

## **More questions than answers: the role of practitioner research in professional practice**

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### **Introduction**

The concept of the career guidance practitioner viewing themselves as a professional is currently being challenged (Colley and Lewin, 2008; Greer, 2009). During the last decade there has been a concerted effort to support practitioners in engaging with research both as an agent and as a recipient to enhance practice and to drive forward the concept of the professional. This paper presents examples of progress within this endeavour and the views of practitioners who have engaged in research activities, either as part of their role or as dedicated continuing professional development (CPD).

Throughout this paper we explore the role of research within the concepts of profession and professional practice; drawing on literature and primary research that captures views from two groups of practitioners. That careers guidance is a profession is an assumed reality for many practitioners and the organisations that represent them (and our own stance is that it is indeed a profession and we refer to it as such throughout this paper). The traditional characteristics/traits of a profession (Friedson, 1986; Piper, 1994; Hoyle, 1995; Becher, 1999) can be generally classified as:

- an occupation constituting a living for members
- members having completed some form of higher learning
- a theoretical knowledge base upon which expertise is based
- providing a service for the common good (from which professional status is bestowed by society)
- autonomy with the primary identity allied to the profession rather than the employer
- controlled membership of the profession.

However, these professional traits are not wholly in place for the careers guidance sector. Indeed, many would perceive the exclusively technical nature of some of the qualifications, the complexity of representation with the myriad of membership organisations, (Bimrose, 2004; Colley and Lewin, 2008; Greer, 2009; Neary-Booth and Peck, 2009) and the lack of specified CPD or an active and acknowledged register of members as defining a more technician-level occupation.

Other professions have taken measures to raise their professional standing. Williams (1998) argues that newer professions including teaching and social work, are seeking professionalisation through a range of measures including defining a body of theoretical knowledge, extended initial training grounded in academic disciplines, all graduate entry, removal of unqualified personnel and investment in a growing body of research and scholarship through postgraduate education, thus contributing to extending the practitioner researcher base. It could be argued that the careers guidance profession has in fact taken (or been given) measures that have moved sections of it in the opposite direction. The movement towards standardised performance indicators has, by definition, limited the opportunities for practitioners to explore and investigate outside of the prescribed requirements. This paper explores further this issue as part of a wider exploration of what it means to be a professional in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the role that research has within this.

## **Practitioner researcher**

The development of practitioner researchers within the careers guidance field has been slow and continually evolving. It is well documented by Lucas (1996) that few practitioners do research. In October 1998 a consultation event sponsored by the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (Jackson, 1998), presented the need for a stronger research culture which could contribute to generating theoretical and conceptual inputs to inform policy, and develop practitioner tools. The important message from the consultation was the need to integrate more fully the practitioner within the research culture and to create mechanisms through which the interface between research and practice could be enhanced.

The OECD report (2003) for the UK identified a strong knowledge base for careers guidance services, but noted that much of the research is insufficiently disseminated to practitioners. This has a significant impact on initial training and continuing professional development in maintaining the expert knowledge of the practitioner workforce. Kidd et al (1994) found practitioners had only limited use for theory and that it did not apply to practice. Douglas (2004) argued that as an element of professional development, practitioners should engage with soundly based theory as a means to stretch views and challenge practice. Harrison et al (2001) in their experience of developing and delivering a Masters level course, present a picture of a wide range of careers practitioners, the majority of whom have not engaged with professional training. They do note however, a strong commitment among their student base to professional development: students as reflective practitioners, take on the role of generating new knowledge as practitioner researchers where they adapt knowledge rather than applying what is known.

However, the relevance of expert knowledge related to practice is called in to question by Williams (1998) who claimed that professionals are out of touch with the needs of clients. Consequently, Irving and Barker (2004) propose that research activities should be a key component of professional and personal development for academics and practitioners, to ensure that 'real world' challenges are recognised and to maintain the currency of careers practice within a rapidly changing world. If we continue to utilise the characteristics of a profession identified earlier, then expert knowledge is one that we should focus on. Irving and Marris (2002) argue that practitioners need a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by their clients and this can be gained from engagement with research activities. A cautionary note is sounded by Bimrose (2006) who challenges the ability of practitioners to be able to deliver evidence based practice, due to the lack of freedom in exercising professional judgements as a consequence of policy constraints.

