

Why evaluate guidance?

By Deirdre Hughes, University Reader & Director at the Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby, England.

Do we need to evaluate career guidance?

The search for meaningful outcomes that clearly demonstrate the social and economic benefits of career guidance is a world-wide phenomenon. Throughout the 1990's, a strong case was made by Killeen et al (1992) on the 'economic value of career guidance', followed five years later by a contrasting emphasis on the 'social benefits of career guidance' (Killeen et al, 1999). This dual approach was specifically designed to inform differing political parties on the merits of investing in the development of high quality careers work. More recently, academic experts such as Sampson et al (1999; 2000; 2004)¹; Mayston (2003)²; Hibert (2004)³; Magnusson & Lalande (2005)⁴ conclude that the benefits which career services provide must be made **more explicit** in order to (i) retain and improve levels of current and future funding; and (ii) develop evidence-based practice⁵ that demonstrates the extent to which different forms of provision can yield positive returns for various recipients. Clearly, being able to identify both 'quantifiable' and 'qualitative' service achievements is integral to the processes of resource allocation and setting of targets for guidance providers.

Who's setting the agenda?

It is important from the outset to recognise that providing evidence on *what works* and *what does not work* is likely to vary at differing levels for different people and organisations. For example:

- **Clients and customers** are likely to be most concerned with having **access to high quality services** designed to help support them with important life and work decisions i.e. was the service accessible and useful?
- **Managers and practitioners** are likely to be most concerned with **formative issues**, i.e. which elements of the service contributed most effectively to the outcomes achieved and how can these elements be best managed to contribute towards future self-improvement?
- **Policy-makers** are likely to be most concerned with **summative evaluations** and **cost-benefit outcomes** i.e. did the service achieve the outcomes expected of it and what are the cost implications for current and future provision?

¹ Op.cit.

² Mayston, D. (unpublished) *Identifying Ideal Practice in Measuring and Maximising the Effectiveness of IAG for Adults*. Centre for Performance Evaluation and Resource Management, York University

³ Hiebert, B. (2005) International Competencies for Educational and Vocational Guidance Practitioners *The Career Counsellor Newsletter No. 17.p. 11. The Canadian Career Development Foundation. January 2005 edition.*

⁴ Magnusson, K. & Lalande, V. (2005) New Strides in Canadian Career Development Research. *The Career Counsellor Newsletter No. 17 pp.3-4. The Canadian Career Development Foundation. January 2005 edition.*

⁵ Evidence-based practice (EBP) is a process of self-directed and lifelong learning in which caring about our clients' requirements creates the need for important information on diagnosis, prognosis, responses and other factors impacting on individuals' career development. (Hughes, 2003)

- **Employers** are likely to be most concerned with **receiving appropriately referred clients into their companies** i.e. did the service provide an effective service in terms of signposting or supplying the ‘right sort’ of people for the labour market?

Therefore the challenge is how best to develop differing types of evidence that will satisfy the needs of a diverse range of stakeholders.

Measuring the quality and impact of interventions

The issue of measuring the quality and impact of career guidance interventions is multi-faceted and complex. Given this is a human activity which is mostly subject to degrees of unpredictability and uncertainty, (particularly in relation to the individual values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours), it is unsurprising that impact is difficult, if not sometimes impossible, to measure. There are a **wide range of factors which influence individual career choice and decision-making** which can impact on outcomes; **career guidance is frequently not a discrete input**, but rather is embedded in other contexts, such as learning provision, employer/employee relationships and/ or within multi-strand initiatives; and **comparing the evidence available in different studies is problematic** when the nature of career guidance, the depth of work undertaken and client groups, often varies considerably; and, **as yet, there is not an agreed set of outcome measures for career guidance, or common methods of collecting data**, except in the case of a limited number of discrete programmes or areas of work. Sultana (2005)⁶ also supports this proposition highlighting the difficulty of seeking to isolate career guidance for the purposes of establishing causal relationships (e.g. between guidance provision and ‘drop-out’ rates).

Defining quality assurance

Throughout the UK and further afield, differing quality assurance models exist that have been developed and applied to the planning, management and delivery of career guidance services. These include approaches that seek to: -

- (i) standardise the process of organisational self-assessment⁷;
- (ii) measure the effectiveness of IAG based upon ‘ideal input’ factors⁸;
- (iii) gather evidence to demonstrate accountability⁹;
- (iv) distinguish between the various input, process and outcome factors involved in the delivery of IAG¹⁰ and
- (v) apply a tri-variable model of quality assurance for IAG¹¹.

