

A Career Counsellor Internship Program

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## A Career Counsellor Internship Program

### **ABSTRACT**

The issue of training career counsellors in Australia requires considerable review with respect to theory and practice. This paper describes an internship model of training in career counselling for candidates enrolled in a master-level qualification in psychology. The program takes a competency-based format and engages interns in the work of career counselling in the higher education sector. The value of competency-based learning and integration of training into extant professional degrees are highlighted as promising avenues for the development of career counsellors.

The training of career counselling professionals in Australia has been found wanting in regards to the development of an appropriate infrastructure. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) review of career services in Australia reported recommendations indicating a need for improvements in training systems (OECD, 2002; Sweet, 2001). Notwithstanding this recent international appraisal, the limitations of the training programs for career counselling practitioners have long been recognised in Australia (McCowan & Hyndman, 1998; Patton, 2002). However, there has been only limited progress in developing training systems.

University programs, particularly postgraduate programs, have been identified as a useful means of training career counsellors (McCowan & Hyndman, 1998; McMahon, 1997; Patton, 2002). For example, the Australian Association of Career Counsellors (AACC) has recognised a range of programs as appropriate for meeting its criteria for professional membership. The university programs have been complemented by a range of training options which are offered by private organizations. The importance and success of programs developed in Australia so far, needs to be recognised and considered with respect to how improvements can be generated. This paper accordingly approaches the issue of training with an agenda of building upon what is currently available through professional degrees. As a model of training, internship, needs to be considered as a supplementary training pathway. This case study describes a career counsellor internship program that has been integrated into a professional master of psychology degree. This model goes some way to raise internship as an additional pathway for training.

## **A COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING STRATEGY**

### **Integrated Approach**

The career counsellor internship program integrates with the practicum requirements of the Master of Psychology offered by the University of Southern Queensland. This professional degree (two-year fulltime equivalent) requires candidates to undertake three work-based placements for the purposes of complying with the criteria for State registration as a psychologist and for membership of the Australian Psychological Society. Many of the candidates take one of the three practical courses within the University's Student Services, which is the main counselling agency on campus. Within the Student Services framework, candidates can undertake a practicum within the careers counselling section<sup>1</sup>.

The practicum guidelines for the degree (Pretty, 2001) require the student to identify, in consultation with their academic supervisor, from the Faculty, and their community/worksite supervisor, the areas of competency they seek to develop within a particular work setting. The very nature of the practicum is about working as a psychologist, albeit under close supervision and following a curricular orientation. Students can take on various work tasks depending upon their aims and needs with respect to the competencies they wish to develop. The use of learning materials is dependent upon the student's current level of knowledge and skill. This may include readings of particular texts or manuals, or intensive guided instruction on the administration of a psychological test. The learning environment is one of professional and collegiate co-operation through supervision and mentorship.

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<sup>1</sup> The personal counselling section offers an internship program for health and clinical counselling. Final and authorised version first published in the *Australian Journal of Career Development* in 13, published by the Australian Council for Educational Research. Copyright © 2004 Australian Council for Educational Research.

## Professional Competencies

Gonczi, Hager and Oliver (1990) argue that competency standards for the professions should relate to *attributes*, in the form of explicit knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes. The most comprehensive description of attributes in relation to the profession of career counselling are outlined in the Careers Coordinator Competency Standards (CCCS) (National Board of Employment Education and Training, 1992) and the Career Counsellor Competencies and Performance Indicators (National Career Development Association, 2002). The importance of the CCCS as a fundamental document for Australian conditions should be understated.

The form and format of the CCCS is mostly consistent with the guidelines for competency-based training promulgated by Harris, Guthrie, Hobart and Lundberg (1995), and other training guidelines for the professions (Heywood, Gonczi, and Hager, 1992). Presentation of the CCCS in a competency-based training format facilitates a clear understanding of learning and assessment goals for the supervisor and intern. Elements of competence within the CCCS generally express the four general components of competency considered necessary by the Australian National Training Authority (2001). These overarching factors include:

- task skills,
- task management skills,
- contingency management skills, and
- job/role environment skills.

