



People, professions and resources

Quality standards for Information, advice and guidance services

A review of the literature – Executive Summary

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1 The purpose of this review

This literature review is part of a review of the UK's **matrix** Standard, which is led by an Executive Group chaired by Dr Deidre Hughes OBE and supported by the Growth Company, which administers the **matrix** Standard on behalf of the Department for Education.

The purpose and scope of the literature review is to identify the key features of good quality Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), so that these can be considered as part of the **matrix** Standard update in 2021. The content draws on empirical evidence about effective Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), gathered and analysed to inform a contemporary **matrix** quality standard 'fit for purpose' now and in the years ahead. This work was conducted by David Imber FIEP on behalf of the Institute of Employability Professionals, commissioned by The Growth Company.

2 Executive Summary

The **matrix** Standard is Crown Copyright and is the property of the Secretary of State for the Department for Education (DfE). A third-party organisation, currently The Growth Company, is contracted by DfE to deliver the Standard. It was launched in 2002 and revised in 2015, having, as is seen in the evidence, made a valuable contribution to developing quality in Information, Advice, and Guidance (IAG), alongside other standards such as the Gatsby Benchmarks and the OFSTED Inspection Framework, which are briefly reviewed to indicate ways in which they can complement one another and the **matrix** Standard. Comparing **matrix** criteria to other standards and offering joint assessments benefits organisations seeking to achieve the Standard.

The paper also briefly refers to the changing UK policy landscape in the aftermath of Covid-19 and relevant policy documents. However, it does not evaluate, or critique government policies nor is it intended to provide a comprehensive overview of government policy documents.

The **matrix** Standard can be applied in any IAG setting; therefore, this literature review considers good IAG practice from a wide range of services, for example, Citizens Advice Bureaux, Careers Support Services, Money Advice Services, Health and Community Services, the National Careers Service, Department for Work and Pensions' employment programmes, Adult Education, Fire and Rescue Services, Further Education, Training Providers, and University services, national, regional and local agencies, including private, public and third sector organisations. Each of these organisations or programmes provides IAG to support their clients in their own context and service setting. In this report, the term 'domain' refers to the context or setting for IAG; thus, for example, IAG is provided in the domain of Money Advice, in the different domains of Further Education, and so on.

The parameters of the literature review were agreed with The Growth Company and the **matrix** Standard Executive Group. Readers should be aware that this review concerns topics of interest that were agreed for analysis, feeding into a wider formal review process; it is not intended to cover all the possible matters relevant to the **matrix** Standard and IAG but is intended to show how relevant research evidence can feed into a new and updated **matrix** quality standard, to stimulate ideas for action as part of a wider review and stakeholder engagement and consultation process.

The Review Questions

The review questions were:

- What definitions for 'high quality in IAG' have flexibility to apply across differing domains^a?
- Does the evidence in favour of inter-personal skills, personal development, and efficacy, and for usability (etc.) of information, warrant more specific identification and use in the **matrix** Standard and guidance?

^a As noted above, in this report, the diverse service contexts are referred to as 'domains', and in keeping with an umbrella or overarching standard, the report discusses quality factors that are useful across all (or many) domains

- How do quality standards apply to both personal and IT-mediated and blended delivery mechanisms?
- What standards can be described for organisations and for staff delivering IAG, to secure the benefit and minimise risks for clients?
- How does the evidence impact on the **matrix** Standard:
 - In the overall Plan-do-review or alternative framework(s)?
 - In suggesting causal linkages between delivery for clients and the supporting services and activities (mainly management, leadership, and resources), giving priority to 'what works'?
 - By suggesting behavioural and resource quality descriptors to be used in guidance to **matrix** applicants or applied in assessments?

The sources, amount, and quality of evidence

For a widely applicable Standard, such as **matrix**, 'career', 'employment', 'education', 'lifestyle', 'personal development' choices can be re-characterised as 'life choices', applicable to whichever IAG domain is under consideration. Taking this view has helped us towards quality standards that can be applied to many IAG services.

A total of 317 research and grey literature papers were identified and reviewed. Of these, 189 proved to have a direct bearing on the subject, whether as high-quality evidence, expert professional reviews and studies, or being important policy or conceptual documentation.

