
CASE STUDY

A CAREER COUNSELLOR INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

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The issue of training career counsellors in Australia requires considerable review in respect to theory and practice. This paper describes an internship model of training career counsellors. The model is derived from a current program of workplace training for candidates doing their masters 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 the 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 lacks an appropriate infrastructure. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) review of career services in Australia made recommendations for significant improvements in training systems (OECD, 2002; Sweet, 2001). Notwithstanding this recent international appraisal, the limitations of the training programs for career counselling practitioners have been long 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; McMahan, 1997; Patton, 2002). For example, the Australian Association of Career Counsellors has recognised a range of programs as appropriately meeting its criteria for professional membership. Private organisations also offer a range of training options, which complement the main university programs. The importance and success of programs already developed in Australia needs to be recognised, but we also need to consider how improvements can

be generated. This paper approaches the issue of training with an agenda of building on what is currently available through professional postgraduate degrees. As a model of training, the 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 program begins to raise internships as an additional pathway for training career counsellors.

A COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING STRATEGY

Integrated Approach

The career counsellor internship program integrates with the practicum requirements of the Master of Psychology, majoring in health or sport psychology, offered by the University of Southern Queensland. This professional degree (two-year fulltime equivalent) requires candidates to undertake three work-based placements to comply 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.

The practicum guidelines for the master 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 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 on their aims and needs in regards to the competencies they wish to develop. The use of learning materials depends on the student's current level of knowledge and skill. These materials 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.

Professional Competencies

Gonczi, Hager and Oliver (1990) argued 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 career counselling, is outlined in the Careers Co-ordinator 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 format of the CCCS is predominantly consistent with the guidelines for competency-based training promulgated by Harris, Guthrie, Hobart and Lundberg (1995), and other training guidelines for professions (Heywood, Gonczi & Hager, 1992). The CCCS competencies have been subsumed into six major units of competencies:

- professional knowledge and practice;
- career education and career guidance;
- counselling and career counselling;
- curriculum and program design;
- organisation, management and consultation;

- information and resources.

Presentation of the CCCS in a competency-based training format facilitates a clear understanding of the learning and assessment goals for the supervisor and intern. Elements of competence within the CCCS 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;
- job/role environment skills.

Within the CCCS structure, task skills have been written to allow for the considerable holistic flexibility required by the professions, as opposed to behavioural task specificity (Preston & Walker, 1993). For example, take 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 learning 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 (e.g. counselling and diagnostic assessment). Contingency management is evident in the performance criterion '*uses specific career counselling techniques appropriate to circumstances*'. This criterion indicates a crucial need for counsellors 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 '*co-ordinates 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; and teamwork. In summary, the CCCS is a fundamental document for Australian conditions and should not be understated.

A LEARNING CONTRACT

An agreement is established between the intern and the supervisor. This agreement documents the plan for developing the intern's career counselling competencies. Clayton (1995) suggested that competency-based learners should 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 for meeting the needs of both parties. Because of the nature of competency-based training, Worsnop (1993) specifies that the trainer should fully inform the learner of what will be involved in meeting the competencies and the concomitant assessment procedures. Within this adult-learning strategy, the practicum and the supervisor-supervisee relationship exist broadly within an ethical framework promulgated by the Australian Psychological Society (2002). These overarching ethics impact on the training process.

Within the consultative guidelines, interns develop a community placement contract, which is a component of the master-degree curriculum (Pretty, 2001). The contract and objectives drawn up between the parties allow for open discussion of the required knowledge, skills and abilities reflected in the CCCS. The pathways by which a student may achieve their objectives are also varied. These pathways must balance against an organisation's needs to continue its usual operations 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 organisation. This choice is acceptable; however, the student must first achieve competence in the organisation's preferred model of career counselling; in the case of student services, the Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 1999). Once competence has been established in the preferred model, the intern is then free to consider and apply their alternative model. The only limitation on this learning endeavour is the competency of the supervisor. If the supervisor cannot train in this alternative method, then it would not be considered an appropriate learning goal. The contract between the supervisor and intern is the primary reference document of the learning strategy and is reviewed according to the development of competencies. The supervision process has been used to track this process.

