Reclaiming professional identity through postgraduate professional development: Careers practitioners reclaiming their professional self.

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Careers advisers in the UK have experienced significant change and upheaval within their professional practice. This research explores the role of postgraduate level professional development in contributing to professional identity. The research utilises a case study approach and adopts multiple tools to provide an in-depth examination of practitioners' perceptions of themselves as professionals within their lived world experience. It presents a group of practitioners struggling to define themselves as professionals due to changing occupational nomenclature resulting from shifting government policy. Postgraduate professional development generated a perceived enhancement in professional identity through exposure to theory, policy and opportunities for reflection, thus contributing to more confident and empowered practitioners. Engagement with study facilitated development of confident, empowered practitioners with a strengthened sense of professional self.

Keywords: careers adviser; professional identity; professionalism; postgraduate study; professional development.

Introduction

During the last two decades careers services in the UK have experienced significant change due to privatisation, multi-professional working and workforce realignment. Careers advisers have not been alone in experiencing these changes; they have been common to many other public sector occupations including youth justice (Souhami, 2007). What has been specific to those employed in careers work has been an expansion in the workforce and the adoption of work-based training routes which have contributed to a fragmented occupational identity (Bimrose, 2006). This paper presents a research project, exploring careers advisers' sense of themselves as professionals and how they define their professional identity.

The role of a career adviser is to provide career guidance and support to help individuals to assess their abilities, search for learning and work opportunities and to implement decisions that affect their career (ICG, 2013). The services are predominantly public funded and practitioners will be found working in education, university, training, voluntary/community and public employment service contexts.

Career guidance is defined by the Council of the European Union as:

Referring to a continuous process that enables citizens at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which those capacities and competences are learned and/or used. Guidance covers a range of individual and collective activities relating to information-giving, counselling, competence assessment, support, and the teaching of decision-making and career management skills (Council of the European Union 2008: 2).

This definition provides a sense of the range and purposes of practice in which career advisers are engaged. In some settings for example in schools and colleges the provision of careers support may be in addition to the substantive role of teaching or lecturing.

Career guidance is acknowledged as a key contributor to a range of public policy goals for example supporting lifelong learning, social inclusion, labour market efficiency, economic development and social mobility (Watts, 1996, 2011; OECD, 2004; DIUS 2007). Across the countries within the UK, career guidance has been utilised as a tool to drive forward significant government policy initiatives over the last two decades, including the skills agenda, (DIUS, 2007; DBIS, 2011), widening participation (Dearing, 1997), social inclusion through Connexions (DfEE, 1999) and social mobility (Cabinet Office, 2009). Within further and higher education careers support has been aligned with the employability agenda and supporting students in developing the skills and attributes for employment and to be successful in the chosen career (DBIS, 2011b, DBIS, 2011c).

Each new policy agenda has contributed to a refocusing of the activities of the careers workforce: the most significant being Connexions. The Connexions service, introduced in 2000, was envisaged as providing a multi-skilled support service for young people, able to address a much broader range of issues than just careers, whilst also prioritising those at risk of disengagement from learning and work (Peck, 2004). The delivery of careers advice therefore, became integrated within a wider provision of support services for young people.

Over the past two decades the provision of advice and guidance to support choices on learning, education, skills and career development has also become integrated within a broad range of occupational roles not just for those working with young people but also working with adults (Harrison, Edwards and Brown, 2001). Often individuals are providing these additional activities without initial or specialist training (Harrison et al. 2001; Taylor, Vasickova, Byrom and Dickson, 2005). Allied with this has been the adoption of a more generic terminology, information, advice and guidance (IAG) (DES, 2003; DCSF, 2009) which has become common parlance when describing careers services provided for both young people and adults.

In 2010 the Department for Education commissioned an independent taskforce to set out a vision for high quality careers provision and to advise the government on how to equip careers professionals to deliver it (Mulvey, 2011). The motivation for this stemmed from the Skills Commission report (2009) which raised issues concerning the initial training and continuing professional development of careers practitioners.

The professionalisation of the career sector has become a focused agenda and as a result of the recommendations from the Task Force (Career Profession Task Force, 2010) initial training, CPD, professional standards, practitioner registration, a cohesive professional body and chartered status are all currently being addressed.

