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Measuring Client Progression in Adult Guidance

LUCY HEARNE

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. The author argues that 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 by the author which aims to determine whether progression can be effectively measured within the framework of longitudinal tracking systems in adult guidance.

Adult Guidance Policy

According to the Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education “The primary purpose of educational guidance is to improve the match between learning opportunities and the needs and interests of learners and potential learners” (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 (OECD), *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)

The OECD 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 OECD Report (2005), *Improving Lifelong Guidance Policies and Systems*, prioritises six EU policy goals where lifelong guidance can positively contribute. These are "efficient investment in education and training, labour market efficiency, lifelong learning, social inclusion, social equity and economic development" (Wannan and 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, Barnes, Hughes and Orton, 2004). Finally, Maguire and Killeen (2003, p.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" (Maguire and Killeen, 2003, p.17). They also confirm the need to generate more substantive research evidence through longitudinal studies which will be of both immediate and long-term 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" (DES, 2000, p. 156). Such activities include; "information, assessment, advice, counselling, advocacy, networking, management and innovating systems change" (DES, 2000, p.156). The Adult Educational Guidance Initiative (AEGI) was established in 2000, and there are currently 36 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 (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme) 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 concluded, "in moving closer to a lifelong approach to the provision of career information, guidance and counselling services, Ireland has many strengths" (OECD, 2002, 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 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.

(Maguire and Killeen, 2003, 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 author during her work with the Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults, in the Waterford Institute of Technology (Hearne, 2005, p.23). Although this research 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 in-depth research by means of qualitative methods. It was evident that clients had stories and experiences which they wished to share and these are the subject of this author's current research.

The research is ongoing and whilst there are a number of anticipated outcomes, the overall aim is to examine the concept of ‘progression’ for adult learners who have received guidance. The findings will then inform the development of a quality assurance framework for guidance and benchmark future best practice in Ireland. The research is underpinned by a theoretical approach to cli-

ent progression and standardised tracking systems in adult guidance contexts. The research design is underpinned by an interpretive approach addressing the research questions through the application of grounded theory. At this stage a number of case interviews with clients have been completed and data analysis is being undertaken. The research has thrown up some interesting questions about the concept of progression within the context of guidance methodologies and asks whether it can be effectively measured.

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, for example, behaviourist, humanist, constructivist. However, McGivney (2002, p. 11) 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”. 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, Eccles, Tackey and Jackson (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 (Dewson, Eccles, Tackey and Jackson, 2000, p.4). 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

The author 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, p.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.

(Gibson, 2004, p.9)

This understanding of the client's story is gained through in-depth interviewing and the same methods can be applied in qualitative methods, such as case studies, by the guidance practitioner/researcher.

Bimrose (2003, p.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.

(Brimrose, 2003 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 respondent's 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, p.7) state that “constructivism has had an influence on some of the key elements of career counselling”. These include: the counselling relationship; the nature of the counselling process; the use of language; and the role of assessment. Brott (2004, p.1) contends that a constructivist 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 clients’ 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 1960s 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, 2005, p.396). The current research by the author 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 advocated. The work of Hansen (2001) is an example of this.

The current research by the author 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 by ensuring that the design and future implementation of longitudinal tracking mechanisms are client-friendly and contribute to quality assurance standards. This is borne out by current international literature and emerging research in other countries in the field of guidance.

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A Framework for Supporting Adults in Distance Learning

LINDA DOWLING AND ORNA RYAN

Introduction

In recent years, many ‘traditional’ Higher Education Institutes (HEI’s) have been seeking to increase the participation of ‘non-traditional’ learners. In the context of this paper, ‘traditional’ institutions are those which mainly offer programmes on a full-time day basis for school leavers and ‘non-traditional’ learners are mature learners, returning to education on a part-time distance learning basis. Distance learning can generally be differentiated from other methods of teaching and learning by virtue of the fact that geographical distance separates the learner and teacher with materials and/or various technologies used to deliver these programmes (Smith, 2004). The increase in the number of non-traditional learners calls for innovative and complementary academic and administrative support strategies designed to meet the unique needs of these learners. Typically, learner support services within ‘traditional’ institutions are provided by a diverse range of offices. It can be argued that the needs of adult learners can best be planned, designed and managed at the level of the programme.

This paper presents a case study of how the features of effective learner support have been implemented by University College Dublin (UCD) in the case of its distance learning business degree programme. The case study presented is of a programme established ten years ago and where the learner support system has evolved becoming increasingly sophisticated in its design over time.

The Centrality of the Learner in Designing Learner Support

One way of conceptualising learner support and how systems might need to change to accommodate the needs of these learners is to acknowledge the learn-

er as the starting point (Tait, 2000). It follows, therefore, that course design, teaching methods, assessment and the overall learning environment must be considered with the learner and their learning in mind. Reasons for providing a range of learner support services of different types and at different stages of a programme include the need to assist with learner recruitment, the need to maximise learner retention, to provide for learners' demands for support, to help in overcoming learners' feelings of isolation and the need to nurture learners who may not have participated in formal education for some time (Mills, 2003; Rowntree, 1992; Simpson, 2002). One of the perceived disadvantages of studying at a distance is the geographical distance between the learners and the institution and the isolation that can be felt by learners as a result. Developing a sense of connectedness between the learners and the institution is a critical success factor for distance learning programmes (Dowling, 2006).

Designing and Managing Learner Support

The development of appropriate learner support systems for those studying at a distance, starting with enrolment, through to induction and beyond has drawn widespread attention in recent years and represents a fundamental ingredient in the success, or otherwise, of distance learning (Kenworthy, 2003; Tait, 2000; Mills, 2003). Tait (1995) presents a framework for the planning and management of learner support which includes an examination of who learners are, what their needs are, how their needs can be met, how services will be managed, how much the services will cost and how the effectiveness of the support services will be evaluated. Furthermore, Rowntree (1992) suggests that distance learners may need support before, during and after their programme.

