An Exploration of the efficacy of the University of Limerick Graduate Diploma in Guidance and Counselling; Using Past Experiences to Inform Future Practice.

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ABSTRACT

The Guidance Counsellor has a significant role to play in Irish secondary schools and adult education as they provide for personal, social, educational and vocational development. At the National Guidance Forum (2007) the ‘Guidance for Life’ report was launched. In this report it suggests areas for improvement in order to enhance Guidance Services. One such suggestion it lists is to,

Ensure that people working in guidance are well-trained and supported, with proper quality assurance procedures in place.

(2007, p.34)

In order to observe such a suggestion an exploration into the efficacy of the University of Limerick graduate diploma in Guidance and Counselling to provide quality graduates to practice as guidance counsellors is the primary task of this research. This paper presents an aspect of the research which explores findings from a questionnaire distributed to 250 graduates from the University of Limerick Guidance and Counselling programme. Firstly a background to the research will be presented, followed by a description of the theoretical frameworks surrounding the analysis of the questionnaire. Finally some of the questionnaire findings will be discussed and conclusions will be drawn. This paper draws on the graduates’ experiences of the University of Limerick Guidance Counselling programme in order to inform future practice in Guidance Counselling education programmes.

INTRODUCTION

When observing the Irish guidance and counselling context, the Education Act (1998) states that “a school shall use its available resources to ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices”. Today the role of the guidance counsellor in Ireland is central to the whole guidance service which pupils receive. The various roles which the guidance counsellor undertakes are listed by the National professional bodies for guidance counselling in Ireland namely, The Institute for Guidance Counsellors (IGC) and the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE). Listed among the roles are counselling, support, assessment, information, classroom guidance activities, planning and organising workshop learning, referrals and professional development. Ryan (1993) noted how,
The Irish guidance counselling service tends to be a compromise between the American model which emphasises personal counselling and the European model which almost exclusively focuses on the narrow concept of career guidance.

(1993, p.63)

A more recent study for The Economic and Social Research Institute in Ireland looked specifically at guidance provision in second-level schools. This study documented how “schools varied widely in the nature of the guidance counsellor’s role” (McCoy et al 2006, p.91). This study observed how variation existed in terms of the range of activities of the Guidance Counsellor and the balance of time spent on the areas of career guidance, educational support and personal support. When literature is examined closely to determine an explanation for this variation McCarthy (2001) suggests that,

The priorities that guidance workers attach to their work tasks appear more a function of the particular type of training they have undertaken. They may not necessarily be a function of clients needs.

(McCarthy 2001, p.7)

Programmes such as the University of Limerick graduate diploma in Guidance and Counselling can be said to have a significant effect on the nature of guidance counselling people receive. The subject content and methods used to teach the content influence Guidance Counsellors not only during their participation in the programme but throughout their career and consequently the people they deal with. The aim of this research is to observe if the type of training offered by the University of Limerick programme is in fact, influencing the service graduates provide. Furthermore an objective of the research includes investigating the University of Limerick graduates in areas such as, the reasons underpinning the high demand by teachers applying and wishing to study this programme, the career paths of graduates, the impact of these Guidance Counsellors on post primary education and adult guidance and the continuing professional development needs of these graduates.

THE PROGRAMME

The graduate diploma in Guidance and Counselling at the University of Limerick is a two year part-time programme that is delivered over four semesters and includes an induction week, two residential weekends and two summer schools, a school placement and an industrial placement as part of the course. Participants are required to attend ten sessions of personal counselling each year of participating on the course. Participants can take part in the programme on campus at the University of Limerick or they may choose from three other outreach locations such as Carrick-on-Shannon Education Centre, Dublin West Education Centre or at Kerry Education Service Centre. The programme has been in operation at the University of Limerick for just over ten years and over two-hundred and fifty Guidance Counsellors have graduated from the programme.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

To begin any attempt to move toward an understanding of the efficacy of a guidance counselling education programme, a basic understanding of the development of Guidance Counselling must be outlined. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to present a comprehensive review of the literature on the development of Guidance Counselling, points can be summarised under the following headings; 1. The influence of pastoral roles, 2. The influence of religious roles and 3. Responding the client needs. As McLeod puts it,
To understand what counselling is, and what counsellors do, it is necessary to have an appreciation of the historical origins and development of this form of helping.

(McLeod 1998, p.29)

Baker and Gerler describe,

What we think of currently as school counselling did not begin with a formal design consisting of established goals, assumptions, and functions. It evolved to what it is today.

