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Updating Qualifications for the Career Guidance Profession in Scotland: Navigating the Maze

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes work in progress to modernise the initial training arrangements for the career guidance profession in Scotland. In a process initiated by the University of the West of Scotland, the Quality Assurance Agency benchmark for the subject is under review. The outcomes of the process may have implications for the training of career advisers and guidance practitioners across the UK.

Keywords: initial professional training, postgraduate qualifications, subject benchmarks career guidance

The context

Career guidance is a small but distinct profession concerned with supporting people to make choices about their future, to navigate the worlds of work and learning, to plan and implement lifestyles they find rewarding. Career guidance practitioners can be found working with young people or adults in state sector career services, notably Skills Development Scotland (SDS), in schools, universities and colleges, in community based settings, or in private practice. The profession has a well-established entry route, with universities offering initial training programmes leading to a postgraduate diploma. In recent years, the context for this initial training has become surprisingly complex. There are a number of factors to take into account at international, UK, and Scottish levels.

Firstly, there have been international comparisons of career guidance training (CEDEFOP, 2009) and attempts to develop transnational vocational competences for the profession (IAEVG, 2003; Schiersmann, 2012). These occur against a wider backdrop of a growing international higher education marketplace.

Secondly, there are UK-wide factors to consider. The devolution of responsibility for statutory career guidance services to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland has resulted in a divergence of policies in the four home nations (Watts, 2006). Policy in England has been radically different from that of the 'Celtic' nations and has led to a near collapse of the already vulnerable profession (Roberts, 2013). This policy context presents considerable challenges for a training structure that is intended to be UK wide.

Another UK-wide factor is that initial professional training has been associated with the largest professional body in the field, the Institute of Career Guidance (ICG), for many years. The ICG has now merged with the Association for Careers Education and Guidance (ACEG), National Association for Educational Guidance for Adults (NAEGA), and the Association of Career Professionals International (ACPI-UK) to form the Career Development Institute (CDI) in April 2013. The new institute inherits a close involvement with initial training in the form of offering its own qualification (dual accreditation with universities) and a process of approval and review of course centres. In Scotland, the award is called the *Qualification in Career Guidance and Development* (QCGD) and is fully equivalent to the professional qualification awarded in the

rest of the UK, allowing mobility of labour. This status quo gives professional body credibility to postgraduate training but may be partially undermined by attempts in England to establish a professional qualification at level 6 (equivalent to level 10 or final-year undergraduate level in Scotland). The CDI also inherits an aspiration to develop an effective professional register, which means it is necessary to link registration to appropriate qualifications (CPA, 2012).

A further complication has been the lingering presence since the 1990s of a rival qualification structure originally promoted by UK Government in the form of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) underpinned by National Occupational Standards (LLUK, 2011). This structure has undergone numerous changes, but most recently has effectively disappeared from Scotland; however, it may yet re-emerge as an issue at UK level.

Thirdly, there are factors specific to the Scottish context. In 2007, the largest employer of career guidance services, Careers Scotland, invested in a redevelopment of career guidance initial training in three Scottish universities (Pugh & Sadler, 2010). A key element of this was the development of a Quality Assurance Agency subject benchmark (QAA Scotland, 2007) which embedded the pre-existing professional body requirements (ICG, 2001) but also went some way beyond them to define content for an MSc in Career Guidance and Development. This reflected an aspiration to establish the professional qualification as a Masters by extending learning beyond university and into practitioner research in the workplace. This benchmark underpinned the revalidation of the two surviving programmes in 2007: University of the West of Scotland and Edinburgh Napier University.

Career guidance programmes are not immune from the factors affecting universities in Scotland more widely. They operate within a context of QAA specifying the nature of postgraduate qualifications (QAA Scotland, 2001) within the associated Scottish Qualification and Credit Framework (SCQF, 2012), which defines qualification levels. The need to generate unrestricted income through growing the intake of postgraduate students or through an offer of continuous professional development (CPD) continues to be an important background pressure on institutions.

Why now? The impetus to update the qualification

Scottish Government (2011) established a policy entitled *Career information, advice and guidance in Scotland: a framework for service redesign and improvement*. This has provided a framework for career guidance with a clarity that had previously been lacking. Whilst there is a Government aspiration for it to encompass the entire career guidance sector, in practice this policy guides the work of SDS, the successor organisation to Careers Scotland, the state sector provider. A number of 'workstreams' were initiated by the Scottish Government to facilitate implementation of the policy. These included a consultative working group, set up to consider the staff development implications of the policy. This group produced the Scottish Government's (2012) *Framework for career development qualifications*. This document includes a recommendation to keep qualifications offered by HEIs under review.

Three other factors are also directly relevant to the timing of this work. Firstly, there has been a recent expansion of career education and guidance mediated via information and communication technologies (ICT), including the use of web services and social media. This process has been accelerated in Scotland by the national policy framework, and this places some pressure on training to keep up with the pace of change in practice. Secondly, there are normal higher education quality assurance processes. The timing of the review work is influenced by the university programme review cycles and a more general move towards QAA updating its subject benchmark framework in 2013. Thirdly, there is a desire in Scotland to influence the development of professional training structures for the rest of the UK. This is underpinned by a belief that as the profession has survived intact in Scotland it is better placed to set standards than the fragmented services in England. With the creation of the CDI as the new professional institute, a window of opportunity has opened to influence UK-wide structures before they crystallise. The Scottish benchmarks can potentially provide a model standard for professional training that is both comprehensive and up to date. This is likely to be welcomed by the CDI.

The work in progress

The process of review of the QAA benchmark was initiated by the University of West of Scotland. It involves representatives from Edinburgh Napier University, SDS, CDI, Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), further education colleges, local authorities, and Inspiring Futures (the largest private sector provider of career guidance services). The products of this working group will be disseminated more widely for consultation within the profession, including interested parties outside Scotland, in the other home nations of the UK. As such, this is the widest group of stakeholders involved in a career guidance qualification review for many years. The work is proceeding with a degree of consensus that provides some confidence that its outcomes will be both widely accepted and durable.

The benchmark will be published in late 2013. Following this, the University of West of Scotland and Edinburgh Napier University will seek to update their programmes and module content to conform to it. It is hoped that this work will be timely and will help to inform the strengthening of career guidance qualifications across the UK as the CDI begins to review its role in initial training and CPD.

Although small, the career guidance profession occupies a pivotal role in education, acting as gatekeeper to opportunity and forming a key link between learning and work. Its effective functioning, therefore, has consequences for the economy, and in particular the labour market. Initial training in career guidance does not merely reflect the profession but also helps to create, define, and sustain it. If successful, this project may help to secure the future of the profession in the UK.

Biographies

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