The development of professional attitudes readily falls outside the capacity of the competency-based learning framework, because attitudes are difficult to set as competencies. In the counselling setting, the development of professional attitudes is mainly derived from intensive professional supervision, which acts as a vehicle of training and formative assessment (Clayton, 1995). Therefore, supervision sessions with the interns include discussion of concerns that relate to ethical guidelines.

Students enrolled in the practical course may use observation, participation or project-related work to achieve their goals (i.e. competencies) over a period of approximately 350 hours. The number of hours varies according to learning needs and site needs. No less than 75 per cent of the practicum hours must be spent on direct work activities. The remaining time may be spent reading texts recommended by the worksite supervisor, attending workshops or conferences, and engaging in supervision. A placement objectives form is completed and it outlines objectives and strategies for achieving the learning outcomes of career counsellor competencies. These are subsumed under general professional themes deemed necessary by the faculty of the generic skills of a psychologist. These generic skills include:

- interviewing;
- formal assessment and testing;
- interventions;
- consultation;
- report preparation;
- project activities;
- professional development;
- ethics activities.

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

Table 1 provides a sample of intern activities, which set some of the competencies derived from the CCCS, and which satisfy the requirements of the faculty of the generic skills of a psychologist (e.g., interviewing).

This sample is typical of the objectives set for most interns. However, each intern brings their own unique background, so the activities and competency from CCCS may vary.

TABLE 1: A SAMPLE OF INTERN ACTIVITIES THAT SET A CCCS COMPETENCY AND ALSO COVER GENERIC PROFESSIONAL SKILLS.

CCCS	Intern Activity
Selects counselling strategies, skills and practices appropriate to specific requirements of individuals and groups.	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Interviewing</i></p> Conducts counselling sessions and is able to report on the basic micro-skills, process and outcomes of sessions to enable the supervisor to gain a clear understanding of what occurred.
Demonstrates career education oriented approaches to counselling.	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Formal Assessment and Testing</i></p> Selects and applies a range of psychometric tests, reports the results to the client in a meaningful form, and demonstrates the counselling outcomes in supervision.
Develops and monitors continuing individual student support systems.	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Interventions</i></p> Develops a case formulation and plan for each client and presents these at a case conference.
Demonstrates curriculum management and co-ordination skills.	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Consultation</i></p> Provides information to faculty on student matters with the consent of the supervisor.
Demonstrates interpersonal and communication skills.	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Report Preparation</i></p> Writes an <i>N = 1</i> case study and presents this to a case conference.
Develops and implements career education programs.	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Project Activities</i></p> Develops a careers resource that can be used by the entire service.
Demonstrates thorough knowledge of, and updates knowledge of, labour market issues, the world of work, and social, economic and industrial issues.	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Professional Development</i></p> Reads professional publications (e.g. Graduate Destination Survey) and reports the outcomes of the readings in supervision.
Demonstrates awareness of self.	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Ethics</i></p> Conducts a self-assessment of current knowledge and skills, and demonstrates in supervision the potential impact of their shortcomings on clients.

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 mentor role for a junior member of the profession (psychologist). Both are aware of what competencies the student needs to achieve, as well as the documented goals and strategies in the learning contract. This relationship facilitates the integration and customisation of training and assessment. The determination of recognised prior learning 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 needlessly repeat any work activity they completed in another setting. The aim of the recognised prior learning approach is to make the practicum as relevant and efficient as possible.

Formative and Summative Assessment

Academic assessment for the practicum course is ungraded; students receive either a pass or a fail. The formative assessment component requires the student to complete a daily diary of their work activities and accumulated hours of practice. The supervisor revises this diary in worksite supervision sessions 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 itself is a variant of formative assessment, in that the student is required to develop issues for discussion and to establish theoretical and practical outcomes in response to the discussion.

Summative assessment consists of mid and final placement reports. The supervisor in consultation with the intern and faculty supervisor completes these reports. The community placement evaluation involves rating the student's performance on the various clusters (i.e. professional practice; communication and organisation; interviewing; assessment, testing and evaluation; intervention and therapy; and other goals). Each cluster contains items that indicate knowledge, skills and attitudes. The supervisor rates the student's performance on each on a Likert scale.