30% of the studies were rated as controlled against counterfactuals (the highest rating) or stating outcomes without controls or counterfactuals. 61% were expert reviews. Only 16 studies employed controls.

	<i>Included studies</i>	<i>percent</i>	<i>Excluded studies</i>	<i>percent</i>	<i>All studies</i>
<i>Controlled trial</i>	16	8	1	1	17
<i>Control by Calculation</i>	8	4	8	6	16
<i>Outcome with weak counterfactuals</i>	3	2	2	2	5
<i>Outcome without counterfactuals</i>	29	15	16	13	45
<i>Expert reviews</i>	73	39	35	27	108
<i>Expert-review based policy</i>	43	23	15	12	58
<i>Opinion studies</i>	3	2	17	13	20
<i>Other</i>	14	7	34	27	48
<i>Totals</i>	189	100	128	100	317

Table 1: Number and quality of sources.

There was a wide consensus about what works, values to be applied, measurement of outcomes and quality standards in IAG across the literature. The consensus is dominated by careers IAG, but that specialism is not at odds with views from other equally important domains.

Key points

Value and definitions of IAG

The social and personal value of quality assured IAG services is widely attested in the literature, as exemplified in Hooley (2014)¹⁰⁸.

The literature contains a variety of definitions on what constitutes 'information', 'advice' and 'guidance'. The review uses a broad interpretation following everyday English usage.

The review uses a broad interpretation as follows:

- **Information** – refers to the provision of factual information relating to the domain or topic at hand, but without exploring the relative merits of different options.
- **Advice** – refers to the provision of in-depth interaction with an individual. It includes the explanation of information and how to access and use the information.
- **Guidance** – refers to the specific needs of the individual and may involve a session or series of sessions between an individual and a skilled and trained advisor.

For the purposes of a widely applicable IAG quality standard 'education', 'lifestyle', 'personal development', 'career' or 'employment' choices can be re-characterised as 'life choices', and so applicable in many differing settings and domains of application. So while information content may vary between IAG domains or services, information relevance, accessibility and usability may have common quality standards. Likewise, the purposes and settings for 'advice' and 'guidance' vary between domains, but all have some quality standards in common. These are the focus of this review, which has confirmed the validity of this interpretation.

Application of inter-personal guidance in IAG

There is little (if anything) in the literature to suggest that effective techniques of IAG support differ significantly between domains. The causal effectiveness of good-quality interpersonal guidance seems universally agreed; its main characteristics are identified, and references are made to literature that provides both high-quality evidence and more detailed behavioural descriptions.

There is strong evidence in support of IAG services that increase clients' capacity to self-manage, enhance their intrinsic motivation, and develop their capabilities for choices and action. On the strength of this evidence, we think that these should be further emphasised in the **matrix** Standard.

The quality of evidence, the range of services from which it is drawn and the proven impact on outcomes strongly suggest that the professional relationship between advisor and client is a necessary component of IAG. It enables all other resources to be useful to the client, enhances their capacity for informed choices, and mediates the contributions of leadership, management, partnerships, advice, development or training, information, and information technology.

Causality, linkages and management

The influence of leadership and management on client satisfaction and outcomes is included in several proposed European and international quality assurance standards (for example, Neary et al 2019¹⁵⁸). But the review has not disclosed definitive descriptions of a causal link between these influences and IAG outcomes. The evidence on leadership and management is considered given this is a critical success factor in any organisation. There are some concepts that are directly relevant to

IAG and already included in **matrix**, and there is scope for them to be further extended. They include:

- A degree of front-line autonomy for advisors with time to build effective relationships so they can respond to individual clients
- Training and skills development for advisors
- A separation between ‘policing’ and ‘supporting’ roles
- Adequate resources and appropriate caseloads
- Appropriate incentives and monitoring
- Partnership working with commitment and understanding at all levels
- Networks of services that can provide support, resources, and opportunities for clients.
- Working with the social networks to which clients belong.

A key quality element in leadership is the espousal of quality standards for front-line delivery by those who lead and develop their IAG services for young people and adults, including for disadvantaged groups.