This research project was framed against on-going change. It was undertaken within a time frame of transformation (2007 to 2011) and against a background of a sector undergoing significant realignment. This transformation was specifically in relation to the introduction of the National Careers Service for Adults (DBIS, 2010), the realignment of the statutory duty for career guidance to schools (Education Act, 2011) and government austerity measures resulting in a significant reduction of the careers workforce working with young people (Hooley and Watts, 2011). The sector is defined here as representing practitioners who provide careers information, advice and guidance as a substantive component of their role. The term careers adviser is used to describe those undertaking this role, but it is acknowledged that many have alternative titles.

Methodology
The research draws from an interpretivist perspective exploring the perceptions of careers advisers regarding their professional status, articulation of professional identity and how engagement with postgraduate level continuing professional development (CPD) informed these. The research was located in a University in the Midlands, UK, where the researcher was the pathway leader for an online masters' programme. As such the researcher was careful to reflexively locate herself within the research and to acknowledge the implications of her position within this context.

The masters programme focused on providing practitioners in careers related roles with the opportunity to engage with theoretical, political and research discourses through which they could explore their practice. The programme adopted a modular structure integrating knowledge and action research to enable the students to reflect on their professional context and the drivers influencing this. Interim awards provided students with a flexible learning pathway.

The participants were all employed in the UK and had either completed or were currently enrolled on the programme. The study was confined to students practicing in the UK, with the majority located in England. This was an attempt to ensure commonality in relation to training and qualifications, work contexts, professional association memberships, and exposure to and impact of policy agendas.

A case study was adopted and was defined as the academic programme and its students. The study aimed to collect practitioner perspectives that could be used to examine the issues of professional status, professional identity and CPD and how these related to engagement with their academic studies. Hamel, Dufour and Fortin (1993) argue that the strengths of case study focus on the depth and the opportunity to investigate and understand the personal experiences of the social actors using a powerful descriptive tool. For this study exploration of the depth and the lived experiences of the students was central to the formulation of the research. It allowed an empirical investigation of the subject from many and varied angles to get closer to the 'why' and the 'how' (Thomas, 2011).

The character of a case study allows for and encourages the use of a range of methods both to support the development of the research and to test out theory. For this study, methods were selected which would complement each other and encourage indicative findings to contribute to the focus of the subsequent stages. This allowed an organic approach that ensured that the research study focused on the evolving issues and allowed findings from each stage to be rigorously tested out by the next research tool. One example was that codes developed to characterise participants' understanding of professional identity from the on-line survey these were then used as themes to analyse responses within the in-depth interviews and narratives.

The tools selected for this process included, analysis of application forms, (n=58), survey questionnaire (n=18), in-depth telephone interviews (n=7) and narrative biography (n=5). The rationale for each of these tools was located in providing a multi-dimensional approach to eliciting practitioner lived experience. The document analysis utilised programme applications made by potential students based in the UK from 2007-2010; all consented for their application to be used in this way. These were used as an initial benchmark to assess the motivations of those interested in pursuing a postgraduate CPD programme. The other methods adopted were used with students currently on the programme or who had recently completed.

All UK-based students were given the opportunity to contribute to the study initially; at later stages of the research a purposive sampling approach was adopted. This ensured that participants broadly reflected various occupational contexts and initial training routes across the sector. The sample for interview was selected through meeting a number of criteria that included having completed a programme application form and the survey questionnaire; eight were invited to take part in an in-depth telephone interview, seven accepted.

Frequency and descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data from the application forms and quantitative elements within the on-line survey. Thematic analysis was adopted for the narrative data gathered from the commentary section of the survey, the in-depth telephone interviews and the narrative biographies. The term narrative data has been used to define all data that was generated from open-ended questions. The approach adopted allowed comparisons to be made within the various data sets to assess similarities and discrepancies between the findings. Within the data analysis a thematic analysis approach was adopted as it emphasised the 'what' as opposed to 'how' things were being said. It aimed to identify themes reflecting the textual data but also provided a flexibility allowing for modification in light of new ideas. Howitt and Cramer (2011) suggest that thematic analysis has similarities with content analysis, thus supporting an integrated approach to data analysis across all the data sets.

Findings and Discussion
When defining professional identity consideration needs to be given to the complexity through which individuals form an identity located within their specific occupational context. The range of contributing factors extends from the internal in terms of personal agency through to the external factors that can facilitate and inhibit professional identity development. Ibarra (1999) argues professional identity evolves through socialisation within the work environment, which requires the observation of identified role models. She suggests that professional identity is created through

experimentation with the 'provisional self, which is then retained or discarded depending on the external feedback received. Larson (1977) argues that professional identity is experienced as shared expertise, where individuals share a common permanent affiliation. Evetts (2003) also supports the role of commonality in defining professional identity and the relationship between workers, colleagues and the work environment.

Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2004) consider professional identity can be defined in different ways but they regard it as having three principal domains; self-concept and image of self; the occupational role; and expectations of others and accepted images within society as to what the occupation should know and do. Identity is however, perceived as a 'relational phenomenon' (Beijaard et al., 2004) and is significantly influenced by the extent to which the perceptions and views of others holds a key role. Brown (2002) and Beijaard et al. (2004) argue that professional identity is an important facet in times of change and transition; professional identity therefore can become compromised if these collective experiences become weakened.

Alternatively Smitina (2010) considers professional identity within the context of the professional role; 'who I am as a professional, what would I like to be and how did I become the professional I am '(2010:1141). Her definition assumes more of a reflective domain whereby individuals focus internally on the contributing factors.

When asked to consider professional identity many participants within the study found this a challenging activity, often responding with 'that's a difficult one'. Within the survey responses a number answered using a question mark. For those that did respond, responses could be categorised as:

     (i)   "I am a career adviser/ education adviser";
     (ii)   "that would depend on who I am talking to"; and
     (iii)   "difficult to describe because I have lots of roles".

The first group (i) felt emphatic that they knew who they were and what they did. This description was often aligned with a qualifier; 'I work with young people/adults'. Some respondents made a point of distancing themselves from other areas of the sector such as Connexions. It appeared important to define what they were not and to express their specialism as a sub-identity.

The second group (ii) appeared to struggle to define themselves. They perceived a lack of understanding about their role from those they worked with including clients and professional peers. This lack of clarity put pressure on practitioners to try and describe their roles in a way that might be meaningful to others.

The third group (iii) which was composed predominantly of practitioners who worked in further and higher educational institutions identified themselves as having multiple roles. Their primary role was as a 'career adviser', but they often had additional responsibilities around safeguarding, staff development or special educational needs, hence their answer tended to change for different audiences. This presented careers work in institutions as a multi-faceted role and one which can have many additional activities and responsibilities added.

Although there has been limited research around the professional identity of careers advisers, recent studies by Colley (2009) Colley, Lewin and Chadderton (2010), Lewin and Colley (2011) and Douglas (2009, 2010) have been driven by a lack of understanding of the changing roles and identities of careers advisers and the social and policy contexts in which they work. In England, Colley (2009), Colley, Lewis and Chadderton. (2010) and Lewin and Colley (2011) explored the impact of careers practitioners working with 14-19 year olds in relation to changing policy agendas. They conclude that the introduction of Connexions has significantly impacted on the professional capacity of practitioners to deliver career guidance. This has often resulted in practitioners leaving Connexions due to compromises on ethics and the undue influence of inappropriate targets. In New Zealand, Douglas (2009, 2010) examined a similar group of practitioners and how they construct themselves as professionals and their professional identities. Her study also concludes with concerns of narrow services objectives, ethical considerations and undermined professional judgments.

The views presented by the participants offered a useful insight as to their' understanding of what professional identity may be. The three descriptors 'I am…' , 'that depends…' and 'difficult to describe' offered an interesting exploration as to how the study participants internalised who they are, without being able to fully externalise this to others. Only a small minority felt comfortable in articulating what they did. This small group tended to have a well-defined professional identity and a job title they felt reflected what they did and a sense of who they are and what they do.

Generic and Specialist Job Roles
The adoption of information, advice and guidance (IAG) as a term to replace career guidance was problematic for some participants, especially for those who worked in Connexions. The redesignation of the job title from 'career adviser', which was perceived as specific and described the type of advice the practitioner gave, to 'personal adviser' which was perceived as vague had a profound impact on how individuals perceived themselves and how they felt others perceived them.

> I feel as a personal adviser in Connexions my professional identity is vague, it is a bit wooly…. prior to Connexions I would say I am Sarah from Littletown careers service I am a careers adviser at such a place and everyone would say yeah, she does careers then. Now I say I am Sarah I am from Connexions and I am a personal adviser and they say what is Connexions? [personal adviser A, Connexions,].
> (Names have been anonymised)

The inability to clearly identify with a specific role presented a challenge for some respondents. For others working in the FE sector, having multiple roles was the norm; often encompassing generic student services activities and safeguarding responsibilities. These activities were additional to the career adviser role, diluting it into a more generic role but retaining a career advice focus and careers adviser as their job title.