Although these theoretical approaches differ in the detail of their content and application, common underlying themes exist which indicate clearly that quality assurance is typically involved in the evaluation of **inputs, processes and outcomes**. This common approach is illustrated below: -

⁶ Op. cit. p.1 paragraph 1.2

⁷ <http://www.guidance-research.org/EG/ip/theory/tp/efqm>

⁸ Mayston, D. (2002a). *Evaluating the Benefits of Career Guidance*, Centre for Guidance Studies: Research Report Series, University of Derby

⁹ Sampson, J.P., Reardon, R.C., Peterson, G.W. & Lenz, J.G. (2004). *Career Counseling and Services: a Cognitive Information Processing Approach*. Chapter 14. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

¹⁰ den Boer, P., Mittendorf, K., Scheerens, J. & Sjenitzer, T. (2005). *Indicators and Benchmarks for Lifelong Guidance*. Thessaloniki: Cedefop

¹¹ Evangelista, L. (2003) Quality assurance in career guidance services – a tri-variable model. *Professionalità Journal*. No. 78 Italy: Editrice la Scuola – www.orientamento.it/orientamento/tri-varibale.pdf.

Inputs

For example:

- Number and characteristics of service users, and the number of sessions per user.
- Number, type and qualifications of staff available to deliver the service.
- Infra-structure including accommodation and other relevant resources.
- Costs, including financial resources allocated to guidance by government policy makers, and time and other resources reserved by providers for guidance activities.

Process

For example:

- Content of services provided, including the focus and type of activities used (e.g. information, advice, in-depth assessment), and the means used (e.g. telephone, face-to-face, group work, on-line).
- Procedures, including promptness of responses to enquiries, appointment lead-times and practitioner guidelines.
- Quality assurance of the management of the service.

Outcomes

For example:

- Level of user satisfaction with the service provided.
- Extent of user personal development, including the learning of decision-making and career management skills.
- Percentage of users progressing into employment, education or training.

Language often gets in the way!

However, there often appears some confusion in relation to terminology used by policy-makers, academics, managers and/or practitioners. For example, Sultana (2005) draws upon key findings from a major European research study which examined ‘indicators and benchmarks for career guidance’¹². He concluded that “key words such as ‘outputs’ and ‘outcomes’ (not to mention the distinctions between ‘information’, ‘advice’ and ‘guidance’) have different meanings in different national contexts (e.g. in some contexts the distinction is made between process factors in the guidance interview, while in others the focus is purely on throughputs that are measurable in quantitative terms - such as placement in jobs or in training” (p2). From this, it is apparent that other terms such as **outputs**, **throughputs** and **productivity gains**¹³ also emerge in the parlance of quality assurance in career guidance. For example, an ‘output’ may represent the number of client action plans produced as a result of a given level of intervention(s)¹⁴; similarly, a ‘throughput’ measure may represent the number of clients using the service at any given time. In contrast, the term ‘outcome’ is often used to describe the impact of the intervention on the individual client i.e. the level of client satisfaction or the rate of progression into learning and/or work.

¹² Sultana, R. G. (in press) *Indicators and Benchmarks in Career Guidance: Summary report on the conclusions of the mutual learning activity*. Cedefop / Bundesagentur für Arbeit. Consultation Meeting. Germany: Nuremburg 27-28 October 2005

¹³ Watts, A.G. & Dent, G. (in press) The ‘P’ Word: Productivity in the Delivery of Career Guidance Services. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*.

¹⁴ Watts & Dent (p.17) describe the term ‘output measures’ linked to client satisfaction.

Measuring impact

Measuring what is to be quality assured involves having a clear sense of (a) what is to be measured; (b) what systems and procedures are in place for collecting and collating relevant data; and (c) what management and quality assurance arrangements are in place to ensure that the data is acted upon in order to effect change and maintain quality of service. In terms of what is to be measured, **inputs** and **processes** are typically defined in the form of **organisational service level standards**. For example, service level standards typically exist for the minimum qualification level of staff (an input factor) and for set procedures such as answering telephone enquires within a specified number of “rings” (a process factor). However, the **outcome factors** are often defined in the form of **set performance targets**, for example, percentage of user satisfaction rates and progression into learning¹⁵ and work.