Within the CCCS, task skills have been written to allow for considerable holistic, flexibility required for the professions, as opposed to behavioural task specificity (Preston and Walker, 1993). Take for example the CCCS performance criterion, *Justifies counselling techniques and interactions on the basis of theories of counselling*. There are multiple theories of careers, counselling, and careers counselling. This criterion does not specify which should be used. It allows the professional to select the most appropriate technique and theory for the situation. Task management skills are also represented at the level of element and subsidiary units. The element, *Provides a career counselling service* indicates the need to manage a number of discrete professional activities concurrently (eg, counselling and diagnostic assessment). Contingency management is evident in the performance criterion, *Uses specific career counselling techniques appropriate to circumstances*. This has indicated a crucial need to be flexible and react to changes in client needs and circumstances. Job/Role environment skills are reflected in the counsellor working in an educational/industrial setting and particularly with other professionals. For example, teamwork is clearly indicated in the performance criterion, *Coordinates team approaches to provide individual student programs*. Generic work skills (typically from Mayer, 1992) are also evident within the CCCS: negotiation; conflict resolution; client-focus; monitoring and evaluating; record keeping; maintaining knowledge; communication; liaison and networking; information technology/computing; and teamwork.

## A LEARNING CONTRACT

An agreement is established between the intern and the supervisor with the aim of developing the intern's career counselling competencies. Clayton (1995) suggests that the learner can be actively involved in the learning and assessment processes. In this vein, the flexibility of the practicum enables considerable negotiation between the intern and the supervisor – this is crucial to meeting the needs of both. With respect to the nature of competency-based training, Worsnop (1993) specifies that the trainer needs to fully inform the learner of what will be required with respect to competencies and the concomitant assessment procedures. Within this adult-learning strategy, the practicum *per se* and the supervisor-supervisee relationship, exist broadly within an ethical framework promulgated by the Australian Psychological Society (2002). These overarching ethics impact upon the training process.

Within the consultative framework, interns agree to a Community Placement Contract (Pretty, 2001). The contract and objectives that are drawn up between the parties and allows for open discussion of the required knowledge, skills, and abilities reflected in the CCCS. The pathways upon which a student may achieve their objectives are also varied. These pathways must balance against the organisation's needs with respect to its usual operation of professional business. For example, an intern may wish to focus on a particular form of career counselling, rather than the model used by the service<sup>2</sup>. This is acceptable; however, the organization specifies that the student must first achieve competence in organisation's preferred model of career counselling. Once competence has been established in the preferred model, the intern would then be free to

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<sup>2</sup> The service has adopted the Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 1999) as the main model for career counselling.

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take on the learning and application of their alternative model. The only limitation upon this learning endeavour is the competency of the supervisor. If the supervisor cannot train in this method, then it would not be considered an appropriate learning goal. The contract is the primary reference document of the learning strategy and is reviewed according to the development of competencies. The supervision process would track this process.

The development of professional attitudes readily falls outside the capacity of the competency-based learning framework because attitudes are difficult to operationalise as competencies. In the counselling setting the development of professional attitudes is mainly derived from intensive professional supervision, which acts as both a vehicle of training and formative assessment (Clayton, 1995).

Students enrolled in the practical course may use observation, participation, or project related work to achieve their goals (ie, competencies) over a period of approximately 350 hours. The number of hours varies according to learning needs and site needs. No less than 75% of the practicum hours must be spent on direct work activities. The remaining time may be spent upon reading, workshops, conferences, and supervision. A placement objectives form is completed and outlines objectives and strategies for achieving learning outcomes with respect to career counsellor competencies. These are clustered under general professional themes deemed necessary by the Faculty with respect to the generic skills of a psychologist. These clusters include

- interviewing,
- formal assessment and testing,
- interventions,

- consultation,
- report preparation,
- project activities,
- professional development and
- ethics activities.

These general professional themes are cross-classified with respect to the focus being individual, group or organisational work and the level of involvement being observation, co-practice, or independent practice. Evaluation criteria are developed and implemented for each cluster.

### **FLEXIBLE TRAINING AND ASSESSMENT**

The practicum experience involves an intensive working relationship between the supervisor and the intern. In this spirit of co-operation, the supervisor takes on a mentorship role for a junior member of the profession (psychologist). Both are mindful of what the student needs to achieve with respect to their competencies and the documented goals and strategies in the learning contract. This intensive relationship facilitates the integration and customisation of training and assessment. The determination of recognised prior learning (RPL) is made against the competencies of a psychologist and the competencies of career counselling through revision of the student's experiences in supervision or through direct observation by the supervisor. This process ensures that the student does not repeat unnecessarily any work activity they completed in another setting. The aim of this RPL approach is to make the practicum as relevant and as efficient as possible.

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### **Formative and Summative Assessment**

Assessment for the course is ungraded, that is, pass/fail. The formative assessment component consists of the student completing a daily diary of their work activities and accumulated hours of practice (Pretty, 2001; p. 38). The supervisor revises this diary in supervision and uses it as a stimulus for supervisory discussion. The supervisor also signs off the entries. This document is submitted at the end of the practicum.

Supervision in itself is a variant of formative assessment in that the student is required to bring to the encounter issues for discussion and develop theoretical and practical outcomes as a result of the discussion.