## **Research skills**

Developing a workforce which is skilled in research methods and can apply them in both developing their own and their organisational practice, offers the career guidance sector a new strand of professional practice through contributing to the theoretical and the applied body of knowledge. The interdisciplinary nature of career guidance, drawing from education, sociology and psychology disciplines amongst others, offers an academic base both multidisciplinary and eclectic (Collin, 2000). Consequently there is limited 'pure', as opposed to applied, research within the career guidance sector, carried out by either academics with a career guidance background or career guidance practitioners with the required skills set. A body of practitioners with skills, passion and the resource to undertake more practice based research would greatly contribute to the credibility of a professional image sought by the sector as a whole. Currently there are significant gaps in much of the literature relevant to careers practice. McCarthy (2004) identifies training, skills and qualifications as one area. Irving and Barker (2004) suggest the benefits of career guidance for marginalised and socially excluded groups is another and readers will be able to identify many more. The research which is commissioned by government and public bodies is predominantly allied to policy and as such does not always facilitate the sector in growing and evolving the necessary knowledge base.

### **The career guidance research community**

The event summarised by Jackson (1998) highlighted earlier in this paper, presented a set of recommendations to establish and grow a research culture within the career guidance community. Twelve recommendations in total were made aimed at all the stakeholders within the career guidance sector including central government, careers companies and individual practitioners. The aim being to enhance theory, networks and widen the dissemination of research. Over the last decade there have been a number of initiatives that have sought to engage practitioners more fully in establishing a practitioner focused research culture. These have included the following:

- Promotion and recognition of research activities through award schemes
- Establishment of research communities
- Dissemination of research activities through focused conferences and symposia
- Development of new higher level qualifications specifically for guidance practitioners
- The National Guidance Research Forum
- Practitioner focused research publications.

These and other initiatives have aimed at providing practitioners with greater access to the findings of research; however the extent to which practitioners engage with research and how it is applied within their practice remains unclear. It would enhance future developments to be able to identify strategies which are effective in making research both accessible and attractive to the majority of practitioners. Irving and Barker (2004) consider in detail Becher's (1999) proposition that the academic community could work more closely with practitioner employers to develop continuing professional development opportunities that engage practitioners in the research agenda, perhaps through training and collaborative projects. A benefit to organisations employing staff who are engaged in Masters level study, is the opportunity to have high quality research undertaken by staff as part of their studies which will impact on organisation and practice development. However, there are considerable obstacles facing employers and practitioners alike in securing research opportunities. This requires strategies which recognise the benefits for individuals, their employing organisations and the sector at large (Lucas, 1996).

### **The experience of practitioner researchers**

The practitioner researcher forms a vital foundation in the development of professional practice: Fish (1998) claims that professional development and practitioner research are synonymous. The practitioner provides a valued, accessible and pragmatic perspective for their community of practice. Developing and growing the skills required to undertake reliable research requires a commitment by all the key stakeholders, including both employers and practitioners. Through engaging in research activities, Collin (2000) and Irving and Barker (2004) suggest that the impact on practice includes development of critical thinking skills and a more reflective approach to work. Without an increase in research activity Irving and Barker (2004) warn that career guidance problem solving will be based on 'common sense' and anecdotal explanations. Jackson (1998) and Irving and Barker (2004), call for a collaboration from the guidance community to create and establish a research culture; engagement with practitioners as researchers is one significant way to achieve this.

### **The research project**

We wanted to test some of these ideas further with practitioners and explore their views of research, its role in creating a professional identity and practitioner skills and experiences of undertaking research. To achieve this we secured perspectives from two groups that we considered would be able to reflect on the role of research within a professional context:

- Practitioners who have enrolled on academic courses of study that involve a strong research element
- Practitioners who have engaged in practical research.

Amongst both groups perspectives on the following four questions were explored:

- Do practitioners undertake research because it is part of their assumed professional ethic (I research because it is endemic to professional life)?
- Do practitioners undertake research because it promotes self-actualisation (Through research I reinforce my identity as a professional)?
- Do practitioners undertake research to promote self-actualisation of the clients with whom they work (I research to improve my professional practice)?
- Do practitioners undertake research because it supports organisational objectives (I research because it improves my organisation's practice)?

## **Methodology**

The research was undertaken with the two distinct groups described above representing a) a group of practitioners engaged in formal CPD activities, and b) a group previously engaged in a research project directed by their employer and linked to their work. The specific modes of investigation were tailored for each group. For the former, iCeGS Masters students were asked to participate via an on-line questionnaire. They were provided with a loose definition of research as a key element within Masters level study and scholarly activity. In the case of the latter, a structured questionnaire was developed and delivered by phone to a small group of practitioners who had been peer-researchers on a recent iCeGS research study sponsored by a Connexions service. This second group were asked to consider their own definitions of research within practice. The students and the practitioners were all asked to respond to the same four issues as identified above.

