

An examination of the client's contribution to the design of longitudinal tracking systems in adult guidance practice

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Introduction

The recently published report *Guidance for Life: An Integrated Framework for Lifelong Guidance in Ireland* (NGF, 2007) sets out a vision for the future provision of guidance, including adult guidance, which is responsive to the needs of all citizens and society. Such propositions are in line with current national and international policy that stress the importance of guidance in the achievement of public policy goals; learning, employment and social equity, (OECD, 2004). More importantly, career guidance is now viewed as central to the construction of a competitive, knowledge-based economy in Europe, (NGF, 2007, Sultana, 2004).

Such achievements come at a price with public funded services becoming more accountable to their users and funders. The drive to equate guidance intervention outcomes with economic outcomes is placing significant pressure on career guidance service providers in Ireland and abroad. Specifically, the two major issues of quality standards in practice and the longterm evaluation of guidance outcomes are currently being addressed in the Irish Adult Educational Guidance Initiative (AEGI). However, the current positivistic approach to service evaluation in the AEGI may not adequately capture the depth and breadth of longterm client progression, (Hearne, 2005).

In recent years, career guidance research has experienced a significant paradigm shift from purely positivistic methodologies to an acknowledgement of the importance of interpretive approaches in outcome research. Furthermore, there is now a significant emphasis on involving users of career guidance services in future policy development (McCarthy, 2006, Plant, 2005). This paper will discuss a current interpretive research study grounded in an Adult Educational Guidance Initiative (AEGI) service that is focusing on the interface between adult guidance policy and practice in Ireland. As the study is still a work in progress, the paper will discuss current Irish adult guidance policy

and practice before examining the significant contribution the client can make to the design of quality longitudinal tracking systems in the adult guidance sector.

Adult guidance in Ireland: Policy and Practice

The adult guidance profession has made great strides in addressing some of the major gaps in provision for the socially excluded and marginalized re-engaging with education in Ireland. This has been realised through the establishment of the AEGI by the Department of Education and Science (DES) in 1999. Current government policy clearly situates adult guidance as a “support service” measure in the promotion of its lifelong learning agenda for economic competitiveness (DES, 2000). Within a European context, recent reviews of policies for guidance have identified deficiencies in policies, systems and practices to meet the demands of knowledge-based economies and societies, (EU Council Resolution, 2004). The development of indicators and benchmarks in guidance are seen as key elements of evidence-based policy making and essential to the monitoring of progress in the Lisbon process, (CEC, 2007). In Ireland, the OECD (2002) country review of career guidance services provided the impetus for the development of quality standards to support the successful implementation of an integrated lifelong guidance framework, (NGF, 2007).

There are currently 39 AEGI services providing a range of guidance supports to adults in specific target groups. Quality assurance is now a priority in the adult guidance services with a recognized need for the implementation of formalized structures to monitor the longterm outcomes of guidance intervention. The positivistic methodology employed by the DES focuses primarily on the hard outcomes of ‘education’ and ‘employment’ as performance indicators for client progression. This is proving inadequate, from both the perspective of the client and the guidance practitioner, as it fails to capture the subjective nature of progression and the ‘soft’ outcomes experienced by individuals. Quite often the attainment of outcomes is achieved through overcoming both personal and structural barriers which involve negotiation, compromise and continuous decision-making. Furthermore, there are a wide range of variables impacting on clients’ progress, including personal circumstances, individual contexts and type and

duration of guidance intervention, which may not be adequately measured in current methodologies, (Bimrose et al, 2004). Therefore, greater flexibility and diversity is required from service providers in the establishment of standards of verification of soft outcomes as performance indicators in longterm evaluation methods, (Hearne, 2005, McGivney 2002).

This issue is now being addressed through the current research study grounded in an AEGI service in the Waterford Institute of Technology. The research is using an interpretive methodology through a case study of the progression of a number of clients of the Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults (REGSA). REGSA is the only AEGI service to be based in a third level institute. All of the other adult guidance services have now been integrated into the VEC sector.

