providers, or researchers—would like to have with those we serve. Notions of ‘flexicurity’ tend to represent competitive ‘globalisation’ and its impact on the new economy as inevitable, and to imply that the best citizens can do is to adapt to the new reality. Flexicurity, as we have seen, tends to redefine the notion of ‘security’ in particular ways, shifting the focus away from notions of redistributive solidarity towards an emphasis on the ‘responsibilisation’ (Ball, 2008) of individuals whose enjoyment of security is not guaranteed qua citizens, but in terms of their willingness to internalise a set of dispositions, including that of adapting to change (Darmon & Perez, 2010). This change—i.e. the changing of jobs within the same employment sector; the change of employment sector; the change from full-time to part-time work, or from indeterminate to time-bound employment contract; the change from work to study, training, or an extended leisure periods—is, within the flexicurity discourse, presented as enabling and life-enhancing, an antidote to the tiresome routine and predictability of a one-track life... and indeed it may very well be when freely chosen. It may be, however, that such change may be experienced as a non-negotiable requirement by the realities of the new economy, resulting in all sorts of hardship.

\textit{Grounding flexicurity}

Within the context of Europe-wide discussions, it is important to keep in mind that the trade-off between flexibility and security is bound to work in different ways in relation to different national and regional contexts, and to different groups and categories of people, so that any consideration of career guidance and its interplay with flexicurity cannot be generalised in an abstract, de-territorialised and depersonalised way. Flexicurity can only operate effectively within social policy regimes that inspire trust on the part of citizens, who accept job insecurity in return for security of livelihood. Within that context, where social spending on support of the out-of-work or of those on the margins of gainful employment is sufficiently generous, career guidance can be seen as a complementary social measure, delivered in an overall environment that is enabling rather than coercive. It bears keeping in mind, however, that there are diverse welfare regimes across Europe (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Castles & Mitchell, 1991), each with its own way of managing the tensions between capital and labour. The concept of ‘flexicurity’ will inevitably play itself out differently in these different contexts, with consequences for the roles that career guidance can play. The same holds true for the labour market situations which serve as the matrix through which flexicurity is enacted, and the consequent pressures on career guidance to adopt particular forms rather than others.

\textit{Guidance as entitlement}

Flexicurity requires that life-long learning “become part of contractual obligations within individual contracts of employment and, at the same time, be integrated in a wider policy perspective, whereby financing lifelong learning is the responsibility of the state or of local authorities” (Sciarra, 2008: 6). There is here an important acknowledgement of the duty of both the employer and the state towards the citizen, as part of a new social contract, whereby job insecurity is tolerated on condition that the employability of the individual is enhanced through
employer and state investment in education and training. This opens up an important formal space for citizens to also make a claim for the provision of career guidance services, when and where needed, as an *entitlement*—a line of argument that has been pursued at some length elsewhere (Sultana, 2011), and which is briefly made by the European Expert Group on Flexicurity (2007: 27). Security is meant to make mobility more acceptable to workers (Keune & Jepsen, 2007: 12), in a situation where transitions between different jobs and different labour market statuses (employed, unemployed, and inactive) are likely to become more frequent. The role of information, advice and guidance, as well as the *right* to all three, are inextricable from the notion of ‘security’, to which they contribute.

*Life-course perspectives*

Life-course approaches to career guidance are of particular relevance within the context of discussions of the flexicurity concept. Employers might require employees to be more flexible at particular phases during the business cycle, or during economic downturns or upswings. Conversely, some classes of employees might be more keen or willing to reduce, increase, or change their engagement with work and with other life activities during specific phases of their life, such as when they become parents, or when their children have left home, or when they feel the need (and can afford) to invest more in leisure pursuits, for instance. Within a life-course perspective, therefore, different needs at different phases of the life course may result in a variety of career trajectories, with fluctuations in the volume of working hours or with career breaks. Within a regime of regulated flexibility that scaffolds change with measures of security, one can expect more frequent changes and transitions, whether freely chosen or induced. The ‘flexible route’ involves several transitions over the life course. Guidance can smooth these transitions, and help deal more effectively with ‘new social risks’. Career guidance has an important role to play in supporting citizens not only in *managing* transitions, but also in *maintaining openness* to change lifelong. Both functions have relevance to both the social and productive spheres, given that the idea behind flexicurity is that of an upward movement in a career trajectory, through training and upskilling, from which both employer and employee are expected to benefit. Career guidance services delivered from within a life-course perspective would need to draw on an arsenal of relevant tools, and bring them from the periphery to the heart of guidance. Chief among these would be the Accreditation of Prior (and Experiential) Learning, in ways that ensure progress and purpose in career planning.

*Social location matters*

The trade-off between flexibility and security should not be presented in abstract terms, but should be firmly rooted in the impact such trade-offs have on the lives of people who are located differently in terms of their relation to the social and economic structures they inhabit. In other words, flexicurity does not play itself out in the same way with people in different occupational categories: some groups of workers (e.g. youth, the low-skilled) are inevitably more vulnerable than others in a segmented labour market, and a case could be made that a generic emphasis on employment flexibility, when seen in relation to categories of workers who suffer multiple forms of livelihood insecurities, is less likely to get the balance between flexibility and security right. Career guidance policy, therefore, needs to be alert to, and to mobilise resources in favour of,
those who are most likely to suffer precarity, and the vulnerability ensuing from ‘new social risks’. It also needs to be aware of the interplay between flexicurity and specific groups of workers, given that we already know that women, for instance, are less likely to benefit from flexicurity arrangements unless a care system is added to the mainstream model—a point that has already been made earlier in this paper. Migrant workers are also more likely to find themselves in situations where the balance between flexibility and security is dramatically tilted towards the former. The advocacy role of career guidance practitioners in such contexts becomes even more pronounced.

