

Only qualifications count: Exploring perceptions of continuing professional development (CPD) within the career guidance sector.

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Abstract

This paper explores the views of a group of career development practitioners undertaking a postgraduate qualification as a form of continuing professional development (CPD). It offers insights into how these practitioners perceive and view different forms of CPD. A case study methodology was adopted to gather examples of CPD activities practitioners engaged in and the value placed on these in supporting the development of professional practice. Their views were synthesised to create a typology representing a differentiated model of CPD. The model proposes three types of CPD: operational, experiential and formal. Formal CPD is perceived as having the highest value in developing professional practice. The study supports a deeper understanding of how careers practitioners engage with and understand CPD.

Key words: Continuing professional development (CPD), careers practitioners, career development work, professional associations, professional practice.

Introduction

There is a general consensus within the existing literature addressing professionalism in career work as to the importance of continuing professional development as a core element (Mulvey, 2013; Neary, 2014; Allen and Moffett, 2015). Postle, Edwards, Moon, Rumsey and Thomas (2002) consider CPD as the link between the theoretical knowledge developed in initial professional education (IPE) and the experience developed in the work environment. Peel (2005) presents CPD as being pivotal in ensuring credibility and professional validity for professional bodies. Within the context of career work Mulvey (2011 and 2013) considers CPD as a moral duty and part of the ethics that frame professional practice. She argues that embracing CPD is an individual choice and challenges practitioners to take responsibility for their professional actions. Allen and Moffett (2015) in research with students undertaking initial training for career work identify CPD as one of the most valued characteristics of a professional. CPD is therefore a key element in the debate concerning professionalisation of the career workforce.

This paper will explore the perceptions of career development practitioners engaged in CPD through a postgraduate qualification. The qualification is delivered by a university in the Midlands, in the UK. It aims to support career development practitioners to develop their professional practice through reflection and engagement with theory and policy. A purposive sample of UK based course participants contributed to the study. Participants were drawn from a range of roles, occupational specialisms and contexts within the career development sector. The data is drawn from an online survey, in-depth interviews and narrative biographies seeking to explore participants' perceptions of CPD, how it supports practice and the types of CPD that are most valued. The study is conducted against a backdrop which encompasses a significant deconstruction of the career workforce as a result of government policy (Langley, Hooley and Bertuchi, 2014; Watts, 2013) and an increasingly target driven approach to delivery (Hughes and Gration, 2009).

Why is CPD important?

Eraut (1994) suggests that professionals need to engage in continual learning, as the knowledge base, the nature of practice and the problems and issues addressed are

constantly evolving. He goes on to differentiate between what he refers to as continuing professional education (CPE) which defines activities such as conferences, courses that are formally organised: as opposed to continuing professional development (CPD) which is inclusive of these activities but also includes work-based learning. Douglas (2004) differentiates between CPD and work-based learning; the latter defined as having the skills and knowledge to undertake changed roles and responsibilities to achieve business outcomes. This suggests a change in focus from developing the practitioner as a professional to one of developing the practitioner to achieve organisational targets.

Like Watkins (1999), Friedman and Phillips (2004) emphasise that CPD is increasingly the responsibility of the individual and not the employer. Mulvey (2004) argues that individual and employer led CPD are different activities. She suggests that if it is individual led, they will identify areas of practice that are underdeveloped and therefore will be more motivated to address them. If however it is employer led this will often be integrated within bureaucratic mechanisms such as annual reviews. She suggests that most practitioners' development needs do not fit easily within these types of systems.

Watkins (1999) describes how the role of professional associations has evolved to take on greater responsibility in supporting the membership to effectively manage changes in working practices. Karseth and Nerland (2007) suggest that professional associations have become the 'critical agents of knowledge' (p. 336). They have taken on the mantle to facilitate and support members in accessing and making sense of abstract knowledge to enable them to stay up to date.