Key issues

Important though **inputs** and **processes** are in quality assurance terms, it is the **outcome**, or ‘**end product**’, that is most critical i.e. has the intervention made a positive and meaningful difference to the client and, if so, at what cost to the individual and organisation?

It is clear that there are at least *six* key challenges related to defining and measuring what is to be quality assured in careers work.

Firstly, the career guidance profession faces a major challenge on the **extent to which it has gathered and analysed data** to show there are certain delivery strategies that, for the majority of clients, are more effective than others. Indeed, could it be that an analysis of the data will reveal **that certain strategies may only be truly effective relative to certain individuals or targets groups**? If so, this message needs to be clearly articulated to those responsible for funding career guidance.

Secondly, the **terminology used to describe quality assurance and how this links to evaluation or measurement of initiatives** needs to be made not only more explicit, but also, **more consistent** within and across organisations so that data can become more generalisable and comparable. This also relates to adopting similar approaches in other countries in order to increase the volume and quality of data collection.

Thirdly, a **balance needs to be achieved between the cost-effectiveness of provision and the quality of provision**. Pass *et al.* (2000)¹⁶ cite cost-effectiveness as the achievement of the maximum provision of a good or service from given quantities of resource inputs. It is often used where organisations have a given level of expenditure to provide a maximum amount of service, in a situation where service outputs cannot be valued in monetary terms. Quality assurance models largely recognise the critical importance of relating cost of delivery with the quality and effectiveness of delivery e.g. the EFQM and the Sampson *et al.* (op.cit.) accountability model. However, **there exists a paucity of data surrounding cost-analysis and how this can be**

¹⁵ The learn direct *Advice* performance targets for 2005/2006 include a 90% user satisfaction rate and a 50% progression into learning rate.

¹⁶ Pass, C., Lowen, B. & Davies, L. (2000). Dictionary of Economics (3rd edition). Glasgow: Harper Collins. In Watts, A.G. & Dent, G. (in press) The ‘P’ Word: Productivity in the Delivery of Career Guidance Services. (p.3) *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*.

broken down and analysed either by specific target group(s) and/ or specific career guidance interventions.

Fourthly, it is important to note that most of the debate surrounding quality assurance and measuring impact in career guidance has acknowledged differences in perceptions and expectations, often characterised as ‘tensions’, between policy-makers and practitioners. Savikas (2001)¹⁷ asserts that policy-makers and practitioners view quality outcomes from two distinct vantage points. The former often view outcomes from a **‘quantitative quality outcome’** perspective; whilst the latter often start from a **‘qualitative quality outcome’** perspective. Hughes (2005) indicates that there exists a third dimension i.e. **‘quantitative qualitative performance indicators’** set by those responsible for managing career guidance provision. Here, it is argued that **greater attention needs to be given to the organisational context**, and within this, greater harmony must be achieved between the requirements and expectations of quality assurance managers and the client-centred approach of the practitioner.

Fifthly, a further critical challenge is **how best to design an organisationally user-friendly data management system** that has both meaning and relevant application to managers and practitioners. Clearly, there is scope to review this in terms of existing ‘centralised’ data management systems and how these relate to more ‘localised’ policies and practices.

Finally, the extent to which **those engaged in delivering career guidance activities are sufficiently trained in techniques of data gathering and analysis to help explain the impact of their work requires further attention.** Whilst the term ‘quality’ is seldom disputed, the term ‘measure’ or ‘performance indicator’ may pose a potential threat to some i.e. the latter being viewed as punitive in scope, rather than for the purpose of service evaluation and development. Therefore, strategies to increase training and application of research techniques could help to achieve closer working links between policy-makers, managers and practitioners in order to ensure greater effectiveness.

Conclusion

The challenge is now set for the guidance profession to commit to actively seek data to show which delivery strategies are the most effective in relation to individuals and target groups with specific types and level of need. Such a dynamic body of evidence would enable managers and practitioners to improve outcomes for clients, and would also offer a compelling argument for greater levels of investment by policy-makers and other interested parties in career guidance strategies.

¹⁷ Savickas, M. (2001) *Quality Outcomes for Career Development: The Perspectives of Policy and Practice*. Paper presented to Second International Symposium on Career Development and Public Policy, Vancouver, Canada.

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