Summative assessment consists of mid-placement and final placement reports. These reports are completed by the supervisor in consultation with the intern and Faculty supervisor. The community placement evaluation involves rating the student's performance on the various clusters (ie, professional practice; communication and organization; interviewing; assessment, testing and evaluation; intervention and therapy; and other goals). Each cluster contains items that indicate knowledge/skills/attitudes. The supervisor rates on a Likert-type scale the student's performance on each.

The flexibility of the program allows the student and the organization to modify assessment to suit their respective needs. This flexibility allows for an holistic approach to assessment that considers information from a number of sources in relation to a range of areas (eg, knowledge, problem solving) (Gonczi, Curtain, Hager, Hallard, and Harrison, 1995). For example, an intern who possess advanced basic counselling skills

may want to be challenged by taking on 'complex cases'. Alternatively an intern with beginner counselling skills may choose to work with 'simple cases'.

## **RESOURCES AND PROGRAM REVIEW**

The worksite supervisor is the main resource of the program. Supervisors are qualified psychologists. The primary supervisor has postgraduate qualifications in career counselling and adult education. Although the Faculty provides an academic supervisor, the worksite person takes on the bulk of the supervision. The intern also participates in case meetings and can seek the support of other psychologists when their supervisor is unavailable.

The Faculty provides the intern with the necessary documentation relating to recording of practical activities and supervision. This documentation has been designed and is reviewed against the standards of the Australian Psychological Society and the Queensland Psychologists Registration Board. The worksite provides the intern with all of the necessary materials to participate in work activities. The physical resources include, an office with fittings, a receptionist, and office equipment (eg, photocopier). This would include access to theoretical textbooks, journals, psychological tests, and relevant practitioner handbooks. An intern is welcome to bring their own practical resources, however, all of what they would need to work (and pass) is available. In line with the aim of flexibility, the practicum allows learners to derive a portion of the total experience for competency development from conferences, readings, and seminars.

## **QUALITY PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES**

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The program has trained eight career counsellor interns since its commencement in 2000. After graduating from the Master of Psychology the interns used the experience to enhance their employment outcomes. Four of the interns secured employment in a career counselling or careers education role. Three used the experience to complement their roles as psychologists and general counsellors. One used the experience to complement their work as a psychologist in a managerial role.

An important learning outcome has been the counsellors own development through learning about the Systems Theory Framework and career counselling. This outcome reflects the learning goal identified by McMahon (1997) in her application of this framework for supervision of career counsellors.

Worsnop (1993) offers a framework for quality through continuous improvement. Without periodically evaluating a training process, there can be few lessons learned by the trainer between one learner and the next. There are a number of quality measures and procedures embedded within the practicum. Upon termination of the practicum, an intern is required to complete a Student Evaluation of Practicum (Pretty, 2001). This is a checklist covering content of the practicum with specific reference to expectations being met for the learning elements (eg, assessment, interviewing, individual interventions). The students' evaluations of the program to date indicate that the learning experience is positive. Furthermore, there has been no evidence that the program failed to deliver with respect to learning objectives.

The quality of the supervisor is also rated on the Community Supervisor Appraisal. This survey is conducted by the student and queries the supervisor's skills in relation to providing an effective training and supervisory experience. Factors such as,

taking a professional attitude, providing realistic feedback, monitoring intern activities and providing a role model, are addressed in the evaluation schedule. To date there has been no negative feedback provided to the supervisor.

Furthermore, the student completes a general evaluation of the actual practicum through the Summary Practicum Site Evaluation. This is a qualitative tool that aims to elicit critical issues through feedback from the student. The supervisor's evaluation/assessment of the student, and the log of activities also contribute to the overall evaluation of the practicum.

Further quality checks are made through meetings between the supervisor and Faculty supervisor. These meetings address the overall content and direction of the practicum within the work setting. Given the breadth of these evaluative devices, it could be concluded that the practicum has gone some way to achieve the guidelines of continuous improvement suggested by Worsnop (1993).

## **SUMMARY**

The internship program provides clear evidence that competency-based training can be integrated into extant higher education programs which cover counselling as a professional activity. What is unique about this training program is its integration within a Master of Psychology, which has traditionally not covered career counselling in practicum courses. The internship program has successfully drawn together competency-based training methods, university curriculum requirements, and documentation on career counsellor competencies (NBEET, 1992; NCDA, 2002). Direct and sustained client

contact whilst under supervision has provided an overarching infrastructure for learning how to do career counselling.

In conclusion, the internship program offers a tentative model that could fill one of the numerous training gaps in Australia. The model also provides a useful source of invigoration for career services at universities, which provide a professional degree relating to counselling (eg, master of psychology).

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