

‘Opening a Door’, Evaluating the Benefits of Guidance for the Adult Client: A Report.

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Introduction

In March 2005 a study was completed for the Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults in Waterford Institute of Technology. The purpose of the research has been to evaluate the benefits of guidance for the adult clients accessing the guidance service. In the context of guidance provision, the focus of the research has been on the clients’ direct experiences of receiving information, advice and guidance, and the tracking of his/her progression to determine outcomes. REGSA is the longest established adult guidance service operating within the Adult Educational Guidance Initiative and the only one located in an Institute of Technology. By 2004, the need to implement a quality tracking system for assessing client progression and informing best practice had been recognized by the service. Findings from the research show that clients have benefited enormously from guidance, not only in terms of education and training experiences, but also career progression and personal fulfillment. The research has also highlighted the importance of lifelong learning for adults and the barriers they face in accessing education and training opportunities.

Methodology; Implementation and Data Analysis

The research has been client focused in terms of design, implementation and analysis. At the outset, a literature review was completed that concentrated on assessing different methods of evaluating client progression, undertaken by a number of guidance services nationally and in the UK. Through consultation with the guidance team it was decided that the best method of evaluation was a postal survey, due to the numbers of clients to track and the time constraints involved. The design of the questionnaire involved the team establishing the key questions for analysis and included both closed and open questions to allow a level of flexibility for feedback from clients.

The questionnaire was divided into 4 key areas of analysis; (1) profile of the respondents, (2) provision required on initial contact with REGSA, (3) clients’ experience of guidance and (4) outcomes for the client (i.e. benefits and progression). The questionnaire was administered by post to a sample group of clients (923) from 2001 and 2003 and there was a 21.45% response rate (198 completed returns). Both quantitative and qualitative measurements were used for data analysis in the questionnaire. This was extremely important. While quantitative measurement provided immediate evidence of the effectiveness of the service, the qualitative analysis allowed the clients to express their opinions and give instructive feedback in relation to outcomes, service provision and their experiences of accessing education.

Benefits of Guidance

Overall, 89.4% of clients experienced benefits from accessing REGSA and 94.5% would recommend the service to others. The feedback has shown that the key benefits expressed by clients have been in the areas of; Personal Development, Access to Professional Expertise, Information Provision, Sign-posting of Options and Appropriate Referral. Clients see guidance as an empowering process allowing them to develop self-awareness and plan for the future. Many clients describe the experience in the following terms; *‘increased motivation, realization of potential, it challenged existing ways of thinking’* and *‘one-to-one guidance helped with confidence building and decision-making skills’*. Having access to a trained professional who was *‘non-judgemental and impartial’* has been extremely important for clients. It gave one client the space to *‘verbalise a problem in a confidential setting’*. Access to relevant and up-to-date information that is suitable to the needs of the client has been of benefit to many respondents who were *‘unaware of what is available’*. Clarity of information is vital for adults who need to know what direction to take and the opening up of new options has allowed many clients to explore areas they would never have considered before. One client expresses it succinctly by saying *‘I was pointed in the direction of third level education, which prior to the appointment I really hadn’t thought about’*. Finally, some clients who needed to be referred to other agencies have benefited in terms of education, financial and personal support.

Outcomes for the Client

Making changes for the adult client is a key outcome of accessing guidance but it is not always easy. While there are many factors that can influence change there are many barriers that prevent it. 74.2% of clients have experienced changes and 56.5% responded that *‘changes were a direct result of help received from the service’*. The two main areas in terms of outcomes experienced by clients are Accessing Education and Career Progression. The two charts below show the status of clients at the time of completing the survey highlighting their progression in education and employment terms.

