MEASURING CLIENT PROGRESSION IN ADULT GUIDANCE

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Introduction

Currently, in the field of guidance relevant stakeholders including guidance practitioners, educators and policy makers, have identified progression for adults in education and employment as one of the key outcomes of educational guidance. Lifelong guidance is now inextricably linked with lifelong learning as a mechanism to enhance individual mobility in the workforce for future economic growth. However, the current policy requirement for measurable data through positivistic methods of analysis may not provide a true reflection of individual progression. Methodologies generating extensive qualitative data in the longitudinal tracking of clients in adult guidance provision are now required. This is the topic of current research which aims to determine whether progression can be effectively measured within longitudinal tracking systems in adult guidance.

Adult Guidance Policy

"The primary purpose of educational guidance is to improve the match between learning opportunities and the needs and interests of learners and potential learners", (UDACE in Brown, 2003, p.1). Within the context of lifelong learning it is now recognised that economic and social development will require a better-educated and adaptable population to meet the challenges ahead. Recently developed government policy in adult education in Ireland now confirms this requirement and views educational guidance as one of the "fundamental foundation blocks which must be in place in building a comprehensive system of Adult Education within an overall framework of lifelong learning", (DES, 2000, p.19).

The 2004 publication of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, *Career Guidance: A Handbook for Policy Makers,* states that:

> Well planned and organised career guidance services are increasingly important. Countries in the OECD and the European Union are implementing lifelong learning strategies, as well as policies to encourage the development of their citizens' employability.
>
> (OECD, 2004, p.6)

It stresses that in order to implement these strategies and policies, it is envisaged that citizens will have to develop skills to manage their own education and employment over their lifespan, requiring them to re-evaluate their career and life goals. Therefore, continuous access to appropriate information, advice and guidance about education, training and employment will be a necessity in the future.

However, it also confirms that there are gaps in the regularity and systematic evaluation of the quality of career guidance services in most countries, concluding that:

> There is little regular and systematic evaluation of the quality of career guidance provision in most countries. Service standards for provision do not exist or are present in some sectors but not in others. Quality frameworks, where they exist, tend to be voluntary rather than mandatory, and to operate as guidelines. Users of career guidance services have a key role to play in the design and evaluation of services.
>
> (OECD, 2004, p.8)

A more recent report, *Improving Lifelong Guidance Policies and Systems*, prioritises six EU policy goals to which lifelong guidance can contribute. These are "efficient investment in education and training, labour market efficiency, lifelong learning, social inclusion, social equity and economic development", (Wannan & McCarthy, 2005, p.14). In order to improve policy, develop common European indicators and benchmark best practice, its expert group on lifelong guidance has developed a number of European reference tools. It recommends that in order to ensure quality of provision for citizens, guidance services need to have a culture of continuous improvement involving regular 'citizen' feedback.

Recognition of the need for research in longitudinal tracking is now evident in international literature which is giving rise to current debates on the outcomes and measurements of progression. Currently, in the United Kingdom, a long-term project which is evaluating the 'usefulness' of guidance for clients through longitudinal tracking provides an example of such research, (Bimrose et al, 2004). Finally, Maguire and Killeen (2003:17) argue that the ongoing focus of attention when assessing the outcomes of career guidance has been in terms of the benefits and costs of that activity. This will require "greater discussion and agreement between policy makers, practitioners, and researchers over what will be deemed appropriate, desirable and measurable outcomes of career guidance". They also confirm the need to generate

more substantive research evidence through longitudinal studies which will be of both immediate and longterm benefit to policy makers (p.18)

Adult Guidance in Ireland

In 2000, the Department of Education and Science recognised the need for education and career guidance for adults in its policy document *Learning for Life*: *White Paper on Adult Education*. It defines guidance as "a range of activities designed to assist people to make choices about their lives and to make transitions consequent of these choices". Such activities include; "information, assessment, advice, counselling, advocacy, networking, management and innovating systems change" (p.156).

The Adult Educational Guidance Initiative (AEGI) was established in 2000, and there are currently thirty six services in operation providing guidance to adults progressing to education and employment. These services have been rolled out on a phased basis providing a comprehensive adult guidance service nationwide under the National Development Plan. The AEGI is specifically targeting adult learners who wish to re-engage with education through a number of initiatives including the adult literacy services, VTOS programmes and adult and community based education.

