

How Would You Know? Assessing the Effectiveness of Careers Guidance Services

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Careers guidance in Scotland is about to undergo major structural change with the creation of “Careers Scotland” which will provide a national, all-age careers guidance service. Among its aims, Careers Scotland seeks to establish national quality standards for careers provision. This *Briefing* draws on a recently completed study of the Effectiveness of Careers Services in Scotland to consider some of the issues involved in assessing the quality and effectiveness of careers guidance work.

- ▶ **Assessing** the effectiveness of careers guidance is a difficult task. A number of approaches are possible, each has its strengths but none provide a comprehensive assessment.
- ▶ **Quantitative** monitoring of work activities and client feedback were the most common methods used in Careers Service Companies (CSCs) in Scotland. Each approach has limitations in what it can assess.
- ▶ **Other** methods such as internal review of careers advisers’ professional practice by peers or managers and learning outcome measures were limited in the CSCs.
- ▶ **CSCs** had become more accountable for their activities through the monitoring of business activity targets and progress had been made in quality assurance. But these approaches did not adequately assess the quality of inputs and how well they met identified client needs.
- ▶ **The** research developed two models as examples of a comprehensive and integrated approach to assessing all aspects of careers service work, incorporating a range of assessment methods as appropriate.

Introduction

Careers guidance in Scotland is about to undergo major structural change with the creation of “Careers Scotland” – a national organisation with the remit to ensure the provision of an all-age guidance service. Careers Scotland has been set up following the Duffner Review of the Careers Service and subsequent consultation by the Scottish Executive (Scottish Executive, 2000; 2001a; 2001b).

The Duffner Report noted the considerable commitment among Careers Service Companies (CSCs) to the measurement of the quality and effectiveness of their work but recommended the need to establish national minimum standards, to update performance measures and to define professional standards for careers advisers – recommendations accepted by the Scottish Executive and endorsed in the public consultation. Currently, as part of the move to Careers Scotland, a “Quality and Standards” Transition Team has been set up.

Against this background, this *Briefing* discusses how the effectiveness of the work of the Careers Service (CS) might be assessed and the sorts of issues that the “Quality and Standards” Transition Team need to take into account in developing national standards for Careers Scotland.

Approaches to measuring the performance of Careers Scotland

Measuring the effectiveness of careers guidance and the work of careers guidance services is a difficult task; some respondents in the research questioned whether it is feasible. There are issues, for example, about what is to be measured, what constitutes success, whether it is possible to establish cause and effect and how to take account of other intervening factors such as careers education inputs, and family and social influences. A number of approaches can be identified, each of which is better suited to measuring certain aspects of Careers Service work than others: quantitative monitoring of activities; client and stakeholder feedback (or customer satisfaction measures); learning outcomes measures; and longitudinal measures of impact (see eg Killeen and Kidd, 1992; Killeen, 1996).

The research found that the quantitative monitoring of work activities to meet Scottish Enterprise requirements and activities linked to the Scottish Quality Monitoring System (SQMS) and Investors in People (IIP) formed the bulk of performance measurement carried out in Careers Service Companies. The SQMS award is held by all Careers Service Companies in Scotland. It uses quantitative measures, client and stakeholder feedback and both internal and external review to measure performance.

Quantitative monitoring of activities

Since 1996, Careers Service Companies have been required by the Scottish Executive to produce targets and

business activity measures ie quantitative monitoring of activities. All CSCs therefore collected Business Activity statistics on the incidence of certain specified activities (eg the number of interviews carried out in school and with the unemployed and with young workers, the number of young people placed etc). Such quantitative monitoring of work activities is one of the simplest approaches and can answer questions such as “how many, how often, when, who?” It can describe what happens but, critically, it cannot indicate how well it happens. This is the key limitation of the Business Activity statistics produced by CSCs.

Related to the Business Activity statistics are Efficiency Indicators which identify unit costs for specific activities. However, their usefulness depends on accurate and uniform recording across CSCs but the research found that recording did not always meet this criteria.

Careers Service Companies are also obliged to produce the School Leaver Destination Return (SLDR) for the Scottish Executive. The SLDR alone is a blunt measure of effectiveness of Careers Service work. Levels of unemployment among school leavers, for example, may say more about the local labour market and social issues than about Careers Service provision.