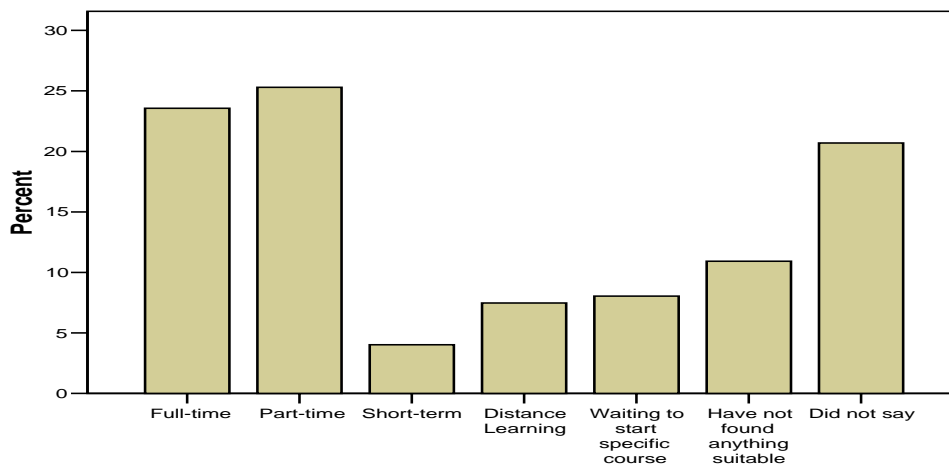


Chart 4. (i) Current Education Status

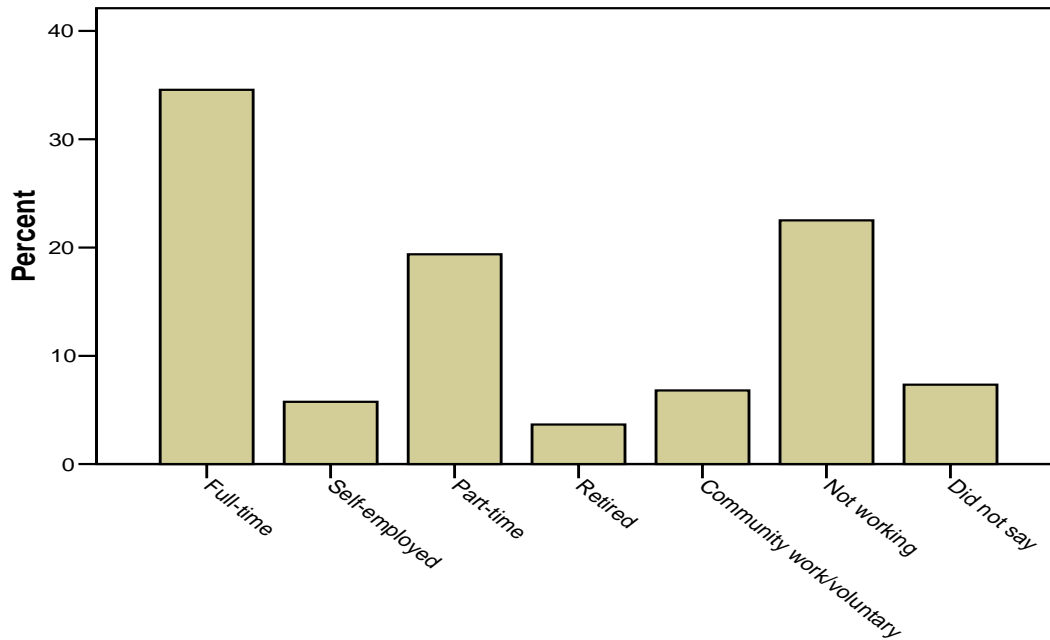


Chart 5 (ii) Current Employment Status

For adults, re-engaging with education is often a second chance opportunity and educational guidance is seen as part of the *'step-by-step process to return to learning'* with the *'aim of retraining for a new career'*. This can take time and a high level of motivation. Indeed, for one client who was *'concerned about his age and the length of time it would take to reach his goal'* the change started in 2001 and now in 2005 he will have *'a qualification and new career'*. Clients have also given feedback on accessing education and training and the barriers they consistently experience in a number of areas including childcare, funding and eligibility to take up courses.

Recommendations for the Service

Arising from the research, key recommendations were made for the ongoing development of the guidance service in the following areas; Client Tracking, Promotion of the Service, Outreach Provision, Profile of the Service, Facilities, Professional Development of Staff, Advocacy and Research. These recommendations are now informing the future direction of REGSA through its Strategic Plan.

Conclusion

An important finding from the analysis is the topic of 'progression' for the client. Responses have indicated that progression is very much an individual experience based

on their own life experiences and expectations. This appears quite contradictory to the concept espoused by institutions and stakeholders in education who appear to require statistical measurement as evidence of progression. In conclusion, with the continuing increase in the numbers of adults accessing education and training determining the benefits of guidance and setting up systems of tracking will become increasingly important. This need is supported by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) which recommends that '*quality standards and guidance provision needs to be better informed by consumers of the service*', (Sweet 2004). In essence, best practice guidelines will need to be established within adult guidance provision locally and nationally in the very near future if we are to continue working for the betterment of our clients.

Copies of the report are available from REGSA at (051) 302287 or shealy@wit.ie

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