## **Practitioner perspectives**

The population for this group represented practitioners who are currently or have been Masters students; all are UK based. This group of participants will be referred to as 'students'. The questionnaire was designed using Snap software and then up-loaded onto a website; the web link was circulated to students with an invitation to participate. The web link was sent to 49 students. Responses were received from 18 students, representing a return rate of 37%. The data are presented as percentages and in numeric form. The limited sample size means that findings are tentative and are used to indicate issues of interest for further investigation and discussion.

The majority 67% (n=12) strongly agreed/agreed that they engage with research as part of their professional ethic. A similar proportion (78%, n=14) strongly agreed / agreed that research has a role in reinforcing professional identity. These findings suggest that respondents see research as an inherent part of their professional life and identity. However, the response was not overwhelming with at least a quarter disagreeing with the statements. When qualitative comments were examined further it became clear that for some who had equated research with professionalism, this view was based more on their personal relationship with work, rather than a natural requirement for a professional. So for example, one respondent noted 'it satisfies my natural curiosity in my professional field of work', while another said 'research enhances my professional understanding of my role'.

There was much greater concurrence with the view that research enhances the client experience. So, 94% (n=17) said that they had specifically chosen to take a postgraduate/Masters level qualification to

improve their professional practice with clients and they saw engagement with this level of study as enhancing the quality of services for their clients. It would appear from these findings that the students engage in research to better support their role as a practitioner first and foremost. Their priority is to improve their knowledge to improve their client services; one comment being 'I enjoy research - it improves my service to clients'.

The role of research in building organisational policy and practice was more ambiguous. 94% (n=17) strongly agreed/agreed that research supported improvements to their organisation – however this could be interpreted either as being proof of evidence based strategy, or rather more prosaically as more effective interpretation of labour market information (for example) for client benefit. In relation to how research contributes to standards of practice, the respondents were equally split between those who felt research was important and those who were neutral 44% (n=8). Furthermore, only 39% (n=7) saw research as being important to organisational policy developments. One respondent, who works in the adult guidance sector, suggested there was no requirement and limited opportunity to engage in research as all learning and training was focused on contractual requirements. They said 'the apparent lack of professionalism in the service means that there is no place for research, interest in the results or capacity to initiate change. I feel I have to find my own context for research within my professional practice'. Although these findings are based on a limited data set, they present a 'snap shot' of a body of practitioners/students whose primary objective focuses on the needs of clients rather than themselves as professionals.

The feedback from practitioners who had previously been part of a research team provides further insight into some of the responses of their student colleagues. iCeGS worked with eight Personal Advisers (PAs), who were practitioner researchers for a specific project to map Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) provision in schools across a Connexions service. With the support of their Chief Executive, we were able to contact six of them by phone and conduct a structured interview. Interviews were recorded and notes taken to assist a thematic analysis of responses.

The first issue that arises from these discussions is the various types and interpretations of what research – and by implication the term practitioner researcher – means. For practitioners, research reflects a range of activities with differing purposes. It meant:

- Finding out information to support clients and respond to client needs
- Finding information or advice to inform their practice, for example to enable them to respond to an issue they had not had to deal with previously
- Generating a shared and balanced view of a particular issue at an organisational level
- Pushing the boundaries of knowledge to develop new understanding.

Using different definitions one respondent reported that they did research all the time (finding out information), while another claimed that no research was being undertaken within the organisation (that pushed the boundaries of knowledge).

As with the students, all agreed that researching was a part of their professional role and they engaged in research activity a lot – by which most meant that they sought information to support their clients, or participated in customer feedback type projects. One respondent for example was currently on secondment researching materials for Year 7 and Year 8 to support decisions related to the diploma. Another noted that they 'used to do a lot more – we used to do reports about specific visits to employers and HE institutions...good for updating my own knowledge and colleagues'.

While most agreed that research was a means to reinforce a professional identity, it was generally discussed in the context of offering a professional service rather than being a professional offering a service. They were keen to ensure that their research skills were applied to best effect for clients but this of itself did not contribute to their sense of professional identity – more it was a technical part of

the role that they needed to do well. In fact, most respondents thought of themselves as a professional because of the route they had taken in securing their role – i.e. the qualifications they had taken. One saw membership of the ICG as a means to denote professional identity, but noted that few colleagues had taken up membership.

Several respondents were able to identify improvements in their own practice as a consequence of participating in the iCeGS research. One had taken the experience with them into a new role and had repeated the exercise with a different group of providers as a means of generating a ‘going forward vision’ and establishing their own agenda. Another said that the role of practitioner researcher had given him ‘professional leverage’ which newly positioned him, in the eyes of schools, as an expert and consultant; someone who could advise teaching staff; ‘I was seen as being someone who was good at what they do’. A third thought that the experience had added value to their CV by adding new skills (enhanced confidence through speaking with senior managers) and helped them to secure a new role.

