

A UNIVERSITY CAREER SERVICE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the social justice activities facilitated by a university careers service. The paper includes a discussion on the relationship between social justice and career development in higher education. Working examples of the activities provided by the career service focus upon the delivery of career-related services to students who are represented by the major equity groups identified within the Australian higher education sector. The importance of theoretically informed practice and collaboration between campus agencies is emphasised as a means of achieving social justice outcomes.

Within the career development literature, social justice has been described as the actions that advance society and advocate for the equal access to resources for disempowered people (O'Brien, 2001). Career development and social justice are not historical strangers. Hartung and Blustein (2002) and O'Brien (2001) described how one of the founders of the discipline of career development, Frank Parsons, was committed to connecting career decision-making and social justice in his work in the early part of the 20th century. The connection has not been ignored - major contemporary texts on career development, counselling and education routinely make reference to the needs of 'special groups' (e.g., Herr, Cramer & Niles, 2004).

Despite the clear impact that career development can have on influencing social mobility and change, Hartung and Blustein (2002) asserted that the discipline of career development was in need of a new paradigm that clearly recognised the unequal distribution of societal resources. In order to fully account for social justice issues, they suggested that counsellors should expand their practices beyond the focus of the individual. In this vein, Hansen (2003) and Herr (2003) argued that (in the American context) career counselling practice should interact with public policy.

Careers industry standards vary throughout the world; however, most professional organisations make reference to the needs of all persons and emphasise the needs of those who are disadvantaged. For example, the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) declared that:

- Each person - regardless of gender, education, race, religion, age or occupational status - should have free and easy access to educational and vocational guidance so that their individual capabilities and skills can be identified and developed to enable them to undertake adequate education, vocational training and employment, to adapt to changing individual and

social life situations and to participate fully in the social and economic life of their community.

- Special target groups, eg, persons with disabilities and social disadvantages, should be provided with career counselling that uses appropriate methods and counselling that take into account their particular needs and communication requirement (IAEVG, 2001).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (1998) produced a handbook on career counselling specific to higher education. In that handbook, UNESCO declares a number of assumptions, including:

- People have the ability and opportunity to make career choices for their lives. The amount of freedom in choices is partially dependent upon the social, economic, and cultural context of individuals.
- Opportunities and choices should be available for all people, regardless of sex, socio-economic class, religion, disability, sexual orientation, age, or cultural background (UNESCO, 1998, p. 4).

These assumptions were established as key attitudes to be taken up by careers practitioners operating within the higher education sector.

Within the Australian context, Hughes (1995) was critical of career development practices within the school sector and suggested that there was a risk of maintaining social structures with inherent features of inequalities. Patton and McMahon (1997, 1999) invigorated career development theory and practice within the Australian social justice and equity context. Their Systems Theory Framework (STF) has emphasised a confluence of social, economic and environmental factors that transcends the intrapsychic factors that have been the traditional foci of major theories and practices of career development. For example, Collett (1997) has used

the STF to explicate the problems of rurality and its impact upon the education of school children; and Sarra (1997) likewise for indigenous persons; and Taylor (1997) for the issue of socio-economic status and participation in higher education. As a result of the STF's broader conceptualisation of career development, variables that induce or potentiate problems associated with social justice are readily accounted.

AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

In describing a set of preferred principles for a higher education system in Australia, the Commonwealth Minister for Education stated that:

There must be equality of opportunity in higher education to allow individuals to fulfil their potential, regardless of their personal circumstances and backgrounds. There should be no systemic barriers to participation. There should be provision for the varying needs of students from different backgrounds (Nelson, 2002, p.2).

Successive Commonwealth Governments have variously identified equity groups that represent individuals who fall into categories of social disadvantage. These equity-groups include: indigenous students; women studying in non-traditional areas; students with a disability; students from a rural or isolated region; students from language backgrounds other than English; and students from low socio-economic status backgrounds (Dawkins, 1990).