Defining and measuring outcomes in IAG

matrix is an outcome-based standard. But the diversity of domains to which it applies means that there is no single measure of successful outcomes that applies to all. In addition, some domains have difficulty measuring their outcomes with any certainty. These appear to be compounded by the difficulty of measuring soft outcomes such as confidence, motivation, and client choice. However, a number of good quality sources that provide means to compare and measure outcomes and ‘soft outcomes. It is acknowledged in the literature that for many services some rigorous methods may prove challenging. The **matrix** Standard currently provides organisations with best practice examples, and this topic merits greater attention in formulating the revised Standard ^{217, 180, 218, 12, 122}.

Securing the benefits of IAG

There has been greater emphasis on inputs, outputs and outcomes in recent years, and the review identifies examples of professional codes of ethics that guide IAG services. The review has found enough high-quality evidence that benefits are not universally achieved, nor uniformly distributed among clients, and that some clients may eventually be poorly served by IAG services that serve others well. This matters, and the review includes some basic recommendations and ethical principles:

- Attention to clients’ individual circumstances
- Increasing the skills of IAG advisors
- Seeking feedback and data equally from unsuccessful and successful clients
- Using comparison groups to measure
 - differential distribution of beneficial outcomes among clients
 - service impacts compared to counterfactuals
 - deadweight
 - the impact of working practices.

IT-mediated and blended delivery mechanisms

We have not made an exhaustive survey of the many and varied IT applications that are promoted in IAG services; instead, we have looked at reviews that identify the advantages and limitations, and the quality standards that may be applied. It is clear that IT is useful and is here to stay. But its use can inadvertently undermine or limit the IAG quality unless it meets quality standards. A challenge to

IT, when used as IAG delivery mechanism, is how far it achieves an adequate emulation of human interactions.

IT services need to be demonstrably usable, accessible, and useful:

- use by target groups wherever and however they can, including by people with disabilities or limitations
- using both human-application standards and machine-relevant standards
- having effective organisational and inter-organisation support
- used by trained, competent and confident users.

The matrix overview: Plan-do-review

The evidence supports and does not suggest reasons to change the plan-do-review concept that is part of the **matrix** Standard. However, the concept is interpreted and applied, it remains at the heart of good service delivery. There are other more detailed models, and among them are a few that could help **matrix** applicants carry out plan-do-review to advantage. But these are only weak recommendations, as the evidence is weak. Following Neary et al¹⁵⁸, and consistent with other models, a successful plan-do review process will cover (among other considerations)

- Policy goals: social inclusion, equity, ethics
- Processes: customisation, relationships, open-ness and lack of bias or sanctions
- Practitioners: professionalism, competencies, CPD and reflection
- Outcomes: decision making competences, educational, labour market or other social or economic outcomes
- Clients: client centredness, customisation, protection of rights, avoiding conflicts of interest.

The matrix Elements, Criteria, and practice notes

This review does not attempt to determine where our suggestions for quality indicators might appear some might be best in the published 'top-level' description of **matrix**, others in more detailed guidance to applicants and assessors. The suggested quality criteria are listed in section 12 and in more detail in Appendix 5.

Other Standards

The report includes brief comparisons with the Gatsby Benchmarks and the OFSTED Inspection Framework. Gatsby benchmarks, described later in this report are now widely adopted in England's schools and colleges, based on 'Good Career Guidance' principles, feeding into institutional self-improvement plans and the Ofsted Inspection Framework. It is noted there exists separate detailed 'standalone' papers and guidance notes on how both frameworks are aligned to the revised **matrix** Standard review Special thanks are due to Dr Deidre Hughes OBE for her valuable contribution on this area, and in the section on the Policy Background. The **matrix** Standard is complementary to these other standards, and its comparative detail will be compatible with these others' emphasis on the professional training and context in which education and careers services are delivered. The **matrix** Standard has additional value in being applicable across many different IAG domains and the report concludes that its detailed description of IAG quality can usefully be adopted to complement and read across to benchmarks and inspection frameworks within the UK and further afield.

Building future evidence

The literature review highlights a range of valid research designs and methods available. The **matrix** Standard encourages applicants to participate in evidence-based approaches leading to better understanding and enhanced quality outcomes for clients/customers.