> Different job titles further confused things, I was known as an Employment Counsellor and then it was changed to an Employment Adviser…As a Careers

and Higher Education Adviser, I feel my professional identity is more defined. [careers and higher education adviser]

Nomenclature within job titles therefore, appeared to have a number of important roles: an articulation of the occupational activity; identification of an area of specialism; and differentiation between various roles and activities within career work. The lack of clarity or imposed changing of job titles was an issue for many in this study and directly contributed to how people perceived themselves and how they present themselves to others. Specific terms such as 'careers adviser' were perceived to have more professional status than more generic terms such as 'IAG' and 'personal adviser', reflecting a combination of the Beijaard et al.'s (2004) first and second domains of self-concept and image of self with the occupational role.

Beijaard et al's (2004) third domain, expectations of others and images within society was located in participants seeking recognition and value from others. How participants felt themselves perceived by their peers, allied professionals, managers, clients and society at large was of great importance to them. Many participants believed that the public have little understanding of the role and practice of a careers adviser. This view was further extrapolated into a belief that it was a role anyone can do. This has been a recurring theme noted by Douglas (2009).

For participants this enhanced a sense of isolation and a lack of value, in what they felt was an important job. The lack of confidence shown by participants in their ability to present their occupation in a meaningful and accessible way is of concern. Government policy specifically in relation to the establishment of the Connexions service had contributed significantly to this feeling. The extent to which the careers service has been manipulated in response to changing government agendas has resulted in key change of focus, clients and practice as evidenced by Artaraz, (2006), Colley (2009) Colley et al. (2010), and Hooley and Watts (2011). With every change comes a rebranding and with each rebranding and refocus the public's perception of career work and potentially a challenge to the professional identity of practitioners. Brown (1997) suggests that in times of rapid change professional identity frames the way individuals are able to cope with stress at work. It is important to have a sense of what contributes to the formation of the career practitioners' professional identity.

Postgraduate CPD as a Contributor to Professional Identity
The analysis of the application forms indicated that respondent's initial motivation for embarking on a postgraduate CPD programme focused on career progression. However, as individuals progressed through their studies career progression was seldom discussed in narratives whereas personal benefits such as self-confidence and critical thinking were highlighted. This suggested that although students initially embark on a programme as they perceive it as contributing to and forwarding their career, the experience of engaging with learning at this level changes the motivation to more intrinsic personal benefits such as self-confidence, self-esteem and academic skills such as research and critical thinking.

This is coherent with Feinstein et al. (2007) and Kember et al. (2008) in that they define intrinsic, extrinsic and career as the primary motivations. Arthur et al. (2006) identified motivation tending to fall into personal interest and professional development which has some resonance here. Kember et al. (2008) suggest

motivations are either intrinsic or extrinsic. This view is problematic as it presents these as an either/or choice, whereas for many potential students this study suggests motivations may be a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic. Within these existing studies there is little discussion as to changing motivations. This study suggests, for this group at least, motivations are flexible with extrinsic evolving into intrinsic and that dominant motivation may be dynamic.

This study suggests that motivations exist on a continuum and supports Swain and Hammond (2011) in that they relate to life course and context. During the course of the study a number of participants were at risk or potential risk of losing their jobs. Therefore, engaging in a postgraduate qualification for some may have been a way of not directly seeking a new opportunity but demonstrating professionalism through seeking higher-level qualifications. Engagement in study potentially contributes to increases in individual capital in the form of what Swain and Hammond (2011) refer to as professional, personal and social capital. It could be suggested that participants perceived engagement with and attainment of a higher qualification than that of their peers and managers as providing human capital that would enhance their employability.

Swain and Hammand (2011) define professional capital as skills that can be used in professional life; this would appear to be the dominant motivation in encouraging individuals to engage in higher level CPD. However, this becomes replaced by personal capital 'attitudes, aspirations and dispositions affecting identity' (2011: 595) as participants become emerged in their studies. Kell (2006) and Caldwell (2001) consider that master's level study meets the needs of practitioners who want to engage with their practice at a higher level through advancing their skills and academic knowledge. As with the Swain and Hammond (2011) study, participants here gained personal capital, for many this was in the form of a professional identity, for others it was confidence in their enhanced knowledge levels when compared with colleagues and managers. These findings also support Kell (2006) who suggests that practitioners engaging in higher-level study are seeking a qualification which affords greater professional standing.