The equity groups have been broadly studied and reported upon with respect to individuals' entry into, and progress through the higher education system in Australia. Fortunately there has been some progress in improving access, retention, and progress for many groups (e.g., Abbott-Chapman, Hughes, & Wyld, 1991; Australian Education Council, 1991; Department of Education, Training & Youth

Affairs, 1999a; National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1994; Nelson, 2002; Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1990; Williams, Long, Carpenter & Hayden, 1993). The Commonwealth Government has required universities to respond to the needs of these equity groups through the development and implementation of Equity Plans and Indigenous Education Strategies (DETYA, 1999b; 1999c). Furthermore, the Government has monitored institutional performance as expressed through the performance of students in equity groups relative to the student population as a whole (Martin, 1994).

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND (USQ)

USQ is a multi-campus, non-elite, community-focused regional university, which developed from a background as a College of Advanced Education with a heavy emphasis on employing flexible modes of study. With this background it is not surprising that USQ's students come from a wide diversity of social, cultural and location backgrounds which include a high proportion of 'first generation' learners (i.e., students who are the first in their family to attend university), 'second chance' learners (i.e., students who come to university study for the first time as adults) and students from identified equity groups – particularly low SES students, students from rural and isolated areas and indigenous students.

Learning and teaching represents the USQ's core function. In this context, social justice at USQ is most clearly embodied in the provision of opportunities for access with success to relevant career paths for a diverse student constituency. All of USQ's social justice strategies emanate from this core theme. The development of linkages and networks with other educational providers serves as a basis for outreach, taster and articulation programs; access and transition strategies include recognition of

prior learning, scholarships programs, orientation and first-year programs; strategies promoting retention and progression centre on inclusive curriculum and assessment, and a wide range of student support services; and the successful transition into employment requires careers education that begins with the University's first contact with the student. Early exposure to careers education is seen as a key social justice strategy that operates at a number of levels.

It is well established that students with a stronger career focus are more likely to persist in their studies - hence early careers advice has been used for many years in US higher education as a basis persistence strategy (Tinto, 1998). This effect is, in part, due to ensuring that students are pursuing a study route that is right for them – improving persistence through improving the fit between the student and the course of study. However, other factors also come into play. For example, by positioning students to gain a greater understanding of the value of the qualification which they are working towards, early careers education has been found to be particularly valuable for first generation and second chance learners who may otherwise be considered at high risk of dropping out, in part due to a tendency to doubt the value of a university education and/or their capacity to achieve it. Factors such as choosing the optimal course program are also critical for these groups. Careers education is also critical to improving the knowledge and confidence (and hence persistence) of particular disadvantaged groups who are prone to discrimination or particular hardship in the workforce, such as indigenous students, students from non-English speaking backgrounds and students with disabilities. Overall, careers education empowers disadvantaged students through improving their knowledge base and confidence, and ensuring that they are maximally positioned to know what career they want and how they need to go about securing it.

By providing strategies that encourage a diverse range of students to persist and progress successfully in their studies, and through to employment, careers education provides a major plank in USQ's overall social justice strategy. These strategies are of particular relevance to high-risk groups, such as first generation learners, second chance learners and learners from identified equity groups.

USQ CAREERS EMPLOYMENT & WELFARE

USQ Careers Employment & Welfare (the Service) is a unit within the university's Student Services. The Service provides individual career counselling, career education, campus employment services, financial services, and accommodation information. The two other units within Student Services are: Counselling & Health, which provides personal counselling, nursing, medical, and academic skills support; and International Student Support, which provides additional support for international students, such as arrival and departure, visa processing, cross-cultural counselling and education.

Organisational change

The provision of welfare support, however, has not been a traditional component of careers and employment services. The welfare support provided by Student Services focussed mainly upon providing accommodation, financial support and crisis counselling support, and was an odd bedfellow for the careers and employment activities.

