

# Scotland: developing a post-graduate qualification in career guidance and development for the 21st century

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## Introduction

In 2005, Careers Scotland, now Skills Development Scotland, the national provider of all-age career and employability services in Scotland, decided to conduct a review of training provision for career guidance. This arose primarily from the changing nature of the career guidance provision as a consequence of its responsiveness to policy drivers, such as establishing the all age-strategy; enhancing services such as redundancy counselling and enterprise activities; and developing the career planning skills of young people to equip them for lifelong career management.

Careers Scotland, wanted to ensure that the training available was appropriate for this changing context and that the training prepared students better to enter the working environment. It was also particularly important for the more remote areas of the country such as the Highlands and Islands that those living outside central Scotland were able to train through distance learning. The lack of access to initial training courses in these areas was impacting negatively on staff recruitment and retention: trained staff from the central area tended to return to there, even if initially working elsewhere in the country. As it needed to deliver services to all the communities in the country, the organisation also wanted to increase the diversity of the background of applicants.

The review, guided by a Steering Committee with wide representation from stakeholders and professional associations, commissioned a wide-ranging feasibility study funded by the Scottish Executive. The consensus which emerged indicated that a broader two-year qualification at postgraduate level was required.

The importance of being clear about the learning outcomes required from a new qualification prompted the drafting of a set of appropriate benchmark statements, outlining the competencies required of those completing professional initial training courses in career guidance in Scotland. Produced by Careers Scotland following a consultation process including Scottish Career Guidance Course Centres and other stakeholders in the Scottish guidance community, the Subject Benchmark Statement

was endorsed by the Institute of Career Guidance (ICG), the Scottish Executive and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for higher education in Scotland. The Subject Benchmark Statement was used to inform the development of the new postgraduate qualification in Career Guidance and Development. A contract to develop the qualification was awarded to a consortium of three course centres (the University of the West of Scotland at that time known as Paisley University (the lead institution); Strathclyde University and Napier University). An expert reference group, comprising employers and stakeholders from across the UK, was established to assist this process, for example by advising on the scope and content.

## The structure of the qualification

From this process, a two-year programme was drafted and agreed: year one leads to a postgraduate diploma (120 Masters-level credit points) and the award of the Qualification in Career Guidance and Development by the Institute of Career Guidance, and the second employment-based year (a notional probationary year) leads to a Masters award (an additional 60 Masters-level credit points). Since the programme at Diploma level confers a professional qualification (the QCGD), none of the modules are optional. However, it includes a lot of emphasis on individualised learning and there is flexibility in the choice of placement, which allows for some customisation. Similarly the flexible structure of the MSc programme and the employment setting in year two allow for more specialisation.

The review identified a need to increase students' experience and understanding of the workplace. The postgraduate programme was therefore enhanced by the inclusion of employment-based 'practice tutors' to mentor students and periods of work experience in different work settings. In addition full-time students undertake six weeks of work experience placements in three blocks in career guidance settings during the first year of study, as follows:

- a one-week induction block in October at a careers centre to introduce students to the work environment at an early stage and confirm suitability and commitment;
- a two-week block in November, (later at one course centre) possibly at Careers Scotland with a focus on achieving specific learning outcomes in their learning plan; and

- a three-week block in March in a different setting, such as Further or Higher Education.

During the development phase, part of the funding was used to employ an e-developer to customise the universities' virtual learning environment (VLE) (Blackboard) to enable the programme to be delivered through e-learning.

The new qualification was received particularly positively by the validation committees of the universities, in part because of the employer participation in its development and the collaborative nature of the work, but also because of its innovative features.

### Distance and e-learning

All learners are expected to use the VLE, and this enables those taking advantage of the distance learning option to benefit from the experiences of others for example through discussion forums. Students use the facility to access course materials linked to the modules on which they are enrolled and to follow up references and library links. In addition, distance learners participate through on-line discussions and telephone contact with their Personal Tutor at the University and their work place Practice Tutor.