The flexibility of the program allows the student and the organisation to modify assessment to suit their respective needs. This flexibility allows for a holistic approach to assessment that considers information from a number of sources in relation to a range of areas (e.g. knowledge, problem solving) (Gonczi, Curtain, Hager, Hallard & Harrison, 1995). For example, an intern possessing advanced basic counselling skills may want to be challenged by taking on 'complex cases'. Alternatively, an intern with beginner basic counselling skills may choose to work with 'simple cases' until they are ready to advance.

RESOURCES AND PROGRAM REVIEW

The worksite supervisor is the main resource of the program. Interns receive about one hour of supervision per working day. Supervisors are qualified psychologists and the lead supervisor has postgraduate qualifications in career counselling and adult education. Having a lead supervisor with a high level of expertise reflects the recommendation made by McCowan and Hyndman (1998) that there should be a master-level career counsellor within an organisation. Although the faculty provides an academic supervisor, the worksite person takes on the bulk of the supervision. The intern also participates in case meetings. These meetings require student services counsellors to present new cases and review ongoing cases in a semi-structured format. This format also reflects the assessment interview, which has been based on the Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 1999). Extending from the formal collegiate review process, interns are allowed to seek the support of other psychologists when their supervisor is unavailable. This backup is particularly important when emergencies arise.

The faculty provides the intern with the necessary documents relating to recording practical activities and supervision. These documents have been designed and are 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 reception area and office equipment. It also includes access to theoretical textbooks, journals, psychological tests and relevant practitioner handbooks. Interns are

welcome to bring their own practical resources; however, all of what they would need to work (and pass) is available onsite. To remain flexible, the practicum allows interns to derive a portion of the total experience for competency development from conferences, readings and seminars.

QUALITY PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

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

An important learning outcome achieved 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) offered 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. Because of this, there are a number of quality measures and procedures embedded within the practicum. On termination of the practicum, an intern is required to complete a student evaluation of practicum derived from the curriculum documentation (Pretty, 2001). This is a checklist covering the content of the practicum, with specific reference to expectations being met for the learning elements (e.g. 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 the learning objectives.

The quality of the supervisor is also rated on a community supervisor appraisal. This survey is conducted by the student and queries the supervisor's skills to provide 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.

Also, the student completes a general evaluation of the actual practicum through a summary practicum site evaluation. This is a qualitative tool, which aims to elicit critical issues from the student through feedback. The supervisor's evaluation and 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 as suggested by Worsnop (1993).

SUMMARY

This 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 does not offer career counselling as a major. Furthermore, the internship program has successfully drawn together competency-based training methods, university curriculum requirements, and documentation on career counsellor competencies (National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1992; National Career Development Association, 2002). Direct and sustained client contact while under supervision has provided an overarching infrastructure for the learning of how to actually do career counselling.

Given that psychologists are generally qualified to perform career counselling, it is appropriate for students completing a master of psychology to take on an internship. However, the program could be improved by recruiting interns from master degree programs majoring specifically in career counselling and education. These candidates would come with a strong background in career-related theory.

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

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AUTHOR

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THEORY AND PRACTICE

This section is designed as a brief professional review of the article. It provides relevant study questions and answers for readers to test their knowledge of the article.

Why is there a need for debate on the issue of training career counsellors in Australia?

Answer: The professional activity of 'career counselling' is readily understood and is often subsumed under the aegis of several regulated professions (e.g. guidance counsellor, psychologist). However, the notion of a single profession entitled 'career counsellor' needs critique. Any person, well trained or otherwise, could use the title career counsellor in Australia. This has serious implications for clients and all professions involved in the practice of career counselling.

What are the advantages of a competency-based internship?

Answer: Competency-based training is inherently practical. Moreover, it requires and motivates learners to be involved in setting their objectives and assessment. This facilitates flexibility for the learner, who is able to demonstrate that they have already mastered various competencies.

How could theory be integrated into an intern's practical training?

Answer: Competency-based training is not necessarily incompatible with theory. An intern's grasp of theory could be enhanced through discussion with their supervisor. For example, the intern could be required to formulate a client's issue using a number of theoretical models (e.g. systems, social learning) and then develop interventions based on those models.

What are some of the potential flaws in the model presented here?

Answer: This model has been based on the training system and competencies of psychologists. It may not necessarily generalise to the other major career counselling professions, such as guidance counsellors who come from the education tradition.