Client and stakeholder feedback (or customer satisfaction measures)

Customer/client feedback had been in increasing use in Careers Service Companies prior to SQMS but the requirements of the SQMS audit had made it compulsory for all Careers Service Companies. The most common approach was the use of questionnaires although several Careers Service Companies had used focus groups.

Customer/client feedback offers a measure of clients’ perceptions of the appropriateness and value of the service to them but it has certain limitations. Clients’ expectations of careers guidance services will have an impact on their response as will their awareness of their own careers guidance needs. It is important to recognise that clients’ demand for certain guidance services is not necessarily identical to their guidance needs. The mechanics of how client opinion is gathered are critical, including the timing of the event and the questions asked of clients. The Scottish Executive has provided some central support in training and templates for feedback, but the research still found a high degree of variation in how this was done, and in the appropriateness of the instruments used. Also, it is often very difficult to obtain the views of non-users of the Careers Service. This was less commonly done by CSCs although the views of non-users can be particularly useful.

Learning outcomes measures

Learning outcomes measures take a more short-term approach to assessing the effectiveness of Careers Service inputs. They seek to ask what changes have happened in

the client's knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviour as a result of Careers Service work. They may include "before and after" measures of attitudes and perceptions linked to specific Careers Service interventions.

Learning Outcomes measures were used relatively rarely in the Careers Service. Where they were, usually "home-grown" quizzes or questionnaires were used rather than commercially produced instruments. Only occasionally was a "before" baseline measure gathered as part of this.

Internal professional review

All CSCs monitored the activity targets set for individual staff and/or areas; this might be done on a weekly, monthly or bi-monthly basis depending on the CSC concerned. Targets meant staff felt more accountable for their work but they recognised that they monitored volume rather than quality. Internal review of professional practice was limited: review of action plans was the most common method used but review of client records was less common and observation of interviews was least developed. There was a great deal of uncertainty about how to develop this and the research found that there was no single common approach in use to assess professional practice. The study identified concern among managers about the impact of internal review on staff and CSCs were generally tentative about this area.

There are issues about the subjectivity of internal review and it can also be difficult for staff who are acting as reviewers to be critical (however constructively) of colleagues. But professional review allows evidence to be understood in its context and with an understanding of the professional issues involved.

External review

External review of Careers Service activities by government bodies, consultants or researchers is another approach to reviewing effectiveness. The value of external reviews depends on their remit, their objectivity and the knowledge and skills of the individuals or organisations carrying them out.

A number of Careers Service Company Boards had commissioned external consultants or researchers to review performance and make recommendations. The impact of such external reviews appeared to be varied, with some examples where recommendations had not been implemented and others where Careers Service Companies concerned were required to make major changes in delivery.

Longitudinal measures of impact

Some measures of the economic and social outcomes of the work of the Careers Service can only be taken in the long term. There are considerable methodological difficulties with longitudinal studies (Killeen *et al.*, 1992)

and, from the point of view of CSCs, they are too expensive for individual companies to carry out. The School Leaver Destination Return only provides evidence of the first known post-school destination information. It does not take account of transitions, even within the first year of leaving school.

The need to go beyond current practices

Business Activity targets have made CSCs more accountable for their activities and SQMS and IIP had made significant contributions to quality assurance in Careers Service Companies. But the research indicated that there are certain aspects of Careers Service Companies' work that are not measured by these approaches, for example, the quality of guidance in an interview or the extent to which a particular input meets identified needs.

The variation in provision across and within CSCs identified in the study suggests that guaranteed minimum standards are not in place for services to clients. SQMS focuses mainly on whether effective systems are in place rather than assessing how effective provision has been in meeting client needs; it also focuses on client demands rather than needs. The research suggests that any quality management system for careers guidance services requires to have a systematic strategy for identifying needs built into it. This applies to SQMS and to other models such as the European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model.

General approaches

As part of the research, two models to evaluate the effectiveness of the CS performance were developed as examples of a comprehensive and integrated approach to assessing the various aspects of careers service work. They incorporate the range of methods outlined above.

One approach is based on the model of self-evaluation used in Scottish schools "How Good is our School at..?" (SOEID, 1996). This model enables various aspects of the CS work to be covered, for example, "How Good is our Careers Service at Careers Interviews?", "How Good is our Careers Service at Working with Employers?"