The views of members however in relation to the provision of professional development can be varied. Friedman and Phillips (2004) suggest from their research with members of associations, that although professional associations promote CPD there is confusion around what defines CPD. This raises a number of questions including, the lack of definition, who are the beneficiaries, and the relationship between CPD and competence? Through

analysis of literature produced by professional associations they conclude that CPD reflects a number of purposes including, personal development, public assurance and verification of standards and competence. Within their study the professionals themselves, considered it as something that needed to be done to keep up to date either formally or informally.

Mulvey (2013) presents professional associations as the third partner along with the individual and the employer in the CPD relationship. Within the career development sector in the UK the professional bodies; The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) and the Career Development Institute (CDI) include CPD as a core activity. Only AGCAS (2015) offers a definition, which focuses on CPD activities contributing to capability to perform the professional role. Providing clarity for members about what defines CPD is an important element when promoting CPD to membership.

The policy context

Within the career development sector in the UK initial training has been fragmented and diverse (Bimrose, 2006). Some practitioners may hold a formal qualification in advice and guidance. This includes a range of qualifications with diverse foci and offered at a range of levels. Equally many practitioners may not have initial training or a qualification (Harrison, Edwards and Brown, 2001). Arguably, this lack of clarity in relation to formal initial training potentially influences practitioner perception and engagement with CPD.

The topic of CPD in relation to the career development sector has attracted considerable discussion in recent years. The Skills Commission (2008) in their inquiry into Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) identified no standard requirement for CPD, resulting in an unsystematic approach to identifying and addressing workforce needs. Lewin and Colley (2011) identified a wide disparity of training within Connexions companies: much of what was considered CPD addressed contractual and legislative requirements and particularly topics that were identified as CPD omissions by the Skills Commission Inquiry (2008). The Careers Profession Task Force 2010

confirmed the Skills Commission findings and added that CPD was not supported by all employers. It argued that CPD improved the expertise of practitioners, facilitated links between theory and practice and improved the morale of the workforce. It recommended that the professional body should require practitioners to record and declare the amount of CPD undertaken annually.

CPD and maintaining competence in relation to the National Occupational Standards: Career Development are now core elements of the Career Development Institute's (CDI) code of ethics (2014a). This requires all CDI members to engage in CPD and to ensure they maintain and monitor fitness to practice. There is a requirement of 25 hours a year of CPD which is randomly sampled to maintain registration on the UK register of Career Development Professionals (CDI, 2014b).

Continuing professional development for the career workforce is a global issue. Both OECD (2004) and Cedefop suggest that there is little evidence of other countries having 'sound systems for CPD' (2009, p40). A major sub theme at the International Symposium for Career Development and Public Policy (2011) focused specifically on the changing role of career guidance and the skills and knowledge of the workforce. The recommendation specified the need to ensure the career workforce has professional standards, robust quality frameworks and national qualification frameworks ensuring the workforce are fit for purpose. The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN, 2012) has addressed many of these issues within their quality assurance and evidence-base framework, specifically focusing on the need for practitioner competence and engaging with CPD. The NICE Network Handbook (2012) documents the academic training for career guidance and counseling practitioners and makes explicit that professionals should actively engage in developing their competence through reflective practice, research and theory but does not suggest a time commitment. [CPD as an ethical issue is also addressed by the International Association of Educational and Vocational Guidance \(IAEVG, 2015\) who include competence and continual learning as a responsibility of individual practitioners within their ethical standards.](#)

The movement towards regulation of CPD raises a number of questions concerning the definition of CPD, what is recognised, valued and considered worth investment.

Mulvey (2004) identifies a number of major issues in relation to mandatory professional development specifically the issue of quality, the extent to which CPD can be counted and the relative values of differing activities.

Given the importance of CPD for all professionals it is critical to gain a greater understanding of what career development practitioners understand by the term (Neary, 2014). The changes in the nature of the career workforce suggest that CPD is potentially an area that individuals will be expected to personally invest in within the professionalisation of the career workforce and as such hearts and minds may need to be won. This research aimed to explore career practitioners' motivations for selection of postgraduate study as a form of continuing professional development and to examine their engagement with, and perceptions of other forms of CPD.