(2004, p.10)

Baker and Gerler describe how responding to local needs was the main influence when initiating guidance type services. Parsons, Beers and Freud influenced the development of school counselling in the early years of the twentieth century in the United States by responding to the needs for the students they taught. This lead to a growth in the 1920’s and 1930’s of the number of guidance teachers in schools however as Baker and Gerler note, “no widely accepted standards for training or practice existed” (2004, p.12). As a result what emerged as the dominant school guidance model was described as trait and factor, or directive guidance which promoted enhancing normal adjustment, goal setting and assisting individuals to achieve satisfying lifestyles. Counselling included analysis, synthesis, diagnosis, prognosis, counselling, and follow-up and techniques for forcing conformity and changing attitudes were recommended. The directive approach to guidance ultimately proved to be too constricted. This was not the ideal situation, as the need for personal counselling during War times was at a high point in the United States, it was however the beginning and it led to improvements throughout the guidance and counselling service in the United States. Most significantly, Post World War II the work of Carl Rogers, which emphasised the counselling relationship and climate, gradually emerged as the dominant guidance function in the 1930’s and 1940’s. Baker and Gerler describe how “Rogers influence had moved school counsellors away from being highly directive towards being eclectic” (2004, p.13) during a time (1960s) described as the boom era in United States. Some of the great theories with regard to guidance and counselling are formed as a result of theorists systematic response to peoples needs be it psycho-social needs, goal setting needs or the need to be listened to. New roles for guidance counsellors have been devised over time. Baker (1994) cited Repetto et al (2008) describes how the role of guidance practitioner is defined according to the tasks they carry out, and as these tasks change over time, counsellors must be prepared to exercise many different professional roles. Today guidance counsellors work in an environment which has accumulated a vast number of theories on guidance counsellor competency, career development and counselling theories. Repetto (2008) explains that based on increasing globalization, societal changes and technological changes there is a need to improve the initial and continuous education of guidance counsellors. However Repetto does state that there is little agreement on the type of training counsellors must receive in order to provide these services.

RESEARCH TO DATE

Research to date has established that implementing the Guidance Counsellor education programme is a complex task.

Presently one can observe the international variation in guidance counselling education programmes and the variation as to who decides on the programme. This in effect causes the implementation of a guidance counsellor education programme to be
a complex task. The complexity of the personal narrative which includes the course directors own experience and education mixed with the difficulty of trying to be inclusive to National policies, professional body frameworks and institutional policy is substantial. This is an ongoing issue which course leaders need to address through awareness, membership of professional guidance and counselling forums and continuing professional development.

(Geary and Liston, 2009)

It has been established that the course director’s ability to be reflexive and knowledgeable in areas such as policy development, international competency requirements and client’s needs significantly affects the Guidance Counsellor Education programme. Professor Van Esbroeck, (2000) described how European surveys in relation to the career guidance and counselling provisions, the roles and tasks performed within the services and the training and qualification of guidance and counselling staff indicate that there exists an extreme variety. Guidance Counselling Education programmes are said to be devised with a top-down or bottom-up approach. Sultana (2009) describes how both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses.

A key consideration here is which strategy is best suited to ensure sensitivity towards changing roles in a rapidly changing environment. If frameworks are built around the competences excellent practitioners have demonstrated in the past, they may fail to identify evolving competence requirements unless they are up-dated regularly.

(2009, p.23)

McCarthy (2001) explains how both approaches are in existence when he describes how across countries there is wide variation on who decides the content and methodology of initial training for guidance workers. McCarthy observed that in Finland it is the course directors who decide on content and methodology. In Ireland it is the course directors & Professional Association and in the UK it is the course directors, Professional Association & Government who influence the programme. When looking further at curriculum development in education the concept of backward mapping is significant to consider in this context. Backward mapping (Elmore, 1994) assumes essentially that the closer one is to the source of the problem the greater is one’s ability to influence it. Guidance counsellor education programmes provide graduates with the education required to address client’s needs/problems.

The problem-solving ability of complex systems depends not on hierarchical control but on maximising discretion at the point where the problem is most immediate.

(1994, p.247)

With this considered the importance of the bottom up approach in guidance counselling would be suggested as the more appropriate at addressing client’s needs. Findings from phase one of this research establish that a combination model of both top-down course content requirements and bottom-up course director influence the course. The initial research findings establish grounding for the research to further explore issues such as the influence of complexities on the quality of graduates of a Guidance Counsellor Education programme and the outcomes for graduates from participating in the programme.