For many of the practitioners in the study taking responsibility and owning their professional development was an important aspect of what the programme represented. Through this they sought autonomy in their professionalism as they were able to exert agency over their CPD. Richardson (2004) argues that students integrate their academic experiences into their personal and professional identity and as such evidence increased pride in their professional role and the contributions they make in the workplace. It could be argued that for these students taking ownership of this aspect of their professional life (their CPD) empowered them in having a greater influence and impact on other parts of their professional life.

Engagement with the postgraduate programme contributed to some practitioners regaining their professional identity or defining themselves as a professional as a result of their study. They felt the programme distanced them from the basic level of training and qualification that many of their colleagues had. In addition, the programme offered the opportunity to learn and share with like-minded colleagues. A number of respondents identified frustrations in their work environment with colleagues who had no interest in engaging with professional development.

> Without meaning to sound snobby, I found myself completing my NVQ in Advice and Guidance along side other IAG workers, some of whom had only completed secondary level education…I didn't want to be perceived as a 'technician' and that is when I began to look into completing a higher education qualification in guidance [careers and higher adviser, FE].

Many perceived the postgraduate programme as providing them with the intellectual engagement that was lacking in their work environment. They were often critical of work colleagues and did not see them as professionals.

The study participants generally perceived a significant enhancement in their professional identity through engagement with theory, empowerment, reflection, policy and academic study. The exceptions to this tended to have a strongly defined existing professional identity. Many claimed to previously having had a professional identity but had felt it was waning; others had a developing or embryonic professional identity which was becoming more fully formed through engagement in the programme. Study participants perceived professional identity being reinforced through engagement with professional development and investment in self and practice, which contributed to clarity of role and the parameters surrounding this.

> I am sort of in the process of metamorphosing into a new professional identity. I think that I did have one before and I probably lost it as a practitioner but I am regaining a new one [adult careers adviser A].

Those in the study who worked in Further and Higher Education institutions predominantly had stronger professional identities than those working only with young people and adults.

> I don't feel my professional identity has changed I feel very strongly about that. I actually can't fulfill it any more, which is a different thing. I have an understanding of what a careers adviser should be and what I want it to be and I am not it anymore. [adult careers adviser B].

Douglas (2011) considers within her research careers advisers whom she identifies as 'academic reflectors'. This group she presents as recognising the value of academic knowledge and reflection in relation to practice. This group use language to construct their professional identity and define it within the parameters of:
> academic knowledge, professional judgment and autonomy, social value and altruism, and ethical practice (Douglas, 2011: 168).

This definition provides strong congruence with the view of the participants in this study and reflects the outcomes and benefits of practitioners engaging in postgraduate level CPD.

The engagement with postgraduate level study produces many benefits for practitioners both intellectually and practically which contribute to establishing or maintaining their professional identity. Intellectually the programme provided personal space for practitioners to critically engage with their practice, to review, reflect and redefine what they did and how they worked. Shaw and Green (1999: 169) claim lifelong learning is about intellectual knowledge and not just about vocational

skills and economic benefits. This reflects many of the research findings here, where individuals' motivations for engagement have generally valued the intellectual elements more than the kudos of the academic qualification. The programme provided the opportunity to re-engage with the roots of what practice was perceived to be about, reaffirming a sense of the individual as a professional.

> I think it has totally reignited my passion and enthusiasm for guidance [personal adviser A, Connexions].

Conclusions

The careers sector has over recent years experienced significant change resulting in divergent policy directions, new job titles and focus of work. The recommendations from the Careers Profession Task Force (2010) have contributed to the establishment of a new professional body the Career Development Institute (CDI), which aims to address many of the professional standards issues which have been identified problematic to professional practice.

This study provides a powerful insight into the views of a group of careers advisers committed to their professional practice. It argues that many practitioners struggle to articulate a professional identity that is meaningful to themselves, their clients and professional peers. Job titles that identify who they are and what they do offer an important element in acknowledging the role that they have.

Postgraduate CPD is initially sought as a means of progressing practitioner's careers, it is perceived as offering leverage in what can be challenging professional times. Through engagement with study at this level intrinsic motivators take on a higher importance and contribute to enhancements in terms of confidence, self-esteem, knowledge of theory, reflection and critical thinking. The programme offers an intellectual engagement that many find lacking in their day-to-day work. It reinforces a professional differentiation between careers advisers committed to professional practice and those who are not. Moreover for many participants this translates into a more defined sense of self as a professional and a clearer professional identity.

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