Methodology

This study focused on the nature of students' engagement with postgraduate study as a form of CPD. A case study approach was selected for this research, the boundaries of which were defined as a masters degree in guidance studies and the students undertaking the programme between 2006 and 2011. The strengths of a case study approach for this type of research are that it provides the opportunity to investigate contemporary events within a real life context (Yin, 2009) and to focus on one thing, in-depth and from multiple angles (Thomas, 2011).

This case study was located as an explanatory case study as it was focused on an in-depth interpretative understanding of a phenomenon (Thomas, 2011). The investigation concerned a clearly defined and unique setting, both in terms of the masters programme and the individual contexts of the students within the programme. The use of multiple methods facilitated an empirical investigation that generated a wealth of rich data allowing consideration of the phenomenon from a range of perspectives. The study aimed to develop an understanding of the choices that career practitioners make in relation to their CPD and to consider how these contributed to their professional practice.

Criticism often leveled at case study as a method concern limitations for generalisation due to the individual nature of the study (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001; Flyvbjerg, 2004). Bassey (1999) suggests that unqualified generalisations can be made from small-scale case studies; however he also sees the potential value in what he refers to as ‘fuzzy generalisations’. He argues that fuzzy generalisation, can support claims that are singular or typical and can be perceived as ‘possible’, ‘likely’ or ‘unlikely’ and may be found in similar situations elsewhere.

Twenty-one UK based career practitioners participated in the study. They were drawn from a range of career related occupational settings and included practitioners working with young people, adults, further education, higher education and the voluntary and community sector and had all worked in the sector between 3 and 25 years. All but one participant had a qualification in career work, these ranged from a National/Scottish Vocational Qualification level 3 to a Qualification/Diploma in Career Guidance/Development. Data were collected at different times during the programme allowing the impact of learning to be assessed sequentially. The tools used included an online survey questionnaire (n=18), in-depth telephone interviews (n=7) and narrative biography (n=5).

The online survey covered a range of topic areas, which explored participants’ motivation for engaging in CPD. The responses from the survey informed the focus of the in-depth interviews. A purposive sample of seven students at varying stages of study and representing different settings within the sector i.e. adult, young people, FE and higher education was interviewed. Purposive sampling ensures that relevant criteria are included and that critical thinking has ensured that the boundaries of what are to be explored are appropriate (Ritchie et al., 2003). The narrative biographies added additional depth through investigating the findings from the interviews.

An important element for the case study was the opportunity to make comparisons across and within the various data sets to assess similarities and discrepancies between the findings. The data was analysed using content and thematic analysis, these provided a systematic and empirical approach to the analysis of the data (Burton, 2000). Within the content analysis the incidence of certain phrases were counted to identify a hierarchy of frequency. The thematic analysis was conducted

allowing for a flexible approach in identifying new themes as the depth of analysis increased. **This supported an evolving and inclusive approach to the data analysis,** ensuring that participants' views were considered in their entirety within the context rather than simply as component parts. Each theme identified was given a code. These codes were used to annotate the texts where they were identified. This produced a list of CPD activities identified by the participants. These were categorised into three groups defined as operational, experiential and formal CPD.

Findings

Perspectives on CPD

Views of what constituted professional development tended to define CPD as a set of activities; the most commonly identified was training.

Ongoing training is a vital part of this experience and this might be gained from specialist careers information events, education and qualifications training, updating of guidance techniques, networking and sharing best practice. [Carol¹, FE Careers Adviser, Narrative]

There was a belief in the importance of CPD as a fundamental component of what was perceived as being a 'professional'.

Personally speaking if you want to do a good job or the best a job as you possibly can it is also your duty to continue to develop yourself. [David FE Career Adviser, Interview]

Participants were asked to list the CPD activities they had engaged in which supported them in undertaking their role (Figure 1). The analyses of the various types of CPD identified by practitioners in the study were collated and catalogued and three dominant classifications were generated.