THEROETICAL FRAMEWORK
The theoretical framework for exploring the efficacy of the University of Limerick Guidance and Counselling programme is based on a framework presented at the 2009 IAEVG (International Association of Education and Vocational Guidance) conference. The framework has been developed by the Canadian Research Working Group on Evidence-Based Practice in Career Development. During the presentation Borgen et al describe how “without efficacy studies career services are vulnerable” (2009, slide 14). (Bernes et al. 2007) describe research regarding efficacy as having the potential to significantly contribute to the advancement of the field of career guidance and counselling. The model Borgen et al suggest for studying the effectiveness of guidance counselling is the input-process-outcome framework. Under the heading of input resources available such as, staff, funding, facilities, infrastructure and community resources are listed. Under the heading of process activities that link to outputs or deliverables, generic interventions and specific interventions such as interventions used by service providers skills used by service providers, home practice completed by clients, programs offered by agency, involvement by 3rd parties, quality of service indicators, stakeholder satisfaction are listed. Under the heading of outcome indicators of client change such as learning outcomes, knowledge and skills linked to intervention, personal attribute outcomes, changes in attitudes, intrapersonal variables (self-esteem, motivation, independence), impact outcomes, impact on client’s life, e.g., employment status, enrolled in training, societal and relational impact and economic impact are listed.

Similarly to this framework a model of classroom learning known as the Presage-Process-Product (3P’s) model has been considered. Biggs (2001) describes how learning can be identified, analysed and evaluated using presage, process and product model. The 3P’s model describes the influences on student learning outcomes and in doing so also illustrates the learning process.

![Figure 1. The ‘3P’s’ Model of Teaching and Learning (Biggs 2001, p.136)](image-url)

These models (Biggs and Borgen et al) are observed along with the reflective cycle described by McNiff et al (2002) to from a three phase (input, process and output) framework which will be used when observing the data gained from the questionnaire. While the model for this research mainly reflects Borgen et al’s model it takes on board aspects of the Presage stage of
the Biggs model in order to consider student factors carefully and it considers the exploring and identifying strands of the reflective cycle, therefore it can be described as an eclectic model.

**THE QUESTIONNAIRE**

The questionnaire was sent to all 234 graduates of the University of Limerick graduate diploma in Guidance Counselling. It consisted of both structured and unstructured questions which explored graduates experiences of the University of Limerick programme. Questions focused on gaining data in relation to the reasons graduates had for choosing to complete the programme, their career paths following completion of the programme and their continuing professional development needs. Data surrounding the priorities they attach to their work and the skills and competencies they gained from completing the course was also sought. The focus of questions developed throughout phase one of the research and also throughout a piloting process. A total of 37.3% returned the postal questionnaire. Responses to the structured questions were analysed using SPSS and answers to unstructured questions were thematically grouped in excel.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The analysis of results begins by observing both qualitative and quantitative data surrounding inputs, processes and outputs to the graduate diploma in Guidance Counselling. Inputs examined include student factors such as funding and the reasons graduates chose to participate in the programme. The course context factors such as the infrastructure, communications, resources and devised programme content are examined. Process factors analysed include the learning experiences graduates had during the programme and outcome factors examined include the service and careers of graduates following completion of the programme. For the purpose of this paper the emerging theme of the effect of the personal counselling focus of the University of Limerick programme is examined under input, process and output factors and discussed in depth. It has been explained in early parts of this paper that the focus of the guidance counselling programme and guidance counselling service is an ongoing debate. Should Guidance Counsellors be providing a careers service or personal counselling service?

**OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS**

Quantitative analysis of the questionnaire presents the following findings in relation to students input factors. A gender imbalance which shows 68.3% of the programmes participants being female is not surprising considering the nature of the programme and the fact that 82% of participants are coming from the teaching profession. With only 16.5% of participants receiving funding or part-funding, a substantial financial commitment to the programme is evident for over 80% of the participants with one such participant commenting on the programme being “enjoyable but dammed expensive”. However many note the fact that the programme is part-time is attractive and supports their continuation in the working environment. “The part-time aspect has allowed me to stay at work”. “I was not in a position financially to take a year off to study, so the part-time nature of the course made it accessible”. In fact when you observe the reasons graduates had for participating in the programme, the location (82%) and part-time convenience (89%) rate most highly. With regard to tutor input many made comments in relation to the nature of the relationship between the tutors and students. Tutors were described as having “genuine interest in students with staff interaction positive and helpful, overall excellent”. In general comments were
positive towards tutors on the course however specific negative comments did emerge. “I felt sometimes the tutors were not well enough prepared”, “high level of student interaction and good level of support from tutors”. Some negative comments emerged in relation to the administration of the programme, “administrative/organisational issues could have in some instances been better some more planning in advance” although interestingly it was the counselling aspect of the course which was noted to be most organised. “The UL programme was to a large extent very well organised and well run especially the counselling aspect.”

