



Supervision for careers practitioners in HE – developing the reflective practitioner or an unwanted intervention?

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Careers guidance in HE

Careers guidance in HE has been through many transformations from the mid 1960s' university appointments boards to the heterogeneous HE careers services available to students today. This shift from a strong emphasis on the 1:1 guidance interview to a menu of activities has resulted in the emergence of a group of practitioners whose support needs are correspondingly more diverse and complex.

Careers guidance and counselling

There is still a perception that the *major* difference between careers guidance and counselling is that guidance is not 'so emotional', as if feelings were somehow less to the fore when making decisions about one's future working life. 'Not so emotional' may mean that the majority of careers advisers do not see themselves as offering personal counselling. Watts (1996) recognises the reluctance of many careers advisers to become too involved in the emotional needs of their clients but acknowledges the value of counselling skills and techniques in their work.

Supervision and Mentoring

There are many definitions of supervision but the one used in the study was Proctor's (1988):

'A working alliance between a supervisor and a counsellor in which the

counsellor can offer an account or recording of her/his work, reflect on it, receive feedback and, where appropriate, guidance. The objective of this alliance is to enable the counsellor to gain in ethical competence, confidence and creativity so as to give the best possible service to her/his clients.'

In the UK, supervision is a requirement for all practitioners who are members of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). It is considered to be a major device for ensuring accountability. It has not, however, really been considered as a device for supporting careers practitioners and very little research has been carried out in this area. Bimrose and Wilden's (1994, p.382) view is that supervision *'could provide the framework for a more focused concern with what actually goes on in the guidance process'*. Graham & Ali (1997) see a move towards supervision in HE careers services following the recognition of the importance of mentoring but suggest that one of the difficulties in providing such supervision is the shortage of people in careers services who are trained as counsellors and supervisors. Careers practitioners, like many other helping professionals, usually work in busy environments and this *'can distract attention away from critical self-reflection'* (Bimrose & Wilden, 1994, p.382) but their suggestion is that *'work needed to be re-prioritised so that supervision would be elevated to the level necessary for consistent monitoring of professional practice'* (Bimrose & Wilden, 1994, p.382).

Supervision has the potential to protect against stress and burnout (Chemiss, 1995) yet is still not considered as a useful strategy for providing support to the guidance profession.

The Study

This was a small empirical study that emerged from my own background as a counsellor and a careers adviser in HE and my active involvement in counselling supervision and the training of supervisors. My motivation for undertaking it grew out of personal experience. When I was a careers adviser, I was also a volunteer student counsellor and I questioned why we didn't have supervision at the careers service when it was a requirement at the Student Counselling Service. I recognised that there were some practical reasons for regular 'supervision' not being provided; we saw more clients, often for only one session and the 1:1 discussion was not the pivotal focus of our work. Nonetheless, I would have really valued some time set aside to discuss with colleagues the complex issues that often arose, not only in the individual guidance discussion, but also in other areas of the work. I believed that acknowledging and working with the feelings expressed by the student when faced with the major transition from HE to work was crucial to an effective outcome of the discussion. Many other AGCAS colleagues shared this view and much of the internal AGCAS guidance training I was involved in was designed to:

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- ▶ enable careers practitioners to define their personal meaning of guidance
- ▶ help them acknowledge and work with emotion
- ▶ recognise its effect on them and their clients
- ▶ identify their own personal limitations.

The role of the mentor had been developed as a way of supporting practitioners involved in the AGCAS/University of Reading qualification but mandatory ongoing professional support was still missing. I wanted to understand why and was therefore interested in exploring two questions:

- ▶ To what extent was supervision already in existence in HE careers services?
- ▶ Would careers practitioners consider the supervisory relationship helpful in their professional work?

I interviewed eight careers practitioners, all of whom worked in pre-1992 universities. I cannot claim that these practitioners were totally representative of the AGCAS membership, as this was an exploratory study aimed at clarifying issues and stimulating further discussion. I knew the practitioners, but as I was no longer directly involved in careers guidance in higher education, I was able to maintain a critically subjective position.

Findings

Support for their work in a time of such rapid change and greater accountability was considered to be important by all of the interviewees. Some support needs were already being met within AGCAS through national and regional training programmes. All participants drew informally upon their network of AGCAS colleagues around the country for support. They spoke of the possibility

of AGCAS providing them with a mentor but they were unaware of any formal mentoring scheme, apart from the requirement for a mentor if one was pursuing particular modules of the AGCAS/University of Reading professional qualification. Three participants worked in services where peer groups had been established to discuss client issues but they had not found them very useful because some colleagues believed that seeking help in dealing with complex guidance issues was a sign of incompetence and were reluctant to participate.