- *Operational CPD* describes training defined by and delivered by the employing organisation and predominantly focused on developing skills and knowledge required by law or contractual obligations.
- *Experiential CPD* describes reflected knowledge and skills developed within the context of their work environment, which enhanced their capabilities to deliver their professional role.

1 All the respondents have been given pseudonyms.

- *Formal CPD* included activities that usually have an external focus such as award bearing qualifications. These were perceived as having wider recognition or focusing on developing professional practice.

Figure 1. presents examples of the types of CPD identified by the participants. These have been classified to offer an overview of the differentiation of activities.

[Figure 1]

Operational CPD

Operational CPD reflects employer led professional development that is defined and mandated by the employing organisation. Participants when asked to identify CPD provided by employers generally considered that employers did not provide CPD but did offer them training. They identified that training provided by their employer tended to focus only on legislative requirements such as health and safety or activities, which enabled them to meet contractual requirements. This was considered as different from CPD.

All learning and training is focused around the needs to meet contractual requirements and the government agenda. [Andrea, Adult Career Adviser, Survey]

I think any training I have had has just been to meet a particular policy agenda or organisational objective. It hasn't really enhanced my practice. [Laura, Adult Career Adviser, Interview]

For many this focus on contractual requirements provided the impetus to seek out external CPD such as the postgraduate programme. The employer CPD was not perceived to offer the development and support they wanted.

There was nothing forthcoming and that was what started my quest really to find something that would not only help me as a practitioner but would help me in the role that I am doing as well. [Susan, Connexions, Interview]

For many there was a sense that once they had successfully completed initial training there was limited further investment in them by their employer: other than what was essential. This tended to focus on systems and processes rather than professional knowledge or skills development. Some practitioners felt patronised by some of the

training they had completed and that it eradicated professionalism rather than enhanced it; one referred to it as a form of ‘infantilisation’.

You are made to feel you are back in the school classroom by some forms of training. [Laura, Adult Career Adviser, Interview]

There were some variations on the training offered to participants by their employers. Those who worked for educational institutions, in universities and colleges of Further and Higher Education were often able to identify a greater range of CPD opportunities provided. This often included specialist practitioner training such as Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP), management training and mental health training. The multi-functional nature of these institutions appeared to offer a broader staff development programme than for those who worked in a single function organisation such as dedicated services for young people or adults.

Operational CPD tended to be perceived by participants as being compulsory, employer defined and aimed at meeting organisational agendas. It was generally undervalued and considered to address the needs of the organisation as opposed to the professional needs of the practitioner.

Experiential CPD

This form of CPD was based on day-to-day practice. It focused on the development of the skills, knowledge and abilities of the career development practitioner through experience.

Now I haven’t done formal CPD, but working in this field and doing this job in its own right is continuing development. [David, FE Career Adviser, Interview]

Participants provided a number of suggestions of how they developed their practice experientially through engagement with new client groups, working with other professionals and learning on the job. Experiential CPD was generally perceived as an implicit part of practice, whereby knowledge and skills were developed tacitly to enhance practice. Alternatively they were developed explicitly with practitioners identifying a development need and seeking internal support to achieve this such as the progression routes for a particular course they were unfamiliar with or job opportunities in other countries.

Formal CPD

Formal CPD was the phrase most commonly adopted by participants to describe activities they perceived to support the development of their professional practice. How this was achieved was not well articulated; CPD tended to be defined as ‘formal’ or not. When asked to define formal CPD participants viewed this as an activity that was credit or award bearing, was linked to an educational institution, or had real perceived benefits to practice. This formal CPD was generally perceived as being of greater value to the individual in contributing to their professional development and career. It had a value outside of their current employment and was therefore transferable. For others formal CPD was defined more broadly and was perceived as the intellectual engagement in professional practice and developing understanding through reading policy documents and research papers. Formal CPD was seen as something that was different from operational CPD in that it did not focus on process and systems but on esoteric knowledge, which was deemed more in line with CPD that develops the professional as opposed to the technician.