Overall, learner support can be categorised in two ways: (i) academic support and (ii) non-academic support (Mills, 2003; Rowntree, 1992; Simpson, 2002). Academic support includes, assisting learners with programme content and assessment, managing programme workload, assisting learners in developing appropriate learning competencies and helping learners become independent. Non-academic support includes, assistance with any personal difficulties learners may encounter, helping learners retain interest in their studies and providing assistance with their social integration into the institution and the programme (Simpson, 2002; Tait, 2000). It is recognised that responsibility for the provision of support tends to rest with disparate functional offices (Dirr, 1999). Stark and Warne (1999) suggest that due to the nature of distance learning, it is important that learners have one person they can contact, i.e. their 'anchor person'. How

some of these supports can be integrated into a model of learner support will now be discussed in the context of the Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS) (distance learning) programme at UCD.

Learner Support on the Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS)

The BBS is a distance learning programme delivered through a blend of home study and occasional weekend attendance on campus and was specially designed for part-time adult learners returning to education. The programme was introduced in 1996 and was the School of Business's first venture into distance learning. Special features of the programme's structure include an eighteen-week semester and Autumn repeat examinations, which were regarded as an essential safety-net for non-traditional learners whose studies may be interrupted by diverse life-events. In addition, because of the non-traditional nature of the learner body the provision of supports to help learners cope with the academic demands of third level education was a primary consideration in the programme's early design.

In all evaluations of the programme, the quality of the learner support has been identified as the most significant factor in learner satisfaction. Another indicator of the effectiveness of the programme's learner support is the relatively high learner retention rates for the programme – in 2005/06 a drop out rate of five per cent was experienced across the programme's 280 participants; retention rates have varied over each full cycle of the programme, have never fallen below 60 per cent. Particular features of the programme's learner support framework are examined below.

The BBS Learner Support Framework

The five central features of the Learner Support Framework are:

(i) Day-to-Day Learner Support

A telephone/email/drop-in service with a same day query response policy is operated by personal tutors for dealing with all day-to-day academic and administrative queries. Counselling and advice is available on module content and assessment and this is further supported by the use of a managed learning environment (Blackboard).

(ii) Feedback and Learner Progress

Programme participants have tended to benefit from two types of written feed-

back on coursework, (i) individual feedback for each learner and (ii) general coursework feedback to a class outlining the main strengths and weaknesses of coursework submitted. The timely provision of feedback allows learners make any necessary adjustments to their coursework. Close monitoring of progress is also necessary as is careful attention to the setting of coursework deadlines and the proactive management of learner workload.

(iii) Study Skills Development

Three formal accredited study skills modules are provided at the early stages of the programme. These modules include: planning and organising study; learning from lectures; reading techniques; note-taking techniques; memory techniques; referencing guidelines; preparing for examinations; reflective learning; understanding learning; levels of learning; sourcing and evaluating literature; developing academic writing skills; how to learn creatively and developing critical thinking skills. The modules have been designed and are delivered and assessed by the personal tutors. A critical decision was made to ensure that the modules were not delivered in isolation from other modules on the programme and that the type of assessment adopted was designed to allow learners develop the skills needed to satisfactorily complete the assessment for other modules. Furthermore, the timing of the delivery of study skills is important to ensure that provision is made for progressive skills development at key stages of the programme.

These accredited learning skills modules have allowed learners to quickly develop the main learning competencies needed, develop confidence in their own study skills and understand what is expected from them during the course of their studies.

(iv) Induction and Learner Integration

Initial induction is scheduled over a weekend prior to the official programme commencement date. The purpose of this weekend is to ease the learners transition into formal education. The weekend sessions include: what to expect from the programme; issues surrounding returning to education as a mature learner; an introduction to note-taking; reading and memory techniques; essay writing; the establishment of peer support networks with fellow learners; meetings with past programme participants and the sharing of experiences.

(v) Personal Tutors

An early decision of the programme management was that the programme office would be staffed by personal tutors qualified to masters level in business so that they could provide day-to-day academic advice to learners. The personal tutor acts as the administrative manager of the programme and is responsible for the provision of academic support outside of the class weekends on campus. This academic support is provided in consultation with and in line with the needs of the academic teaching staff.

This personal tutor system allows for the academic and administrative needs of learners to be served through one unifying medium which is managed at a programme-level and also serves as the central interface between the learner and the institution. The personal tutor acts as an intermediary between the learner and the institution and in helping to shape University policy on the provision of support for adult learners studying at a distance.

Reflections

The framework of learner support that has evolved displays innovative and progressive features when benchmarked against the needs and interests of adult learners. It is also a case that provides clear illustration of many of the factors that are influential in determining the success or effectiveness of student learning when applied to the adult learner studying at a distance. But, perhaps, the case is most valuable for the way in which it highlights the importance of delegating a central and orchestrating role to the local programme office, for academic as well as administrative duties, and in policy formulation. The single greatest achievement of the programme has been in providing an effective 'voice' for the non-traditional learner body within a school predominantly geared to full-time day learners. While the framework of learner support outlined in this case study requires a significant financial and time investment on the part of institutions, the subsequent high learner retention rates that can be achieved makes this a very worthwhile investment.

Conclusion

This paper set out to present a case study of how the features of effective learner support were implemented in the case of UCD's distance learning business studies programmes. The paper proposed a framework of support founded upon the 'centrality of the learner', which advances the debate beyond the traditional dichotomy in learner support between academic and non-academic responsi-