In 2002, an international review of career guidance policies carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) concluded, "in moving closer to a lifelong approach to the provision of career information, guidance and counselling services, Ireland has many strengths", (p.20). However, it did identify specific weaknesses in linking policy making and practice through the absence of established systems to track client progression and monitor long-term service use.

As the AEGI has only been in operation since 2000, much of the current activity in relation to evaluation has been on an ad-hoc basis at local level, in the style of customer satisfaction surveys and feedback forms for service development and quality assurance. To date, there have been no national guidelines on the implementation of longitudinal tracking systems to monitor client progression and inform future best practice in the services. The Department of Education and Science employs a positivistic approach in its definition and measurement of progression requiring hard outcomes and performance indicators based solely on education and employment readiness. This approach is now proving to be limited, from both the perspective of

the user and the guidance practitioner, as it does not provide a true reflection of the client's experience of progression. As Maguire and Killeen (2005) argue "it is difficult to see how studies of the impact of career guidance activity can be meaningful if they do not allow for what might constitute life-changing effects of interventions, which may or may not be readily apparent in terms of easily observable or tangible outcomes, such as the take-up of learning opportunities, or entry into employment" (p.5).

Current Research Topic: Measuring Progression in Adult Guidance

The "dearth of analysis in the area of tracking the progression of adults in educational guidance provision in Ireland" was identified by a study carried out by the Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults, in the Waterford Institute of Technology, (Hearne, 2005, p.23). Although it employed a quantitative methodology in the form of a postal survey, service users did get the opportunity to give qualitative feedback on their experiences of accessing guidance, education and employment. However, the limitations of this approach highlighted the need for more indepth research through qualitative methods. It was evident that clients had stories and experiences which they wished to share and these are the subject of the current research.

Whilst there are a number of anticipated outcomes from the research, the overall aim is to examine the concept of 'progression' for adult learners who have received guidance. This will then inform the development of a framework for quality assurance purposes and benchmark future best practice in Ireland. The research is underpinned by a theoretical approach to client progression and standardised tracking systems in adult guidance contexts. The research design takes an interpretive approach addressing the research questions through the application of grounded theory in the form of a case study of the hypothesis. A number of case interviews with clients have now been completed and data analysis is currently being undertaken.

What is Progression?

As education practitioners we will have our own assumptions and opinions of what progression means for a client that may be subjective and based on our own philosophies of learning and achievement, i.e. behaviourist, humanist, constructivist. However, McGivney (2002) states "progression is one of the many words referred to

in education literature and policy making which has no universally accepted definition but is still used as a measurement of achievement by stakeholders in education and employment", (p.11).

At present, it is a policy requirement that such outputs are measured in terms of 'hard' outcomes, and within tight timeframes, which include attainment of qualifications and securing employment. The 'soft' outcomes discussed by Dewson et al (2000) would appear to be neglected in evaluation systems. They argue that outcomes such as analytical, organisational, personal and interpersonal skills gained from training, support or guidance interventions cannot be measured tangibly, (p.2). Quite often the achievement of such outcomes by the client is gained through the overcoming of personal and institutional barriers that may never be equated sufficiently.

The *Opening a Door* (Hearne, 2005) report found that the main barrier to progression is still financial, and even though funding supports are available to the majority of full-time students in Higher Education, they may be inadequate, (p.12). This would concur with Kathleen Lynch's (1999) argument that inequalities continue to exist within our current education system for adult learners (p. 212). These are propounded by the lack of research of mature student progression within colleges where there are no systems to track students beyond their first year. As a result, there are difficulties about the recording and identifying of inequalities and the implementation of supports needed for adult learners to enable their progression.

Overview of Methodologies in Adult Guidance Research

This research study proposes that because of the limitations of quantitative analysis, methodologies that generate extensive qualitative data are now required in guidance research. In relation to adult guidance, attention is given to the client's story to help the client make sense of his/her experiences, decisions and actions. Gibson (2004: 1) refers to the relevance of narrative theory in career counselling and the power it has to illuminate the importance of the past for the present. "It invites and assists the client to more clearly become the author of his or her identity and career. From the reflective position of author, the client can recognise and act on the responsibility to live a meaningful story", (p.9) This understanding of the client's story is gained through indepth interviewing and the same methods can be applied in qualitative methods, such as case studies, by the guidance practitioner/researcher.

