Competence development for counselling practitioners – The Masters programme M.A. bob in Germany

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Introduction

In this article I describe the development and situation of guidance/counselling in recent years in Germany, some actual tasks on the national agenda and the goals and structure of our Masters programme 'M.A. bob' (M.A. in Career Counselling and Organisational Development) within this context[1].

The Masters programme 'M.A. bob' developed as a logical response to the changes in guidance and counselling from a disparate 'add on service' to a more coherent, distinct field which focuses on three major elements: lifelong provision, quality and professionalism. We have tried to foster these developments within the Masters programme. In this context, the most important tasks in this field are the development of a national and field-wide recognised competence framework and a more coherent but flexible system of training and qualification for practitioners. These are supported by the 'German Federal Ministry of Education and Research' (BMBF, 2007), by the 'national forum for counselling in education, vocation and employment (nfb) as well as by a large number of experts and stakeholders in the field.

The University of Heidelberg's Institute for Educational Science is supporting this development both through the master programme 'M.A. bob' as well as through its research.

1. The disparate field and developments

Whilst the Masters programme in Career Counselling and Organisational Development was initiated at the University of Heidelberg in 2004, ideas about the programme were first discussed in the late 1990s. Three major developments and circumstances influenced the Masters programme:

- the poor professionalism in the counselling field, the lack of development in research and theory, and the will of a broad range of actors to change it;

- the diversification within the 'career counselling' field accelerated not least by the demise of the 'counselling monopoly' of the German PES (Bundesanstalt für Arbeit) in 1998;

- an increased need for more and better guidance and counselling services, driven by the effects of 'flexibilisation', technology development, individualisation, etc. on the employment markets, educational systems and modern life in general.

The MA programme is one measure beside many others to attain greater coherence, better quality and professionalism and the integration of theory and research in the training of:

- guidance practitioners;

- consultants working within career guidance organisations to improve their services, or working for companies to improve their career guidance practices; and

- researchers.

In this sense the Masters programme is more than a study programme for a relatively small group of students: the Masters programme is a laboratory to develop and discuss the future of guidance and counselling in Germany and also within the international context.

2. Target group and goals of the Masters programme

2.1   Target Group

The Masters programme targets the following two groups:

- those who already have some experience in career counselling and related practice and who want to further improve their professional skills; and

- those with experience and previous practice within a counselling-related background (e.g. education, social work, human resource development, training) and who would like to prepare themselves specifically to work in the field of guidance and career counselling.

It therefore is directed towards vocational and job counsellors, human resource directors as well as career and outplacement counsellors.

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[1] The Masters Programme m.a. bob 2and the concept that is presented in this article was developed by a team around Prof. Christiane Schiersmann at University of Heidelberg, Germany. The text is based on a presentation held at a CEDEFOP Workshop in Thessaloniki in October 2008 by the author.

2.2 Conditions for admission

Students are admitted once a year at the beginning of the winter semester. Requirements for admission are a university degree or a degree from a comparable institution for higher education with a minimum duration of three years, and at least one year of practical experience in an occupational field connected to counselling. The examination board can also declare any candidates who have a foreign degree, equivalent to the German university degree, eligible for the programme. The main teaching language is still German and candidates have to have a good background in this. Now, students are coming both from German-speaking countries but also from China and Eastern Europe countries as well.

3. The degree programme's goals

The OECD-study on "Career Guidance and public Policies"[2] (cf. OECD 2004) recommends that career guidance/counselling (see 4.1 below for a definition of 'career counselling) should be offered both during the primary education, and in the transition from school to vocational training or university, and from there into professional life and into further training programmes (OECD 2004, p 39-68). However, counselling should not primarily be provided in transitional processes. The resolution of the European Union on lifelong counselling (8448/04 EDUC 89 SOC 179) places particular emphasis on this point, in addition to numerous other studies already in the public arena - (Watts & Sultana, 2003; Sultana, 2003; Sultana, 2009; Watts & Fretwell, 2003; Watts & Fretwell, 2004). In the context of lifelong learning, counselling encompasses a range of services designed to empower citizens in all stages of their lives to understand their competencies profile and to make decisions concerning their initial education, further training and career development. Companies can also benefit from it by predicting the competencies their personnel will require now and in the future. Counselling about human resources and organisational development in non-profit and commercial organisations is just as important.[3]

As greater importance is being placed on counselling and career guidance in the German as well as in the European debate so is the demand for better quality guidance is increasing. However, high quality counselling can only be performed by professionally trained counsellors. In contrast to other European and Anglo-American countries, the counselling sector in Germany is not sufficiently professionalized (cf. Schiersmann/Remmele 2004, Ertelt 2007, Watts/Sultana 2003). Therefore the Master 's programme at the University of Heidelberg is contributing to the advancement of greater professionalism, a more scientific approach and better quality of counselling.