It has become evident that distance learners still appreciate the opportunity to meet face-to-face and, consequently for the students employed by Careers Scotland, each module is supplemented by a two-day workshop run by the University of West Scotland. These are either held on campus or in-house. An evaluation of the student experience regarding distance learning has been carried out and this mode of delivery has been judged successful. Some issues reported, however, include a sense of isolation and some difficulty getting the required support of colleagues who are not familiar with this mode of learning. Aspects appreciated by students included quick and easy access to materials on the VLE, links to other web sites and to the on-line journal collection and the supply of 'readers'!

E-learning is also being used to support the development of reflective practitioners through personal development planning (PDP). For example, the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) took a strategic decision that all undergraduate programmes would by 2008 provide support in personal development planning through the use of an 'e-portfolio'. The decision was also taken by the career guidance programme that learners on the postgraduate course in Career Guidance and Development would use the password protected e-portfolio, where they document reflections from their experiences and their learning, which enables them to share these with others such as tutors, Practice Tutors and employers. There is also a dedicated module on reflective guidance practice. The initial emphasis has been on creating a fairly simple system

which all learners can use rather than making this too sophisticated, but with the intention of developing its potential further.

### The role of the Practice Tutor

The Practice Tutor acts as 'the expert in the field' supporting the learners by offering a workplace perspective. During the first pilot year of the programme (2007/8), sixty staff members from Careers Scotland volunteered for this role. Those undertaking this role tended to have assessment or supervisory responsibilities, so had already developed some mentoring skills. Other e-learner students employed in the FE sector and by the Independent Schools Careers Organisation (ISCO) also have access to Practice Tutors.

The Practice Tutors were briefed at the outset and have attended development days, during the first year of delivery, run jointly by Careers Scotland and university staff. It is hoped in the future to arrange more formal training for them, possibly by customising an existing course on 'Peer Support and Supervision.' Practice Tutors, as this is a very new role, are still unsure of their full role and responsibilities and consequently of the level of support to offer students. Contact between Course Tutors and Practice Tutors could also be enhanced.

It was envisaged that learners would take responsibility for contacting their Practice Tutor about once per fortnight, using e-mail, by phone or in person. This would enable them to discuss details of assignments and for the Practice Tutor to point the student in the right direction, but in a way to encourage self-reliance rather than dependency. In certain circumstances and in consultation with the student, Practice Tutors may become involved with assessment at the workplace, but it is recognised that this changes the dynamics of the relationship with the learner. It is also hoped that the involvement of Career Scotland, and now Skills Development Scotland, staff in this way will facilitate the development of a professional discourse and more reflective practice with the organisation itself, as staff come into contact with new ideas and existing approaches are challenged. Developing the reflective practitioner was a key aim of Careers Scotland and remains one with the successor organisation Skills Development Scotland. A survey of Practice Tutors was carried out in July 2008 to identify issues arising from the first pilot year and plan for the future.

Key findings included a variation in frequency and extent of contact with, and support given to, students. This was often influenced by the level of dependency exhibited by individual students and their stage of study. Contact tended to be less frequent as students became more able to cope with the demands of the course:

**'Started off once a month but no contact recently'.  
'Sporadic since January as student needed less support'.**

All Practice Tutors used email communications with students with almost half of those who responded also communicating by telephone. Face – to - face meetings varied significantly often due to the degree of geographical proximity of students to Course Centres.

The majority of Practice Tutors surveyed felt that there could have been more contact with university tutors particularly regarding progress of students on the course and this was identified as a key area for development to increase the added value of the triangular relationship of the student, Personal/Course Tutor and Practice Tutor:

**'We need more awareness of the other work students are doing in order to support them better'.**

**'Would like to be alerted to potential problems with the student in advance'.**

Practice Tutors believed that they were most effective in supporting and advising the student and completing relevant assessment reports about the student. This was followed by effectiveness in assessing students ( where this happened). Practice Tutors felt that they were less effective at planning inputs and using the Individual Learning Plan, probably as this was a new role, and sometimes found it difficult allocating time to the Practice Tutor role.

In general, Practice Tutors enjoyed mentoring their students and felt that they had gained personally and professionally from this role. It is to be hoped that the role of Practice Tutor will be embedded and developed over time. This issue of accreditation, and related recognition, of Practice Tutors would also be worth investigating in the future.