The integration of Welfare was crucial for the overall operation of the Service. Over the past three years the Service has reviewed its core mission and has transmuted the welfare support. Welfare is now integral to the mission of the overall

career development goals of the Service, and represents a set of service activities that have influence the careers and employment elements of the Service. This organisational revision was partly guided by application of the STF (Patton and McMahon, 1997, 1999), which provided the theoretical validation and conceptualisation of the nexus between social and economic disadvantage and the career development services within the university context.

A previous position of Welfare Counsellor provided the services of accommodation support, financial support and crisis counselling. Through a process of consultation and realignment of service responsibilities, these activities were changed considerably. The position was retitled from Welfare Counsellor to Psychologist, Careers and Equity or Social Worker, Careers and Equity (depending upon the profession of the incumbent). The use of Careers and Equity was specifically included to signal the nexus between career development and the provision of services to alleviate disadvantage. The position description mandates the incumbent to provide counselling and educational programs that facilitate students' progress in university studies and overcomes career barriers related to socio-economic background.

The bulk of accommodation activities were reduced and devolved to the Administrative Officer. Crisis counselling was retained, but reduced in the number of allocated hours, and became a backup support for the other units of Student Services. Financial support consisted of the assessment of students' needs and the provision of short-term loans. This activity was retained, but modified. The assessment process was changed to include more emphasis upon the relationship of a loan to a particular student's career and educational plans. This required a more comprehensive analysis of the presenting problem and included psychosocial assessment with respect to

career, studies and their relationship to financial competence and hardship. The position also took on a significant role in the assessment and management of scholarships, which are discussed later in this paper.

Providing support for casual employment was added into the position description. This entailed an educational perspective through which casual employment underpinned the acquisition of skills for students' ultimate career and employment plans after university. Furthermore, responsibility for the provision of career education programs to students from the major equity groups was included in the position description. Moreover, these career education activities were to be integrated with the work of the Psychologist, Careers and Industry, the position primarily responsible for the bulk of work relating to career counselling and education.

INTEGRATED SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVITIES

What follows is a description of the service activities specific to the social justice agenda of the Service. The ethos, development and implementation of these activities were guided by the STF and the aims and principles of the IAEVG and UNESCO. Essentially, the Service is committed to the notion that university career services are powerful vehicles for social justice ideals and objectives (O'Brien, 2001).

Rural school children and parents

USQ is a major provider of higher education to regional Australians. Rural students' transition into and through higher education is a significant issue with respect to failure and retention. The Service developed a career education program that has engaged rural high school students in an intensive, experiential process in which they

are immersed in university (McIlveen, Ford & Everton, in press). The residential experience included educational sessions on career exploration, the actual process of being a student at university (e.g., attending lectures, renting away from home), and the social experiences related to living in a city.

The Service has also maintained a program of visiting rural schools within the Darling Downs region. These visits include career education sessions with senior school children during the day and with parents at night. The visits are specifically designed for first-generation families, who have not been exposed to higher education.

Indigenous school children

The University's Kumbari Ngurpai Lag Higher Education Centre provides comprehensive academic support for indigenous students. Part of its brief involves the provision of preparatory courses to students. The Service collaborates with the Kumbari Ngurpai Lag in providing a career education workshop to high school children who are brought to campus to discover university (similar to the program for rural students mentioned previously).

Students with disability

The Service conducted an employment forum for university students with a disability. The forum was founded upon the notion that the employment-related knowledge and self-confidence of students with a disability could be enhanced by linking students, with one another, employers, employment agencies, State and Commonwealth Government agencies, and with key staff of the university's careers service. The forum allowed for intensive networking and contained presentations on specific skills

and knowledge required for entry (and re-entry) into the workforce (e.g., disclosure of disability). Evaluation of the forum indicated its strengths in terms of content and process (McIlveen, Cameron, McLachlan & Gunn, in press).