Bimrose (2003:3) argues that "theories informing current guidance and counselling policy practice have been developed mainly by operating from scientific positivist paradigms of research using quantitative methods". Concerns about the limitations of this research method in guidance are now being expressed by researchers and practitioners. Quantitative research is a scientific approach that is typically led by clear ideas and the construction of a hypothesis that can be tested through gathering data and measuring it in an empirical way. To counter this Bimrose proposes that "knowledge and understanding built up from a particular approach to research needs to be complemented with knowledge and understanding derived from different ways of investigating social phenomenon", (p.3)

In contrast, qualitative research is more concerned with the exploration of a particular phenomenon of interest in depth and in context, using the respondents' own words, feelings and experiences without making prior analytical assumptions. In social research there are a number of terms used including 'interpretive', 'naturalistic' and 'constructivist' to describe this approach. Constructivism claims that reality is socially constructed and that there is no one true objective reality that can be known. Instead there are multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge and it is the task of the researcher to help construct that reality with the research participants.

McMahon and Patton (2006) state that "constructivism has had an influence on some of the key elements of career counselling", (p.7). These include the counselling relationship, the nature of the counselling process, the use of language and the role of assessment. Brott (2004:1) contends that a constructive approach to assessment in career counselling presents the opportunity for the practitioner to gain insights into clients' stories, amplify clients' self-awareness and enable clients to develop a future orientation through action steps. Likewise, it is argued here, that the same process can operate in the guidance research interview where client's expectations, experiences and outcomes are discussed and analysed and can lead to the development of new theory in the field. Within this context, the application of grounded theory in guidance research would appear to be appropriate and effective.

Grounded Theory in Guidance Research

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method, developed in the 1960's by two sociologists, Glaser and Strauss, which uses systematic procedures to collect and analyse data to develop theory about a particular phenomenon. The researcher does

not begin with a preconceived theory in mind unless it is the intention to elaborate and extend an existing theory. Instead, the theory emerges from the data and is more likely to resemble 'reality'.

Developments over time have seen Charmaz (2000) introduce a constructivist method in response to the systematic procedures of the earlier theorists arguing that grounded theorists needed to "stress flexible strategies, emphasize the meaning participants ascribe to situations, acknowledge the roles of the researcher and the individuals being researched, and expand philosophically beyond a quantitative orientation to research", (Creswell, 2005, p.397).

Within the context of educational research, grounded theory is viewed as a "process" theory that explains an educational process of events, activities, actions, and interactions that occur over time (Creswell, p.396). The current research is using grounded theory to analyse the 'process' of progression, which is individual and subjective for each client, allowing for an emerging design and the development of new theory on the topic. It is envisaged that this new theory will contribute to a deeper understanding of progression and feed into the design and implementation of new systems of tracking and evaluation in adult guidance provision.

Conclusion: Can Progression be Effectively Measured?

In conclusion, adult guidance is now seen as a valuable and integral element within the overall framework of lifelong learning for adults in Ireland. Through guidance intervention, adult learners are progressing at all levels in our education system. However, they are still experiencing personal and institutional barriers that are hindering their progress. It is becoming increasingly evident that in order to capture these experiences a more holistic approach is now required in the design of systems for tracking and evaluating the effectiveness of guidance. We are already seeing evidence of this in new theories of guidance practice where a more 'integrated' approach to education, work and life roles is required (e.g. Sunny Hansen).

The current research topic proposes that while quantitative measurement may be valuable in assessing academic, employment and short-term outcomes it does not capture the total story of the client over a longer time span. Qualitative methods, such as case studies, that will lead to the development of appropriate questions and understandings of the client's experiences for measuring progression are now required. Service users have a valuable contribution to make in the design and future

implementation of longitudinal tracking systems that are both client friendly and valuable for quality assurance purposes. This is need borne out by current international literature and developing research in other countries within the field

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