

The influence of professional standards on New Zealand career development practice

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Introduction

Standards for career development practitioners provide important guidelines for the career development industry. Professional standards have existed for a number of years and have been developed by a number of career development professional associations. Widely used standards for career practice have originated with the Canadian Career Development Foundation (2004), The National Career Development Association (1997) and the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (2003).

Until recently, standards for career development practice in New Zealand and Australia did not exist. However, the creation of the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) in 2004 and changes in 2008 to the Career Development Association of New Zealand (CDANZ) membership criteria introduced standards for career development practice in both countries.

CICA requires that by 2012 members of any of its eight affiliated career professional associations will hold at least a Graduate Certificate in career development from a CICA endorsed provider. To be endorsed, a provider must undergo a rigorous review by CICA and provide evidence that each of the CICA standards is met in the curriculum.

In New Zealand, CDANZ established standards that must be met by new applicants for Professional level CDANZ membership as of May 2008. Evidence of standards attainment is provided by possessing a career specific qualification at Level 6 or above. Current Professional members have until 2013 to attain an acceptable qualification or to demonstrate competency in the CDANZ standards through a CDANZ approved Assessment of Prior Learning process.

Standards for career development practice are important for many reasons. Foremost among justifications for standards is protection of clients. Standards are intended to ensure (as well as possible) that those who deliver career development services have demonstrated professionally recognised knowledge and competency. When career services are delivered by practitioners who don't possess the requisite knowledge and skill, the results can be injurious. Standards establish the knowledge and skills that are generally acceptable by the profession for the delivery of career development services.

Standards also establish a reciprocal relationship between professional associations and providers of career qualifications. Standards provide a benchmark for qualification providers to assess the content of their qualifications against the expectation of professional associations. In Australia, the relationship is being formally developed as CICA endorses only those qualifications providers who are able to demonstrate that their curricula meet the rigor established by CICA. CDANZ does not endorse or review career qualifications but accepts that Level 6 or above career qualifications meet its standards.

Beyond benchmarking the content of career development qualifications, standards also provide a guide for career practitioners to evaluate their career practice knowledge and skills. Career development practitioners can use standards to self-assess professional development needs. Since professional development is required to retain membership in career development professional associations, standards provide a gauge for assessing which professional development topics would be most beneficial.

Further, standards are integral to professional identity. Professions Australia (1997) define a profession, in part, as a “. . .group of disciplined individuals who. . .define and demand high standards of behavior in respect to the services provided to the public and in dealing with professional colleagues”. Furbish (2003, 2004) asserts that standards are needed for career development practice to advance as a profession in New Zealand. Clearly, standards are the *sine qua non* for a profession.

Lastly, standards establish credibility for career development practitioners to their employers, the public and third-party purchasers of career development services. Standards provide tangible evidence that services provided by career development practitioners based on professionally recognized principals. Standards communicate to employers and to third-party purchasers of career services (such as ACC in New Zealand) that career development practitioners meet the expectations of the profession.

Well articulated and demonstrated standards support the advancement of career development services across practice settings. For example, recent research by Vaughan and Gardiner (2007) into career development services in New Zealand secondary schools notes the variability of quality. The investigation also notes inconsistencies in the perceived role of school career development services by key stakeholders such as students, parents, teachers, principals and even the career development practitioners (career advisers) themselves. Standards provide the substance for school (and all) career development practitioners to “make the case” for the quality of their work and the need for adequate resources and training.

The first step has been taken. Standards for career practitioners in New Zealand have been developed. However, constructing standards is primarily a “top down” process. Standards are developed by an overseeing organization such as a professional association. While there is opportunity for membership consultation, the great majority of association members are not involved in the process. For standards to be accepted and embraced by career practitioners who are expected to deliver services consistent with the standards, more needs to be known about how practitioners view the relevancy of the standards for their practice and how able they believe themselves to be to apply the standards. These are the questions to be investigated in this research.