Previously, no postgraduate degree programme for guidance and counselling existed in Germany, and people working in this field had varying professional qualifications which were mostly academic. It was, therefore, necessary to have a graduate programme, encompassing a mixture of academic study and work experience, leading to a Masters degree. This programme can provide a prototype for drawing up standardised qualification frame for guidance and counselling.

The main goal of the Masters programme is on the one hand to enable students, who have already gained professional experience in counselling or related fields to expand, update and improve their capabilities in professional counselling at a university level, and on the other, to specifically prepare them for the particular field of 'counselling'.

The Masters programme therefore aims at teaching counselling abilities in both a scientific and practical way. Counsellors completing this programme will be able to undertake a variety of activities in the fields of educational, vocational and organisational counselling, e.g.:

a) practical counselling work using a scientific approach;

b) management roles for providers of counselling services;

c) content-related and strategic concept development in politics and/or in various organisations; and

d) research activities.

The concept developed for the programme which delineates various theoretical, practical and hands-on features, specifies how there goals will be achieved. The concept was conceived in order to reach these goals and is based on the assumption that knowledge and competences acquired in these three areas are essential for professional counselling. The case-specific combinations of the knowledge and competences acquired enable the students to update and implement their professional counselling capabilities in actual situations.

4. The competence model and competence development

Since we started to develop the Masters programme, two questions have been very important. First, how can we develop a competence-oriented curriculum? And second, how can we make competence development happen?

4.1 Competence oriented curriculum and our competence model

We had three points to consider when starting to develop a competence-based curriculum:

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[2] This study covered 14 OECD countries and covered important questions like "how can career guidance be delivered more effectively?" or "why does career guidance matter for public policy?"

- the national and international comparison of educational programmes for guidance/counselling practitioners (Sultan,a 2009; CEDEFOP, 2009; Schiersmann/Weber, u.a. 2008; Ertelt, 2007);

- the need for a holistic approach which includes organisational consultancy, the management of services, self-employment, research and evaluation competences; and not least

- the development of a coherent model for counselling and guidance in a lifelong perspective.

The programme provides competencies for two fields or perspectives of counselling:

- career counselling; and

- organisational counselling in the context of career counselling.

Career counselling

In the educational, vocational and employment field 'career counselling' addresses individuals who seek assistance in decisions concerning their education choices, career development, further education or job opportunities. Career counselling encompasses diverse client groups and counsellors need to be able to be effective in a variety of situations. For example these would include school drop-outs; high risk groups among young adults; students wishing to change their study programme or university; young professionals, those interested in career development or in further education; the unemployed; parents, (in particular mothers going back to work), and elderly workers. Several counselling settings and methods have been developed with respect to these counselling situations or target groups, which are parts of the Masters programme.

In Germany, career counselling is offered by a wide range of organisations, including schools, employment offices, further education providers as well as a large number of organisations in which counselling is but one of many activities they provide (for example chambers of commerce and industry).

Organisational counselling in the context of career counselling

'Organisational counselling' focuses on supporting an organisation (agencies, companies) or parts of it (for example departments, teams). Organisations are understood as social systems and as learning organisations. Objectives in organisational development include improvements in communication and work efficiency in the organisation's systems as well as the relation of the parts of the system to its whole. One focus of the degree programme concentrates on issues of competence development. Nevertheless, this aspect cannot always be easily isolated, given the increasing connection between

training and further education, human resources development and organisational development in companies. There is a constant interaction with other areas of activity within an organisation. When restructuring an organisation, issues of competence development and learning processes can be just as important as improving the culture of the organisation, team development approaches or implementing knowledge management systems. Special emphasis is also given to the organisational counselling of small and medium-sized businesses due to the fact that they have limited functional differences and, therefore, small internal capacity for organisational development (cf. Iller & Sixt, 2004). Another core theme is organisational counselling for educational organisations and other consultancies.

For both areas, from a systematic point of view, the programme operates on different levels, which relate to our systemic understanding of counselling (see graph 1):
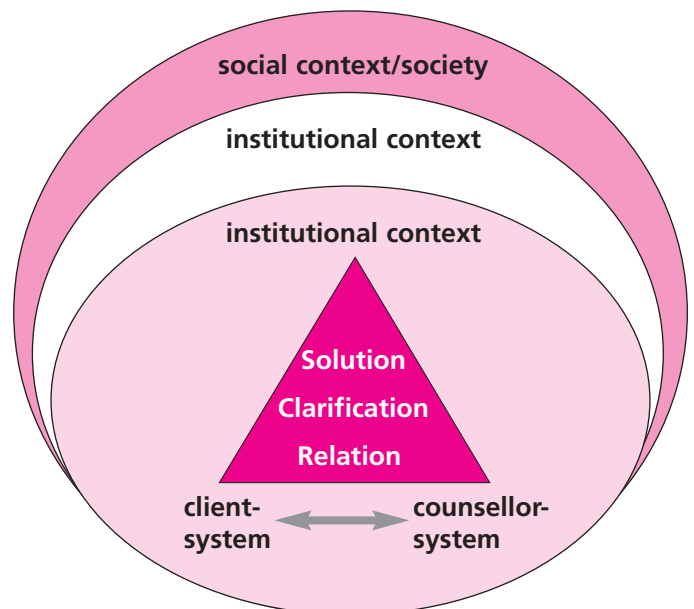
Graph 1 Systemic counselling model and structure of modules in M.A.bob