**Flexicurity traps**

The increased opportunities for flexible management of one’s engagement with employment can generate new challenges for individuals and groups, requiring career guidance to respond creatively by generating new forms of engagement with citizens. Some of these new challenges are captured by the term ‘flexicurity traps’. A case in point would be parents, for instance, who withdraw from full employment in order to devote themselves to child-rearing, but who then find it difficult to re-enter employment, for a whole host of reasons that include, among others, outdated skills, decreased self-confidence, lack of networks, and so on. Such ‘traps’—which could involve young people who constantly move from one training path to another, without breaking into employment, or adults who scale down their work commitments and find it difficult to re-engage with it on a full-time basis later on—can evoke new career guidance responses, specifically tailored to cater for the consequences of new behaviour patterns that are encouraged by flexicurity arrangements. Other new challenges are grounded in the fact that, as we have seen, flexicurity represents not just a policy or strategy, but is a state/condition of the labour market, requiring fundamental changes in the organisation of work, including, among others the increase of atypical work contracts, the possibility of extending fixed-term contracts to more consecutive contracts, shortening the notice period, and the emergence of employment pools on an intra- or inter-company basis. These ‘new’ ways of enacting working roles and living working lives call for new ways of conceptualising and delivering career guidance services.

**The meaning of work**

Aspects of flexicurity arrangements require a different engagement of individuals with the notion of ‘career’—which etymologically signals the embarking on a ‘track’ that is both linear and cumulative in scope, and around which one constructs an identity/life project (Sennett, 1998). Much of career guidance theory feeds into such notions of career development, and is informed by imageries related to stability. Contemporary forms of capitalism, in contrast, have given rise to a ‘universe of instability’, and indeed the whole notion of ‘flexicurity’ is one of the satellite terms which revolve within the orbit of that universe. Career guidance is therefore increasingly challenged to reconceptualise a number of its founding principles and theories, an interdisciplinary endeavour that requires both intense conceptual work, and extensive empirical research. There is a need, for instance, to delve deeper into notions of ‘self-efficacy’, which seem to be at the heart of the image of the individual as a constructor, or co-constructor with others, of complex life pathways. There is also a need to generate qualitative, longitudinal data on the way individuals experience their protean careers within the context of flexicurity, and the extent to
which—and the conditions under which—they experience such flexibility as enabling, or as a source of constant stress, despite the promise of security, limited as this may be by conditionality. At even more pragmatic levels, and from the perspective of employers, research needs to be carried out to gauge how much individuals identify with—and invest themselves in—‘jobs’ (as opposed to ‘careers’), when they know that both they and their work are, in many ways, ‘disposable’—mere expendable units depending on demand—and when they cannot ‘quilt’ any meaningful life project from the ‘patchwork’ of work roles they engage in. In other words, while flexibility might be attractive in terms of boosting profitability, it might, at the end of the day, be ‘counter-productive’, in that lowered personal investment in employment roles could reduce the efficiency of workers, and negatively affect organisational work cultures. It is also to be expected that, as Sennett (2007) has noted, the imperative of flexible utilisation of labour power intensifies the trend to design work tasks in ways that deskil people, given that constant turnover and short-term contracting make intensive training unviable. This too has implications which would deserve study, with the results feeding into the way career guidance is conceptualised. The denigration of skill, the atrophy of the concept of ‘career’, the dissolving of associational ties on the workplace—one and all have a fundamental impact on what it means to be ‘human’, where traditionally notions of a ‘life well lived’ embraced work as having ‘salvific’ value. Career guidance, which has historically drawn on various strands of humanistic philosophy and psychology, is here faced with an identity crisis: if the demand is for someone who can work with temporary connections, unattached to the past, with a focus on talent and potential and not skills, achievement or experience—if, in short, the traits and qualities prized by the new capitalism are disconnected from, and indeed pervert, the vision of humanity as historically defined, what implications does this have on career guidance, rooted as it is in notions of Homo Faber, whereby ‘self’ finds its most fulfilling expression through work?

**Conclusion**

The issues raised above highlight the need to revisit career education and career development programmes and services offered in the education and labour market sectors, and to reconfigure them in the light of these fundamental changes being wrought by late capitalist forms of work organisation. One can envisage that the new realities of life/work design will be so pervasive in terms of their impact that whole aspects of the field of career guidance will be transformed, following developments that have been noted in Public Employment Services (Sultana & Watts, 2006) where career guidance is increasingly embedded in a range of other activities, rather than as a stand-alone, discrete and recognisable service, and where information and placement functions reduce the value of deeper forms of guidance, given that traditional notions of the ‘self’ to be discovered are overwhelmed by Nietzschian notions of the self to be invented and constructed. All this has major implications for who offers information, advice and guidance, how, where, and when—as well as for the training of service providers, who are, as a consequence, more likely to be part of an interdisciplinary ‘wellness’ team whose role boundaries are inevitably blurred.

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