Method

A questionnaire was developed based upon the standards of CICA and CDANZ. A total of 21 unique standards were identified. The questionnaire listed each standard twice. The first presentation of a standard instructed respondents to indicate on a 10 point scale how relevant the standard was for their career practice. The scale used 10 to indicate Highly Relevant and 1 to indicate Not Relevant at All. The second presentation of a standard instructed respondents to indicate on a 10 point scale how able the respondent was to apply the standard. The scale used 10 to indicate Fully Able and 1 to indicate Not Able to Apply. Each presentation of a standard also included an open response section.

The questionnaire also sought information about the length of career development practice experience, formal career specific qualifications, professional association memberships, practice setting and preferences for professional development strategies. Lastly, the questionnaire requested respondents to indicate the occupational title they used to describe themselves.

The questionnaire was placed on an Internet survey site. The two largest career associations in New Zealand (CDANZ and CATE) were requested to send an email invitation to participate in this research to their memberships. For CATE, the email was sent only to members who had professional level career development responsibilities in schools (i.e. administrative and support career staff were not included). The invitation to participate was sent by the associations so that no direct contact was made by the

researcher. The email provided a Participant Information Sheet and a link to the Internet survey site. Placing questionnaire on an Internet survey site allowed for anonymous participant responses as the survey site does not collect email addresses of respondents or other identifying information.

Results

The number of CDANZ and CATE members invited to participate was about 800. A total of 66 responses were received within three weeks.

Eighty-one (81) percent of the respondents were age 40 or older and most reported 10 or more years experience in career development practice. Most worked full-time (70%) and a variety of practice settings were indicated. Private practice was the most frequent setting noted, followed by tertiary and secondary education. Sixty-five (65) percent indicated CDANZ membership and 24% percent indicated CATE membership although some respondents held memberships in both associations. Forty-three (43) percent reported holding a Graduate Certificate or Graduate Diploma from AUT University, 31% reported a career related qualification and 18% reported a Level 6 career qualification from Weltec or Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology.

Respondents offered a variety of occupational titles to describe their occupation. Most common was Career Consultant or a variation. Also used were Career Practitioner and Career Advisor. A few respondents indicated Teacher as their occupation.

Means for the responses to the items about the relevance of the standards and ability to apply the standards were calculated. The means ranged from 7.43 to 9.72 on the 10 point scales. These responses indicated that participants generally felt that the standards were relevant for their practice and that they were able to apply the standards.

Some standards were rated high in relevance as well as the ability to apply the standard. Participants rated the relevance of the standard “Using effective communication skill” highest of all the items with a mean rating of 9.72. The ability to apply this standard was also rated highly as indicated by a mean rating of 9.23. The relevance of the standard “Uses effective listening skills” was rated highly with a mean rating of 9.68 and the mean rating of the ability to apply this standard 9.17.

Another item that generated a high mean rating was the relevance of “Works effectively, appropriately and ethically with diverse client/student groups” at 9.44. However, the mean rating of the ability to apply that standard was somewhat lower at 8.66. Similarly, the standard “Applies relevant Code of Ethics and legal requirements” produced a mean rating of 9.29 for relevance but slightly lower for ability to apply the standard at 8.91.

Lower mean ratings were given to both the relevance of the standard “Demonstrates knowledge of a range of career development theories” (7.63) and the ability to apply the standard (7.43). Other items with lower mean rating were the relevance of the standard “Applies career theory to practice” (7.65) and the ability to apply this standard (7.45). The standard “Produces quality career information” generated a mean rating of 7.44 for relevance and 7.47 for ability to apply this standard.

The complete list of standards and the mean ratings of their relevance and respondents’ ability to apply the standard is provided in Appendix 1.

Means were calculated also for the rankings of preferred professional development strategies. The format for this item listed 11 professional development activities that requested respondents to rank order them

with 11 being the most preferred and 1 being the least preferred. Local workshops (within 1 hour travel) presented by international trainers was the most preferred (7.94) closely followed by local workshops presented by New Zealand trainers (7.90). Mentoring/supervision also emerged as a highly preferred professional development strategy with a mean rank of 7.25. The least preferred professional development strategies were international workshops/conferences requiring overseas travel (4.24), video conferencing online training (3.40) and text-based online training (3.35).

The complete list of professional development strategies and mean rankings is presented as Appendix 2.