I probably mean mainly reading, reading policy, research, papers, articles, news articles watching videos. You know anything that engages people, just develops people’s understanding. [Andrea, Adult Career Adviser, Interview]

Discussion

There appeared to be a lack of consensus as to the nature of CPD and its purpose. Terminology used by participants was often interchangeable as the terms CPD and training appeared to be synonymous, particularly when describing learning opportunities delivered by the employer. Some ‘training’ activities were described as enabling participants to deliver their role such as, courses about using specific management information tools or child protection. Kennedy (2014) acknowledges training as effective in introducing new knowledge however, it places participants in a passive role as recipients. These activities appeared to take the form of technical skills and knowledge facilitating the application of their role within their specific context.

CPD was presented as enhancing their professional practice through the opportunity to engage with concepts and knowledge addressing career theory, professional practice techniques e.g. Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP): activities that

enhanced the service to the client and extended their abilities as a professional. All could identify examples of what the employer defined as CPD but few could articulate examples of where they felt their employer had supported them in extending their professional practice. Training was perceived as something operational and functional which supported them to meet contract requirements. CPD was perceived as something different, which was more about developing them as a professional practitioner and offering intellectual stimulation.

The activities identified in operational CPD were generally planned by the employer; some may have been identified through annual review for personal planning and development schemes within the organisation. These activities were not acknowledged by participants in the study as professional development in support of practice; but practitioners perceived that employers defined them as CPD. This supports Mulvey's (2004) view of employer led CPD meeting different needs from those identified by the individual. However, many participants suggested that it was the definition by the organisation that this was CPD that was problematic. This differentiation would support Douglas (2004) who separates work-based learning from CPD. Operational CPD could therefore fit better within the concept of work based learning rather than CPD.

Watkins (1999) and Mulvey (2004) question the benefits of mandatory CPD. For some of the participants these activities were perceived to de-professionalise them; one study participant described it as 'infantilising' and 'patronising' due to the didactic mode of delivery. Many of the activities identified however, were linked to legal requirements and contract compliance. Although these may not be considered as important to the participant many of these activities contribute to enhancing professional practice, especially activities around legislation and safeguarding. These are important areas that need to be addressed. The issue may be more around how these activities were presented, in that the links to professional practice were not explicitly made.

Although the majority suggested their employers contributed little to their professional practice development, respondents to the questionnaire identified that over one third had their programme fully funded by their employer; this was predominantly but not exclusively educational institutions, another 28% received

some financial support. Thirty-nine (39) % identified themselves as having fully self-funded their studies, the majority of these worked as adult career practitioners. In total 61% had received some funding from their employing organisation. There was no sense of an enhanced commitment to their organisation as a result of the funding provided for them and little recognition of the employer contribution to their studies. Many generalised about their employers' lack of commitment to CPD, yet in reality some employers were willing to contribute financial support, however, this was on an individually negotiated basis. This would suggest that employers are both more open to supporting those practitioners who are proactive about their CPD and they value higher-level qualifications being undertaken by employees.

Experiential CPD was recognised and acknowledged by practitioners but the value to practice was often underestimated. It tended to be seen as implicit, enhancing practice through supporting the practitioner to develop their role and expertise. Yet, when combined with reflection it can be a powerful form of professional development. Generally experience was not acknowledged as a form of CPD. Experiential CPD could be considered as contributing to ensuring competence, as such it may also be allied to observation of practice and work based assessments. References to competence were minimal and appeared to be aligned with initial training rather than ongoing ability to perform a role. This view is likely to be influenced by the nature of initial training; for many of the participants this was through the work based competence route the Scottish /National Vocational Qualification (S/NVQ). For some of these, their initial training was influential in their choice of postgraduate CPD. This was because they felt intellectually ill-equipped to fully engage with the role.

'Experiential CPD' fulfils the role in making sure that practice is evolving to meet the present and future needs of clients. Competence is therefore constructed implicitly within developing practice but is often assessed explicitly as a contractual compliance through formal observations of practice. This contractual requirement rather than reinforcing the value of competence often undermined it as a managerial device (Evetts, 1999). Experiential CPD can also provide a vehicle to develop practice through engagement in action research and practitioner enquiry. This would strongly contribute to developing the evidence base and encouraging more practitioners to engage in practice development.