The Counselling and Health unit of Student Services, in collaboration with the Regional Disability Liaison Officer stationed at USQ, has established the Tertiary Taster Program for high school students with a disability. The Service contributes a career education seminar to this residential program. The students learn about their career options and are guided in selecting tertiary education courses.

Females in non-traditional disciplines

The university operates a successful program for high school girls that aims to immerse them in the career and educational possibilities of mathematics, science and technologies. The Service collaborates with this program and provides a career education seminar that focuses upon expanding the girls' view of their career potential and futures. Gender issues are also sensitively considered within the scope of individual career counselling for women returning to the workforce or attempting to realign their career.

Financial assistance and scholarships

Students in general require considerable financial support and assistance in finding stable and manageable casual employment (Long & Hayden, 2001). To this end the Service manages a loan scheme that provides small, short-term, interest-free loans to student on behalf of the university, for the purchase of educational materials or emergency items (e.g., medicine). The Psychologist, Careers and Equity, administers these loans in conjunction with a review panel, consisting of the Service Manager and

the Manager of the Counselling and Health unit of Student Services. The assessment process for a loan requires standardized financial information and a demonstrated capacity to repay the loan. Moreover, the assessment interview takes a holistic view of a person's circumstances, similar to the STF model, in order to determine the relevance of the financial support in context of the student's overall career and educational status. The Psychologist is also responsible for guiding the student's who take a loan on the process of better financial management, through individual and group-based education, and on securing part-time or casual employment for future needs.

The Service manages eight undergraduate scholarships: the Commonwealth Learning Scholarships (Commonwealth Education Cost Scholarship and Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarship); Chancellor's Scholarship; School-leaver Scholarship; Non-School Leaver Scholarship; Indigenous Student Scholarship; Distance Education Scholarship; and the Robin Yong Scholarship. The majority of these scholarships have financial hardship, personal hardship, or membership of an equity group as selection criteria. The assessment process is conducted by a panel, which is convened by the Manager of the Service. The Psychologist, Careers and Equity, takes a lead role in providing an expert opinion on the applicants' situation as it relates to their needs and career and educational status.

Tertiary Preparation Program

USQ has been a leader in the provision of preparatory education for students who are unable to enter university via the standard pathway of high school and tertiary entrance score. The University's Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) has demonstrated its efficacy in properly preparing students for undergraduate studies

(Clarke, Bull & Clarke, 2004a, 2004b). An important feature of the TPP is a career educational module through which the individual studying the course completes a career assessment and develops educational pathways for their career success. This assignment work is completed under the instruction of the TPP Career Counsellor. The Service and the academic unit that offers TPP collaboratively manage the position of TPP Career Counsellor.

Community career education

Career education is not widely available in the regional communities of the University. The Service provides free career education seminars in collaborative arrangement with the University's marketing and public relations unit. The content of the public seminars focuses upon the nature of university life, career information and assessment, and how to enter university. Although supported by the marketing department, the career education work is provided as a professional community service and without bias toward USQ. These seminars are focussed primarily upon non-school leavers and potential first-generation students who would not ordinarily consider higher education an option for their career.

To support its work in assisting individuals who were unfamiliar with processes and occasional abstruse discourse of universities, the Service published a community education booklet, the Family Guide to USQ (Ford & McIlveen, 2003). This product was firmly directed at the parents of first-generation students. Its was produced through the support of key stakeholders (e.g., rural parents associations) that were able to specify which elements of higher education were in need of clarification for the new-comer. The booklet's content ranges widely; from explaining the terminology of university, to possible career outcomes for particular programs, to the

pragmatics of renting and paying for textbooks. This Guide complements other supportive information available on-line and in print.

Committees and organisational communication

The Service has embarked on a strategy of internal liaison and consultation in order to assure its goals of providing career services to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is an ongoing activity that requires considerable attention within a dynamic organisation replete with competing and evolving priorities.

