Professionalism in Career Guidance and Counselling – how professional do trainee career practitioners feel at the end of a postgraduate programme of study?

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The purpose of this research was to explore the extent to which our students identified with some key characteristics and competences that define a professional career guidance and counselling practitioner. We asked them to reflect on...

1) their professionalism
2) their level of competence and
3) their appreciation of ethics

We wanted to emphasise the student voice – the views of entrants into the profession have rarely been researched.

We also wanted to reflect on the competences of career guidance and counselling professionals which emerged from an Erasmus project (NICE) we are involved in and on the QCGD learning outcomes on ethics and professionalism.
The CGC Professional is ‘... the fundamental and unifying role concept which anchors CGC professionals in their practice’

(NICE, 2012: 52)

The professional role covers ‘... the general academic competences which students of career guidance and counselling should develop’

(NICE, 2012: 64)
QCGD learning outcomes

* the ethical principles that apply to career guidance and development interventions

* strategies for upholding ethical practice and professional standards

* the boundaries and limitations of own professional expertise and competence

* what is meant by reflective practice and continuous improvement
Professionalism

19th Century: Control of specialist knowledge, protectionist entry requirements, no government interference, self regulated practice, Chartered status, male (law, medicine, clergy) (MacDonald, 1995)

20th Century: Growth of state sector professions (health, education, career guidance) offering free at the point of delivery services and managed by local democracies; high female participation; academic ‘training’ in HE (Evetts, 2011; Banks, 2004)

21st Century: Professionals are ‘practitioner-workers’ in large employers who manage occupational identity and give a sense of purpose; regulated by legislation and ‘accounting logic’ (Evetts, 2011; Broadbent, 1997). Professionals have moved from being seen as ‘experts in their field to ‘facilitators’ (Ball 1984; Watts, 2001). ‘... the more knowledge intensive society becomes, the less deferential it will be. A better educated public will be more confident of its own judgement, and less content to take authority on trust’ (Broadbent et al., 1997).
Questionnaires were issued to 2 groups of students undertaking the Postgraduate Diploma in Career Guidance and Development at the University of the West of Scotland

- Group A (N=14) had just completed a course of full-time study
- Group B (N=7) were existing practitioners half-way through the same programme but being taught on-line

Questions enabled students to reflect on 3 themes –
- Professionalism (using the NICE 1 (2012) characteristics of the career guidance and counselling professional)
- Their level of competence and skills acquisition (using several models from literature)
- Their understanding of ethical practice (using the CDI 2012 Code of Ethics)
17 statements that define professional competence were extracted from the NICE (2012) Handbook.

Of these, both groups of students ranked the following as ‘most valued’:

- Adherence to professional values
- Adherence to ethical standards

Group A ranked engage in CPD, respect diversity and human rights and engage in reflective practice in their top 5.

Group B had relating research and theory to practice, responsibility to one’s employing organisation and having the relevant qualification in their top 5.

- Are part-time students better able to relate their learning to a work context? Are full-time students more concerned with theory?
Reflecting on professionalism

- ‘You need to be aware of your own development in order to do your best with the client. You must adhere to the ethical guidelines and be competent in what you do’ (Group A, student 9)

- ‘As a professional ... you need to respect a client as a person and you need to be confident in your own role and aware of your limitations’ (Group B, student 3)

- ‘I believe in being dedicated to the work that I do and to the organisation which pays my salary ... if I did not believe in the values or ethical standards of my employer I could not work for them’ (Group B, student 4)
### Theme 2: Stages of competence development

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<td>Group A: 0</td>
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<td>Group B: 0</td>
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- Students in Group B were more inclined to see themselves as competent by the end of the course, a significant minority in Group A were hesitant to say this by the end of their course.

- It is interesting to note that students identify with the word ‘conscious’ when reflecting on the stage of competence. No student in either group claimed ‘unconscious incompetence’ and only 1 Group B student partially identified with ‘unconscious competence’.
# Theme 2: Stages of skills development

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## Stages of skills development

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**Group B**
Stages of skills development

Development of competence

Group A
- Novice
- Advanced beginner
- Competent
- Proficient
- Expert

Group B
A significant majority of students in Group A characterise their development as moving from ‘advanced beginner’ through ‘competent’ to ‘proficient’ after several years’ experience.

In contrast, students in Group B regarded themselves as ‘competent’/‘expert’ sooner, none regarded themselves as ‘novice’ and only one as ‘advanced beginner’ at any stage in their development.

Group B essentially demonstrated a ‘shallower’ progression than Group A perhaps suggesting they felt they had less to learn.

A number from both groups regarded ‘proficiency’ as the target by 2 years after course completion, far fewer aspired to ‘expert’.
Reflecting on competence

* ‘I feel that I am now consciously competent and am aware of my role but am always thinking about how I am doing and how to improve’ (Group A, student 1)
* ‘I feel prepared to start working in this field but I am aware that I am not completely up to speed and have a lot to learn’ (Group A, student 6)
* ‘Currently aware of my practice because of my studies’ (Group A, student 5)
* ‘I have some self-awareness but am still a little unsure’ (Group A, student 9)
* ‘At the moment I could describe myself as being consciously incompetent but heading towards consciously competent which I hope to be once I complete the qualification and get more practice’ (Group B, student 3)
Here we explored student ethical values based on reference to the current (2012) Code of Ethics developed by the UK professional body, the Career Development Institute. Students were invited to rank order the importance of the CDI statements of ethics on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being ‘of very great importance’ and 1 ‘not at all important’.

All of the CDI ethical statements were supported by Group A and Group B as important, none scoring under 6. Competence and benefitting the client were the most highly regarded ethics but when forced to consider a wider range of ethical practices, students were also able to identify the importance of benefitting society, benefitting their employers and benefitting their profession.
Conclusions

* Students put great value on professionalism being about helping their clients and being able to reflect on their developing practice: these themes emerge throughout the responses from both groups of students.

* They support all aspects of ethical practice and they describe themselves mainly as ‘advanced beginners’ or ‘competent’ by the end of their course with aspirations to being ‘proficient’ but not necessarily ‘expert’.
**Conclusions**

- Students were able to differentiate between competence and professionalism, with the majority (14 from 21) suggesting that professionalism is more than competence.
- Students saw themselves as moving from a state of ‘incompetence’ to one of ‘competence’ by the end of their course although they did not tend to aspire to ‘unconscious competence’.
- Adhering to professional values and ethical standards scored highly as professional characteristics on course completion. This reflects the view expressed in our paper that being a ‘certain sort of person’ is perhaps a prerequisite to being an effective career guidance and counselling professional.
The research appears to suggest that students do not explicitly identify with their profession on leaving an academic course (having a responsibility to one’s employer was only valued by some of those who were in employment): perhaps full-time students still need to be socialised into the job by undertaking it rather than by learning about it on a full-time course of study.
References