When observing the qualitative data for process factors aspects of the programme content and methodology which aided the learning process for participants emerged. Many commented on how they liked the assessment for learning approach, “I liked that it was continuous assessment and we had no written exams” however it was also noted on some occasions that this type of assessment was quite demanding “I resented having to complete so many essays”. A small number of responses highlighted the secondary school focus of the programme as being frustrating especially when working in an adult guidance context. Following the career paths of graduates it can be observed that 60% work in secondary guidance sector and just over 15% work in adult guidance sector. This figure will be useful for course tutors to consider when preparing modules in the future.

Overall the main body of graduates reflected on the programme as a very positive experience. With many comments noting the significant outcomes of the programme, “overall a positive experience. I grew a lot personally from the programme and my professional career was enhanced greatly from doing the course” and “it was a very positive experience. The course contributed greatly to my own self-development and greatly helped me to carry out my duties as deputy principal in a more enlightened fashion”.

THE FOCUS OF THE GUIDANCE COUNSELLING PROGRAMME; INPUT

The most interesting finding is in relation to the personal counselling focus of the graduate diploma in Guidance Counselling. The personal counselling domain is openly said to be the philosophy driving the University of Limerick graduate diploma in guidance counselling. With the course prospectus stating that personal counselling is ‘afforded primacy’ within the course and with just over 30% of graduates listing the programmes focus on personal counselling as a reason that attracted them to the programme many qualitative comments regarding the value the personal counselling focus emerged. Comments included, “The personal development was excellent”, “Very strong on counselling training. I found this of huge benefit in my role as a guidance counsellor” and “Heavy emphasis in the course around the counselling side of things. Well worth doing”. The psychological aspects of guidance counselling and focus on the personal counselling dimension are emphasised throughout the course. Psychology, sociology and economics are all connected with guidance counselling programmes and practice but the extent to which each underpins a guidance counselling education programme is debated in literature widely. In the UK context Watts & Law (1996) describe how trends in the past have seen many changes in the focus of guidance counselling.

Indeed as a crude generalisation, it could be argued that whereas in the 1940’s and 1950’s the careers field was dominated by psychology, in the 1960’s and 1970’s this dominance was challenged in the UK by sociology, and in the 1980’s and 1990’s by economics.

(1996, p.1)

Guidance Counselling education programmes are easily categorised into those with psychological, sociological and socio-economic emphasis and the comments from the
questionnaire such as “The course places a heavy emphasis on Counselling’ strongly confirm
the existence of the personal focus in the University of Limerick programme. Chamberlain
and Delaney in article entitled ‘Guidance Counselling in Irish Schools’ state that,

Although broad parameters were derived from theoretical models developed in the
United States and Europe, it is felt that the form taken by school guidance in Ireland
should meet the distinctive educational and cultural needs of Irish society.

(British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 1977, Vol 5, no.1 pg 51)

The Irish guidance counselling service is among a minority of European Countries which
takes a personal counselling emphasis. The breakdown of what areas guidance covers in a
number of European countries is analysed in an ERSI report ‘Guidance for all?’ From the
breakdown one can see that the emphasis in Europe is on the Vocational and Educational
guidance of students with few countries providing personal guidance. Ireland however is
among one of the few countries that does support personal guidance. The ERSI report
describes how,

International work (OECD, CEDEFOP and World Bank reports) has tended to focus
attention on the nature of career guidance services operating in schools, giving
considerably less attention to the more ‘personal counselling’ dimension of the role
which has traditionally been a feature of Guidance Counselling services in Irish
schools.

(2006, p.13)

THE FOCUS OF THE GUIDANCE COUNSELLING PROGRAMME; PROCESS

While many positive comments with regard to the personal focus of the University of
Limerick programme existed. A minority of comments expressed a weakness to the
programmes lack of focus on careers education. “I felt it was lacking with regards to
developing knowledge and skills in the career area/ subject choice area and the course
selection area, which a huge part of the work” and “The area dealing with careers exploration
and practical work regarding careers information etc. was very poor.” These comments would
suggest a need to improve the course in order to facilitate career education more effectively.
These comments also highlight that even though the graduates are from the same education
programme the counselling versus careers debate continues to exist. This suggests that
McCarthy’s comment with regard to the close relationship between guidance counsellors
work tasks and the training they receive may not necessarily be the case. When graduates
current work tasks were explored it was found that providing an information service was the
task most often required followed closely by providing a counselling service. Consequently it
may be the case that the course director and course team would reconsider the amount of time
spent on the counselling aspect of the course to allow for more careers education. However
this is a consideration which needs to be looked at carefully as qualitative comments from
graduates lack clarity in relation to this debate. On one hand comments such as….