The overall aim of the research is to examine the concept of ‘progression’ for adults which will contribute to the development of a model to track client outcomes longterm. It is specifically focusing on the gap of ‘user-led’ models in the quality assurance process which is well supported in the literature. It is anticipated that the findings will contribute to the development of quality standards in longitudinal tracking in adult guidance which are informed by the users of the service, i.e. the clients.

The Role of the Client in the Design of Longitudinal Tracking Systems

The importance of longitudinal tracking to assess the longterm outcomes of guidance intervention is well supported in guidance discourse and research. Nevertheless, evidence for the ultimate economic outcomes required by policy makers is still lacking in the field, (Kidd, 2006, Bimrose et al, 2004). Longitudinal studies are now needed that measure the range of effects allowing for an understanding of the impact of guidance interventions and the nature of progression for users of career guidance services.

Despite the activities in individual countries progress on the development of European level indicators or benchmarks on guidance is still slow, (OECD, 2004). The development of a number of common European reference tools in guidance which are intended to help Member States improve their policy and quality assurance systems has been a step in the right direction. Significantly, in assuring quality of provision for

citizens, guidance services need to adopt a culture of continuous improvement through regular citizen feedback, consumer protection and redress, and the involvement of users in the design, management and evaluation of the services and products, (Wannan & McCarthy, 2005).

Up to this point there has been a lack of research on involving guidance service users (i.e. clients) in the development of public policy. However, this may be slowly changing, with a growing conviction that end users should be actively involved in the development of public services, (Magnusson & Lalande, 2005). At present there is a minimal attempt by policy makers, in their 'top-down' approach, to capture and reflect the views of learners in the education sector overall. "The rights and needs of individual citizens are at the heart of the European discourse on citizenship, and there is growing awareness in member states that effective democracy means devolving to individuals and communities the right to play an active role in shaping services that affect lives", (Plant, 2005:2).

With regard to policy development, two sound reasons are offered to involve users in the process; the first relates to citizenship and the right to shape the development of public services that directly affect our lives, and the second relates to guidance policies and services meeting the needs of individuals and the community. Therefore, a major aspect of future policy formation and service development is the creation of effective mechanisms to capture and transmit the 'voice' of users and non-users in guidance (McCarthy, 2006, Plant, 2005). More importantly, the need for a 'bottom-up approach' is now recognized in Ireland, where "the most obvious gap which exists in the current national literature on guidance is the views, perceptions, opinions and recommendations of people who use guidance services, as well as those who do not", (NGF, 2007:50).

In relation to the AEGI, a mid-term review found a number of deficiencies in relation to 'client tracking activities and service use', (SPSS Ireland, 2005). It is understood, anecdotally, that some of these deficits are currently being addressed through the piloting of a standardised questionnaire to evaluate all of the adult guidance services. The issue of qualitative methods still needs to be addressed within the AEGI.

Furthermore, it remains to be seen what outcomes will be measured in the future, how such structures will be implemented, and the longterm effects of regular evaluation

on the sector. While it is recognized that a balance may have to be achieved between quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis, the current research study finds clients have a valuable contribution to make to the design of longitudinal tracking systems through qualitative methods. The client's stories are providing greater insights into the experiences of progression that need to be considered in quantitative methods if they are intended to adequately measure the longterm outcomes of guidance intervention.

Conclusion

The development of quality standards in guidance is now a major public policy issue both nationally and internationally. In keeping with international best practice, it is recommended that continuous quality improvement of guidance services should be pursued through qualitative and quantitative methods, (NGF, 2007). However, there is still some way to go with regard to the implementation of quality standards in the guidance profession in Ireland overall. At the moment the adult guidance services in the AEGI are attempting to achieve this with inadequate structures to support them and an increasing demand by clients for their services.

It is now recognised that analysis of the longterm outcomes of guidance interventions can only be realised through evidence-based research. However, there are concerns within the guidance field about the theoretical limitations of positivistic paradigms and the use of quantitative methods that are informing current guidance and counseling policy practice. Guidance research needs to include both positivist and interpretivist approaches that reflect the subjective nature of client progression. If longitudinal tracking is to be effective it needs to capture the range of quality outcomes experienced by clients following guidance intervention. Within this context, the research is providing a new insight by capturing the 'voice of the user' which will inform the design of quality tracking systems for future policy development in Ireland.

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