The Manager of the Service sits on the Vice-Chancellor's Committee on Student Support and Equity. This committee provides the organisational forum through which the needs of disadvantaged students can be presented and through which relevant policy or recommendations can be developed. This Committee also subsumes the Disability Advisory Sub-committee. This committee provides an avenue through which career development issues can be raised.

The Service has relied heavily upon collaboration as a means of initiating and implementing social justice activities. This entails a commitment to working with other, sometimes disparate, organisational units.

New and emerging activities

The Service has commenced negotiations to develop an indigenous student mentorship program through which senior students will mentor first-year students and high school students. This program aims to provide significant role modelling to encourage indigenous students from a local high school to consider higher education and to encourage current university students who feel discouraged in their studies.

Toowoomba, and the University, has welcomed refugees into the city. As a multicultural education centre, the University provides an important source of support for refugees. There are considerable cultural issues that need to be addressed to better facilitate these new Australians' entry into the workforce; admission to a degree is not the only solution. They require support in learning and engaging with the discourse of career and employment within the Australian context. The Psychologist, Careers and Equity, commenced the first round of consultations with a pilot group of undergraduate students who were holders of a humanitarian visa or were recently granted citizenship. The aim of the project is to enhance the students' career development and their capacity to enter the workforce as graduates.

The University has established a Pro-Vice Chancellor portfolio for social justice and regional engagement. The creation of this PVC role opens up considerable opportunities for the Service with respect to engaging with the University as a whole. It is envisaged the Service will actively pursue the aims of this portfolio in an attempt to bring about best practice in social justice and further collaborate with university agencies.

DISCUSSION

There is neither a comprehensive nor definitive guide for the implementation of social justice ideas or strategies within the career development sector of Australian higher education. Nevertheless, we contend that the practice of career development within higher education should reflect theory and that it should be used to revise existing practices and to implement new practices. This paper describes a limited range of proactive professional services that are driven by the idea of linking career development and social justice within higher education. An important feature of the

work presented here is its implicit relationship with the Systems Theory Framework and the aims and principles of the IAEVG (2001) and UNESCO (1998).

There are of course limitations to the amount and quality of social change work that can be done, given the exigencies of a busy career service. The extent to which an organisation can introduce social change work is constrained by resources and attitude, rather than by standards or ideals, as these are readily available (e.g., DEST, 2004; IAEVG, 2001; UNESCO, 1998). In terms of resources, the examples presented here are generally cost-efficient and can be readily established within other university settings and so mitigate against the perennial issue of limited resources. Furthermore, it is our experience that collaboration with organisations that are not agents of social action can produce positive, cost-efficient outcomes. It is therefore imperative that that a university career service maintains links and networks with other internal and external agencies (e.g., employers) to develop a broad understanding of social justice issues within the community. Our example of working with university marketing and public relations staff is indicative of this point. Furthermore, we contend that it is the responsibility of the careers service to engage with university organisational dynamics to bring about social justice initiatives, rather than rely upon a top-down approach of waiting for direction and resources.

Career development practitioners are powerful gatekeepers and channels into the higher education system. We therefore encourage career development practitioners to learn about the key issues of equity and disadvantage that have a significant impact upon the career potentials and outcomes of students. There is a variety of equity-related resources that are of value to career practitioners. We recommend the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (2004) website that contains resources pertaining to equity issues in higher education.

This site contains links to crucial documents that guide and underpin Australian policies and practices pertaining to higher education.

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THEORY AND PRACTICE

Why is Systems Theory Framework relevant to the issues of career development and social justice?

Answer - The STF embeds the individual's career development within broad social, economic and environmental factors and thus induces consideration of variables that impact upon a person's position and resources within society.

What are some of the main equity groups that require the attention of career practitioner working within Australian universities?

Answer - Indigenous students; women studying in non-traditional areas; students with a disability; students from a rural or isolated region; students from language backgrounds other than English; and students from low socio-economic status backgrounds

Which Commonwealth Department provides a valuable website containing information on equity resources?

Answer – Department of Education, Science and Training.