“….the content covered over the two years of the course is far too much for a graduate
diploma other graduate diplomas have much less contact for the same qualification.
The counselling content in terms of hours and personal counselling is far too heavy.
This means the course lacks balance.”

On the other hand…. 
“...when I embarked on the programme I was very much aware of the time given to counselling as part of the course. However in stepping into the 'careers' class I felt very much in the dark. I relied heavily on others for support and spent more than an average amount of time planning for classes. That said I still would not change the counselling aspect of the course.”

Overall the counselling aspect is looked upon favourably by graduates. While some recognise a need for more careers information they also recognise that they can assess the information easily.

THE FOCUS OF THE GUIDANCE COUNSELLING PROGRAMME; OUTPUT

Findings from a Finish comparative study (Lairio, M. and Nissila, P., 2002) of the School Counsellors’ conceptions of the core tasks of school counselling in 1990 and 1997 questioned counsellors on ‘What core tasks do they consider to be core tasks of school counselling’. Findings show that in 1990 the core task was noted (40%) to be career counselling whereas in 1997 supporting growth and development (40%) was listed as the core task with career counselling dropping to (14%). This suggests a significant change over time with regard to the core role of the Guidance Counsellor in Finland. Lairio, M. and Nissila, P. (2002) suggest this is due to a changed and increasing in problems facing teenagers over time. Therefore it is important for education programmes such as the University of Limerick graduate diploma in Guidance Counselling to keep up to date with the changes in core tasks which Guidance Counsellors require to be prepared for.

Most recently it has also been argued that it is impossible to separate so distinctly career and personal guidance. Porfeli et al (2005) describe Super (1984), Krumboltz (1994) and Holland (1997) theories’ of career development and by doing so they note how it is both the person and the context as well as the process and content orientations collectively that provide the most complete picture of career development. The guidance and counselling system in Irish secondary schools has recognised this climate, as guidance counsellors integrate personal counselling and career counselling into the service they provide pupils. A study by the Department of Education cited in Shiel and Lewis (1992) shows the involvement of personal counselling in Irish Secondary School,

The 1985 survey of the School Guidance Committee ranked individual personal counselling as the activity in which they engaged most frequently at Junior-Cycle level.

(1992, p.11)

In setting the context for the research it was recognised that the strength of the personal dimension in guidance counselling in Ireland may be due to the work and influence of Carl Rogers. Many similarities between the development of guidance counselling in Ireland and America also come to light when setting the context for the development of guidance counselling. When we look at the British context McGuinness describes how “In 1979, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate published a report (DES, 1979) in which they described 'the personal development of children' as ‘the central purpose of education’” (1998, p.8). This suggests that personal counselling was held with high esteem in the education system in Britain. However as we read on McGuinness describes a country which evolved with more of a focus on “testing, vocationalism, central control and, of course, the market place.” (1998, p.8) Economic commentators feel this may be the way forward and countries such as Norway and Poland have also recognised this view by separating out a distinct career guidance role. In the ERSI report it states,
Within such ‘holistic’ systems like Ireland, economic commentators warn that there is a danger that career and educational guidance in schools can be marginalised within the broad concept of guidance.

(McCoy et al 2006, p.15)

They maintain that counsellors spend much of their time dealing with pupil’s personal problems and are possibly falling short of helping pupils with educational, vocational choices and long term career planning. However it has been argued that by complying with such economic views would in turn led to a situation where,

Pupils and students are viewed more as future contributors to the national economy, valuable for that potential contribution, rather than as intrinsically valuable for their humanity.

(McGuiness 1998, p.9)

When analysing the output factors of the University of Limerick graduate diploma in guidance counselling it can be established that the programme views the clients graduates will deal with as clients with both personal and career needs. The University of Limerick graduate gains competencies to provide for counselling to a high standard and provide for careers information when required.

“It was a very difficult programme, but in terms of personal and professional development it enabled me to feel confident in my role as a Guidance Counsellor. I felt competent in my dual role of both career advisor and counsellor.”

CONCLUSION

This paper has given an overview of the whole research area by outlining a background to the development of Guidance and Counselling and briefly explaining the research to date. By particularly focusing on the questionnaire framework for analysis and presenting results an in depth element of the research has been explored with reference to international examples. The debate continues with regard to the counselling versus the career focus of guidance counselling. The University of Limericks graduate diploma in guidance counselling prioritises the personal counselling focus while considering the need for career guidance. The final phase of this research hopes to explore this concept further in order to establish the clients’ experiences of the graduates of the University of Limerick programme.

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