Respondents were able to identify a number of ways in which the research had impacted upon their organisation. One reported that they felt the research had enabled their hunches about practice to be explored ‘you can have a feeling that things aren’t right but research clarifies that and highlights shortcomings’. Consequently, the research process was used to clarify, verify and account for issues being experienced by PAs on a day to day basis. Other impacts were indirect, for example the process of undertaking research and asking questions had ‘made the schools sit up and realise that they were not doing enough – things have been better since’. Another indirect example is that the research had generated a number of resources which were added to the PA library. Despite these impacts however, respondents were generally unsure about the impact of undertaking the research on the organisation, partly because they felt they were not close to management levels. This group of practitioner researchers were aware of being briefed by their organisation on the research findings, but could not recall what happened next.

There was general agreement that research was important for improving services for clients. But there was also recognition of the difficulties in finding the resources, the time, or ‘headroom’ as one respondent put it, to undertake it. One respondent noted that the research activity ceased once the ‘funny money’ that had funded it had run out. Another noted ‘I would like to be part of more research but there are time constraints – if it’s not key to your case load management then it’s hard to fit in’. When talking about the tyranny of the case load another respondent commented that ‘research is important and should inform all policy and practice but the reality is that research is the thing that will give if time is pressing’.

However, one respondent also recognised that research was important for the profession: ‘unless we acknowledge the professional body of knowledge we end up in a situation where accusations like ‘anyone could do it’ get levelled at us’.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

The status of the career guidance profession has been debated in the literature, and has been the concern of many practitioners and their representative bodies for many years, if not decades. This paper has reviewed the arguments that promote the notion that the core of the role is a professional one, but that the infrastructure to support the professional development of those working in the sector, to raise the status of the profession to secure enhanced partnership working and give the sector a stronger voice in policy development has not been achieved. Taking note of other professions (such as teaching and social work) and the measures that they have taken towards professionalisation, the paper focuses on the role of research in the development of a professional identity.

Over the last decade there have been changes and developments in the field that have undoubtedly enhanced the research base that informs the work of the sector, and the research skills base among those who work in it. However, the capacity to continually grow and improve its effectiveness,

through critical thinking and a more reflective approach to work, needs a workforce with a stronger foundation in theory, and enhanced research skills.

In order to secure a practitioner perspective on the role of research within the profession the researchers approached two groups who separately had engaged with research. The findings show that practitioners understand research and its potential in a number of different ways. Fundamentally they see research as a means to improve services to clients, either as a core component of what they do in the role (researching information for example), or in their own study as a means to improve their practice.

Thus, research is used to improve professional practice on a daily basis or on a reflective basis. The relationship with research is therefore personal. So for example, 94% (n=17) of the students had chosen postgraduate study as a way of improving their research skills, however only 39% (n=7) had joined the programme with an identified research area they wished to progress, suggesting that (not unreasonably) developing the skills required to conduct research is of more importance to students than advancing the body of knowledge. These results therefore support the perspective of Irving and Barker (2004) where research directly supports practice with clients.

It also raises concerns about the knowledge and skills base underpinning the work of the profession. The Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act (HMSO,1993) together with the introduction of the competence based qualifications in the form of the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) and the subsequent introduction of the Connexions Service, have made a significant impact on the professional identity of the careers practitioner (Colley and Lewin, 2008; Greer, 2009). These events led to the migration of much initial training from a higher education environment to the workplace, which widened access in gaining a qualification and increased the range of providers engaged in delivering the NVQ. However, we would argue that it also eroded the research skills base within the sector as competencies to design, deliver, interpret or apply research to practice are not measured within these frameworks.

This is further evidenced by the limited knowledge of how research is used by employing organisations, or indeed in a wider sense of how research can support professional identity which in turn can support and promote the profession. So this leads to the question of how do career guidance practitioners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century define their professional identity? It appears that the starting point among practitioners might be of a professional identity that sees professional service delivery as being synonymous with professionalism. Consequently, if we are to better promote the relationship of practice and research and the integration of researcher with practitioner a number of themes need to be pursued. These include the provision of more visible platforms for practitioner research; the status of practitioner research needs to be enhanced and be fully integrated within the core of all professional practice within the guidance sector; and research that is developed and used by organisations, communities of practice and research organisations needs to be shared and disseminated in ways that are tailored for practitioners and policy makers alike. In this way we can move towards the model of the practitioner workforce that simultaneously builds the evidence base and improves practice.

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