The support needs identified were related to the career stage of the practitioners. Those at an earlier stage, even in services where the individual guidance interview was no longer so central to the work, said that they needed support to 'check out what they were doing' and whether they were doing 'the right thing'. They were also looking for support in developing their interpersonal skills, help with establishing effective relationships and reassurance that the information they were giving to students was current. Those who were in more senior positions, including those who were directors, stated that they needed support for their management role. They needed help in managing people and in managing change. Only two of the participants interviewed had a mentor. One because he was undertaking the Diploma in Careers Guidance in HE and another who had continued the mentoring relationship developed when he too was a diploma trainee.

The word 'supervision'

Participants expressed difficulty with the word 'supervision'

'I think my immediate, almost emotional, reaction to the word

supervision is fairly negative because supervision raises issues like being directed, being told what to do, being checked and assessed and I guess I don't like that.'

[Sally]

'Mentor is a word I would have thought would be preferable to supervisor... it feels to me as if it's checking up on rather than supporting.'

[Roger]

Practitioners all agreed that they would welcome regular opportunities to reflect on their practice, to develop their professional expertise and to express their feelings about clients/other aspects of their work. If this was the case, why was it then that higher education careers advisers were apparently so reluctant to discuss their work with others, other than in an informal way?

'Well, I think it reflects that sense that guidance is more superficial than counselling and therefore doesn't require the same level of focus on professional practice. I think that's a misconception.' [Jim]

'We're not in a culture here that invites us to express our feelings... This isn't a culture that encourages that type of letting off of steam.' [Dave]

When asked who might provide supervision for careers practitioners, the responses varied. Nobody stated categorically that support must come from within each service or even from within AGCAS. They were all very clear that the kind of support they would value should ideally be provided by a person who had a careers guidance and a counselling background. They considered that it would be useful if that person came from outside the service and/or from outside AGCAS. The



practitioners were sceptical about the value of a 1:1 supervisory relationship and the amount of time they were willing to invest in it. There are, however, many ways of providing counselling supervision, not all of which involve a 1:1 relationship with a more experienced counsellor. Inskipp & Proctor (1993), suggest a variety of possible arrangements for supervision including working with peers and working with peers and an 'expert'.

One reason why the peer support/ discussion groups had not been successful was that people felt pressure to discuss case issues even when they felt this was not necessary. There was a continuing perception that participating in a 'supervision group' would mean that they would be coerced into manufacturing problems in order to make a contribution to the group. A recent study of the responsibilities of counselling supervisors concluded that 'the notion that all casework is monitored by an experienced colleague is a fantasy, not a reality. Most counselling work is not discussed in supervision, and the notion of the supervisor 'overseeing' the work of the counsellor is naive. Either expectations of supervision should be played down and something akin to the term 'consultative support' should be adopted, or the responsibilities of supervisors need to be more formal, with more power and authority conferred upon them.' (King and Wheeler, 1999, p.227) The theory of narrative construction posited by, among others, McLeod, (1997) and White and Epston, (1990) has been related to careers guidance by Cochran, (1997) and the narrative way of working as 'consultants' in the therapeutic process can also be seen in their approach to 'supervision'.

Final thoughts

Careers guidance in HE is informed by much of the theory and practice of counselling. The support and professional development needs of careers practitioners might also be informed by the theory and practice of supervision to develop the type of consultative mentoring relationships required. These relationships would enable deeper practitioner discourse not by 'checking up on me to see if I'm doing it right', but by identifying and redefining 'what works' and what might work even more effectively for both client and practitioner. Some of the resistance to supervision is undoubtedly located in the word itself, 'If you called it mentoring, I don't think anybody would have much of a problem with it' but the concept of supervision, in some form, would help careers practitioners to:

- ▶ be clearer about their own limitations
- ▶ give themselves permission *not* to work with the more personal aspects of their clients' lives and
- ▶ be more able to recognise and acknowledge where these emotions are having a significant impact on clients' vocational decision-making.

'Perhaps what we need is what we offer. When we provide effective guidance to students we offer them a space to think things through and, after all, many of the issues we are dealing with are similar. We too are struggling with the difficulties involved in knowing how to take a decision, which is a good decision. Why should our needs for help be any different?' [Roger]

Note: The names of interviewees quoted are pseudonyms.

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