The model has four levels. The main message of this systemic model is, that counselling has to take into account the client and the counsellor as separate entities each with an individual background, competences, abilities, resources, values and goals. Together they constitute the counselling system. The counselling process that emerges between them is embedded in organisational contexts and societal circumstances, which differ from service to service and between each single counselling situation. The model makes no preliminary choice between individual approaches or concepts and methods of counselling: it rather raises the question as to whether those approaches could be integrated in a general theory of counselling.

Professionals at the level of a Masters degree have to develop the capacity and competence to work in different situations by making judgements on the basis of evidence. They have to have the capacity in terms of theoretical thinking and knowledge regarding all these levels and they should have the competence to develop new solutions for new or unsolved problems. This concept delineates a social science-based understanding of counselling. As such, the degree programme has been designed to be interdisciplinary: It draws from the fields of educational science, psychology, sociology and economics. Therefore it differs greatly from a concept of counselling based on therapeutic or psycho-social fields as well as one-sided psychological or psychotherapeutic approaches. Counselling is placed on a scale between the mediation of subjectively relevant information and biographical or institutional problem-solving. It is therefore understood as a non-standardised situation which encompasses elements of reflection'.

3.2 The competences and modules

Our research and practice is leading to a general competence model for guidance/counselling practitioners which we described and published in a study for the German federal ministry for education (BMBF) (Schiersmann/Weber u.a. 2008). This model reflects the ideas described here and is seen as a starting point for two further developments:

- the debate with all actors in our counselling field in Germany both about a common view of a competence framework for guidance/counsellor practitioners and the shaping and reshaping of training- and study programmes for counsellors; and:

- the use of the model as a framework for future empirical research about competence needs within the field, especially regarding the need of differences between services, professional roles and target groups. (See Appendix 1).

The framework is focusing on the following major fields of competence:

- Competences for the counselling process
- Competences relating to the client
- Competences relating to the counsellor
- Organisation-centred competences
- Societal context-centred competences.

Within the Masters programme M.A. bob these competences are the basis for the curriculum. The following table shows how the modules of the degree programme are shaped:

Basic modules (G)

Module G1: Theories and approaches for counselling as an interaction process

Module G2: Professionalism and ethics

Module G3: The organisational contexts of counselling

Module G4: The social framework of counselling

Module G5: Supervision/mentoring of the learning process and counselling portfolio

Module G6: Masters thesis and Masters examination

Consolidation modules 'person-centred counselling' (P)

Module P1: Person-centred theories

Module P2: Concept and methods of person-centred counselling.

Module P4: Project I: Person-centred counselling.

Module P1: Person-centred theories

Module P2: Concept and methods of person-centred counselling.

Module P4: Project I: Person-centred counselling.

Consolidation modules 'organisation-centred counselling' (O)

Module O1: Organisational theories and models of organisational development

Module O2: Strategies in organisational development and counselling in organisations

Module O4: Project II: Organisation-centred counselling

Optional module 'counselling research' (F)

Module F: Empirical counselling research (variant seminars)
Optional module 'counselling management' (M)

Module M: management in counselling-organisations and for self employed counsellors (variant seminars)

Optional module ‚scientific work-techniques' (W)

Module S: Special counselling methods (variant seminars)

Optional module ‚Special counselling methods' (S)

Module W: Scientific work-techniques (variant seminars)

Table 1: Modules of the Master M.A. bob

For the assessment and grading of the students' performance, the Masters degree programme uses the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). ECTS measures the credits achieved by a student using quantitative information. ECTS are a measure of the student's workload. The average number of hours for two complete years of study is 3600 hours of work, which equates to

120 ECTS (36 ECTS in practice). In the Masters degree programme these are distributed over a period of five semesters.

4. Competence development - Designing a competence-oriented study concept

The concept is based on an approach to developing competences with the goal of acquiring professional counselling capabilities. Counselling in the complex world is part of a complex social system. The complexity people are facing is a motor of the knowledge society. At the same time people's lives are strongly affected by disruptions and changes. The competences acquired in the programme make it possible for the students to deal with this complexity. The competences-oriented approach attempts to overcome the division between skills and content. This means that:

- it is generally accepted that the problem of acquiring competences is not independent of content;

- the mere instruction of material does not in itself develop general abilities or skills; and

- this problem can be solved by a calculated didactic combination of knowledge, general abilities and skills from various competence dimensions.