The second approach is a set of Effectiveness Descriptors covering a number of areas of careers work: effective careers work with individual clients; effective outcomes for individual clients; effective work with other clients and organisations; effective work with the opportunity structure; effective strategic development; and support for effective careers guidance processes. The principle is that CSCs audit their careers guidance performance against these descriptors of an effective Careers Service, set targets that would move them further towards them and then measure themselves (and are measured) by a variety of methods that assess the extent to which they had met these targets.

Issues

- ▶ Substantial progress has been made in the quantitative monitoring of CS work and in the running of CSCs as organisations. Less progress has been made in measuring the quality of the careers guidance given to clients; this is an area for Careers Scotland to develop.
- ▶ Each of the methods that might be used to assess the work of careers guidance services has certain limitations. A variety of appropriate methods needs to be used.
- ▶ Internal professional review needs to be developed and a systematic approach to measuring the standard of work of staff and the quality of careers guidance interventions is essential. Internal professional review needs to become an accepted part of the work of Careers Service managers
- ▶ A common concern is the amount of time and resources that performance measurement can take. But some of the activities should form part of everyday professional practice and management activities and in designing evaluation systems, care should be taken to incorporate existing activities into the measurement system.
- ▶ The proper identification of client needs is fundamental to the design of effective provision and the achievement of satisfactory outcomes for clients. The research found that although all CSCs showed some evidence of identification of need, there was little evidence of a systematic and comprehensive approach. If client needs have not been properly identified then the most sophisticated performance measurement system will be of little value.
- ▶ Areas for collaboration could be explored and Careers Scotland will be in a better position than individual CSCs to do so through, for example, collaborating with the research community to develop a broader range of strategies to measure learning outcomes.
- ▶ Few practitioners or managers in Careers Service Companies were aware of research evidence on effectiveness in careers guidance or made use of it in practice. Careers Scotland might consider how relevant research can be used to inform professional practice and the measurement of performance.
- ▶ Both short and long term assessment of careers guidance work is necessary. Longitudinal measures of impact are needed. Some data can be collected in conjunction with the CS but this is an area where centrally funded activity is necessary, for example, to use the potential offered by existing longitudinal surveys such as the Scottish School Leavers' Survey (SSLS) and the Scottish Household Survey.

Further reading

- Killeen, J. and Kidd, J. (1992) "The Learning Outcomes of Guidance: A Review of Research", *Research Paper No. 85*, Sheffield: Employment Department.
- Killeen, J. (1996) "The Learning and Economic Outcomes of Guidance", in A.G.Watts, B.Law, J.M.Kidd and R.Hawthorn (eds) **Rethinking Careers Education and Guidance: Theory, Policy and Practice**. London: Routledge.
- Scottish Executive (2000) **Careers Service Review Committee Report (Duffner Report)**, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.
- Scottish Executive (2001a) **Scottish Executive's response to the Careers Service Review**, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.
- Scottish Executive (2001b) **Careers Scotland – The Way Forward**, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.
- SOEID (1996) **How Good is our School?: Self-evaluation using performance Indicators**, Edinburgh: HMI Audit Unit, Scottish Office.

Further information

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About this study

The research was commissioned by the Scottish Office in 1997 to map Careers Service provision across Scotland and consider its effectiveness after a period of major change to its organisation and management. The research involved: review of national documentation and statistics and interviews with key informants; collection of documents and statistics and interviews with Heads of Service and Careers Advisers in all 17 CSCs. From this data, a typology of CSCs was created and used to select five CSCs for further in-depth study. In each of the five CSCs a programme of interviews was carried out with a range of CSC personnel; school staff; and representatives of Careers Service Boards, LECs, LAs, and Education Business partnerships. Three surveys were conducted: S4, S5 and S6 pupils in 10 schools were surveyed twice, a year apart; a second survey covered 300 employers; and the third survey was of 60 Training Organisations.

Related CES Briefings

No. 5: "Guidance in Secondary Schools: Careers and the World of Work" by C.Howieson and S.Semple

No. 23: "Pupils' Experience of the Careers Service" by C.Howieson and S.Semple

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