Discussion

Clearly, New Zealand career development practitioners accept the relevance of standards and believe that they can apply to the standards to their practices. However, there seems to be differential levels of acceptance of the standards. Standards that relate to client interaction, i.e. communication and listening, are the ones viewed as most relevant and the ones that practitioners believe that they are best able to apply. In contrast, the standards that relate to knowledge and application of theory are viewed as less relevant and practitioners are less able to apply these standards. This perhaps reflects belief among career development practitioners that career development services are based on interpersonal communication more than application of career theory.

The relatively lower ratings for standards relating to career theory may be related to other factors. Entry into career practice in many countries requires a post-graduate qualification as a practice credential. Professional standards therefore reflect the centrality of theory as found in post-graduate/upper undergraduate curricula. As a number of New Zealand career practitioners have not obtained qualifications that emphasise theory, their comfort level with theory may be lower as a result. This finding suggests that the level of formal qualifications required for New Zealand career practitioners be reviewed against the level of qualifications required in other countries. Additionally, verification that existing New Zealand career development qualifications contain curricula that address standards should be undertaken by the professional associations.

Written comments provide additional suggestion about the perceived role of career theory in some practice settings. The sentiment expressed, especially by some respondents who work in practices that provide services to ACC clients, was that services to their clients are structured and limited by the requirements of ACC, which fund these services. The comments suggest that in these and other practice settings where narrow and limited goals are established for career development practitioners, career theory is regarded as less relevant and is less frequently applied when working with clients.

The current research relies on self-reports from career practitioners that standards are considered relevant to their practice and that they are able to apply them. However, there is no independent verification. This suggests that mechanisms to assist career practitioners periodically review the application of standards to their practices are useful. Required professional supervision would be a useful way to address standards in practice. Further, where concerns about standards are identified through supervision, targeted professional development activities should be used to enhance career practice.

Career development practice in New Zealand is continuing to progress towards professional standing. Yet other factors mitigate the progress that has been made. While career practitioners who affiliate with a professional association advance career services sustained by standards, not all who offer career services in New Zealand possess the needed qualifications or adhere to recognized standards. The challenge for career associations is to promote the benefits of professional career services underpinned by standards.

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Appendix One

Mean relevance and mean ability to apply

Standard	Mean Relevance Rating	Mean Application Rating
Demonstrates knowledge of a range of career development theories	7.63	7.43
Applies career theory in practice	7.65	7.45
Identifies how life roles and values impact career development	8.83	8.65
Fosters career management strategies in clients/students	8.71	8.20
Demonstrates knowledge of career information resources	9.13	8.57
Evaluates career information resources	8.34	7.64
Produces quality career information resources	7.44	7.47
Develops career development programmes appropriate for clients/students	8.38	8.05
Uses a range of assessment tools and techniques appropriate for clients/students	8.57	8.25
Demonstrates knowledge of local and national labour market trends	8.92	7.98
Uses effective communication skills	9.72	9.23
Uses effective listening skills	9.68	9.17
Applies helping skills based on accepted theory	8.37	7.82
Develops a network of contacts through relevant professional associations	8.40	7.92
Applies relevant Code of Ethics and legal requirements	9.29	8.91
Maintains accurate and appropriate client/student records	9.20	8.84
Works effectively, appropriately and ethically with diverse client/student groups	9.44	8.66
Engages in professional development for career practice	9.23	8.72
Refers clients/students to other sources of help as appropriate	8.98	8.98
Keeps up with and applies technology	8.43	8.09
Evaluates services to clients/students	8.29	7.75

Appendix Two

Mean ranking for professional development activities

Professional Development Strategy	Mean Ranking
Local workshops (within 1 hour travel) presented by international trainers	7.94
Local workshops (within 1 hour travel) presented by New Zealand trainers	7.90
Mentoring/Supervision	7.25
National workshops/conferences presented by New Zealand trainers	6.91
National workshops/conferences presented by international trainers	6.71
Academic qualification study	6.42
On-site training at place of employment	6.30
Self-study	5.82
International workshop/conferences (requiring overseas travel)	4.24
Video conference online training	3.40
Text-based online training	3.35