Formal CPD tended to be defined as being delivered by an external agent and/or being award bearing. The criteria were perceived as providing professional development that had wider recognition and transferability outside of the employing organisation.

For the participants the importance of award bearing programmes and training provided by external providers (i.e. not internal training teams) seemed to have greater kudos, hence their selection of this form of CPD. The emphasis on the external may represent a lack of credibility in internal provision or just over familiarity. Much of the internal provision was identified as being process focused and devoid of theoretical underpinnings or intellectual stimulation. External provision was perceived as more expensive, having a wider recognition and therefore of greater value.

Participants suggested formal CPD had a specialist and professional focus and concentrated on their professional practice to enhance work with clients. Arthur, Marland, Pill and Rae (2006) suggest the benefits of award bearing programmes for CPD offer an explicit focus on the interface of theory and practice. The intellectual engagement (Caldwell, 2001) that qualifications of this nature also provide is a forum for practitioners to reflect on their practice and critically assess their existing skills and knowledge. Reflection was perhaps interestingly identified as an outcome of formal CPD rather than an outcome for experiential CPD, which may provide a suggestion as to why experiential CPD had a lower value.

Formal CPD therefore was perceived as having value as it contributes to increases in what Swain and Hammond (2011) refer to as professional, personal and social capital. Individuals see engagement with, and attainment of, higher qualifications for example masters qualifications as providing capital, which will enhance their employability.

The role of what is presented as formal CPD contributes significantly to understanding the attraction of postgraduate higher-level qualifications. They offer formal, recognised and certificated CPD that appear to be most valued by career practitioners. The engagement in study at this level therefore tends to suggest an offer that provides practitioners with more than other forms of CPD; developing theoretical knowledge and research in particular enhance practice development. Award bearing CPD was particularly identified as being able to contribute to the professionalisation

of the sector. The development of professional knowledge at level 7 was perceived by participants to offer benefits not just to themselves, but also to their organisation and to the career guidance sector more generally. The survey identified that 95% of the participants felt that postgraduate study was very important to professionalising the sector. It must be acknowledged that these views were all from practitioners doing a level 7 award and therefore their view may not be objective. Whilst this is pertinent it is important to recognise that practitioners perceived an individual role for themselves in contributing to the professionalisation of their sector through enhancing their qualification level. Postgraduate study was therefore seen to increase the credibility of career development practitioners and the status of their work more generically, especially in reflecting enhanced qualifications levels in other professional areas such as teaching, social work and youth work.

Conclusion

The career guidance sector is both complex and fragmented; Mulvey (2011 and 2013) refers to it as tentacular. It encompasses a range of practitioners with differing initial training and qualifications, commitments, motivations, roles and professional status. The practitioners who contributed to this study provide a snap shot of the sector reflecting the main employment settings and roles. What binds this diverse group together other than the fact that they have broadly similar job roles is their commitment to their profession and their professional development.

Continuing professional development takes various guises and all engage in different ways and to different levels. Operational, experiential and formal CPD define the predominant types of professional development identified within this study. Formal CPD was most valued by participants and was perceived as contributing to the development of professional practice.

The study suggests that CPD is a complex activity and one that may not be clearly defined or understood within the sector. The differentiation between what may be considered as CPD (formal and experiential CPD) as opposed to work-based learning (operational CPD) reflects the views of the participants. It would however be helpful to explore this classification with practitioners less committed to their professional development to identify if it has similar resonance.

The career development sector needs, within the professionalisation agenda, to provide an opportunity for debate as to the nature of CPD and the benefits of experiential learning, this is something that the professional bodies may want to consider. CPD should not be limited to just what has been defined as operational and formal activities. It should be a rich, creative activity allowing individuals to reflect on the benefits of various approaches and encouraging a greater value within all of these. Study participants presented continuous professional development as a key determinant of being a professional and central to their professional identity (Neary, 2014).

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