Competences are attained or developed through a combination of experience, knowledge and abilities in specific situations. The students will gain independent counselling experience throughout the entire course of study. This takes place in the form of long-term projects. Students conduct a practical project in each of the areas of career and related organisational counselling. For these projects, it is obligatory to work in collegial counselling groups. This obligation serves a double purpose:

- firstly students become familiar with selected models of collegial counselling each with its own theoretical background, and practice working in self-managed groups;

- secondly, working in collegial groups places the focal point on managing the projects, which guarantees intensive and methodical supervision of the projects (how does it do this?).

The students are expected to undertake an additional 360 hours of counselling practice in the first four semesters of the programme and, using defined criteria, document these in the form of a portfolio.

In terms of the learning and teaching practice the programme encompasses the following elements:

- Competence assessment and individual goal setting on an individual level

- Theory and text-based learning

- Presentation of knowledge in the framework of research and practice

- Group discussion and group work

- Casework and conceptual work

- Simulation of practice in career counselling and actual practical work

- Reflection on experience, especially the interdependence of theory, research and practical experience.

These elements are realised within the degree programme in a macro cycle that covers the whole programme as well as in many micro cycles related to each module. From a more theory based competence understanding, this cycle consists of four elements:

1) Knowledge acquisition

2) Evaluation of knowledge based on defined indicators

3) Practice and action and

4) Reflection and synthesis on a scientific level.

The most important structuring element alongside this general learning cycle is the individual learner, who is supported by the team in identifying individual goals and individual learning paths. Each student is asked to shape the curriculum and to define their own core centres of development which are to be realised (for example in their own theoretical work, the practical work and the internship as well as in the empirical research in their Masters thesis). To concentrate on their own career development is an important element of our concept. Depending on the opportunities presented by the various teaching-learning settings, we are using e-learning elements, teaching in blocks, case work, project work, practice in real-life settings, and other forms which helps to link theory to practice. The blended-learning scenario consisting of on-line learning elements within each module allows employed, part-time students flexibility in preparing for the elements in the programme and in processing the learning from these.

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Appendix 1: Competences for counsellors in education, job and employment

Competences for counsellors and guidance practitioners in education, job and employment
Competences for the counselling process
P 1   The relationship: The counsellor is competent in setting up a relationship which is appropriate to the client's concerns.
P 2   The clarification: With the help of the client, the counsellor is competent in clarifying the client's goals and motives and at the same time in supporting her/him to deal with conflicts in experiencing and behaviour.
P 3   The problem solving: The counsellor is able to transfer the intentions, goals and possible solutions, which were defined during the counselling process, to an actual concrete strategy.
Competences regarding the client
R1   The counsellor is able to incorporate the knowledge about CV's, vocational development processes, impacts from different phases of life and the dynamics of vocational behaviour into the counselling process.
R2   In regard to counselling, the counsellor is able to coordinate the client's individual development with his/her knowledge about theoretical models of identity and the dynamics of individual behaviour, e.g. in the context of motivation, self-concept and self-efficacy, interests, decision making behaviour or learning processes.
R3   The counsellor knows about the great variety/diversity of clients and is able to adjust the counselling process to specific target groups.
R4   The counsellor is able to incorporate the social background of the individual either in acknowledging it as an influencing variable of the counselling process or in actually discussing it within the counselling process.
The Counsellor
B 1   The counsellor is able to act professionally and to continuously reflect and enhance his/her professional behaviour.
B 2   The counsellor acts according to the developed standards, concretises them on his/her own responsibility and reflects his/her work according to these standards.
B 3   The counsellor is able to include theory and research in his/her work in an appropriate manner and to support the cooperation between research and practice, e.g. within the frame of evaluation.
Organisation-focused competences
O 1   The counsellor is able to participate in the development of a specific mission /corporate design of the counselling institution, which is aimed at the needs of the clients, and to work out strategies for the organisation.
O 2   The counsellor is able to reflect the structures, functions and central processes of his/her organisation and to participate in identifying and optimising them.

O 3	The counsellor is able to contribute to the intended design of the organisation and manner of dealing with the actors involved in the process of counselling or in the counselling institution and to contribute to an organisation culture which is appropriate to the goals and the mission of the organisation.
O 4	The counsellor is able to use available equipment in a sensible and resource-saving way and to support the budgeting or acquisition of resources needed in order to maintain and expand the counselling services.
O 5	The counsellor is able to support the interchange with people and institutions relevant to the counselling process and guidance/counselling organisation by, e.g. cultivating his/her professional network, keeping in contact with other players (such as educational institutions, important political institutions, associations, companies) and participating in adjusting the services, programmes, etc.
O 6	The counsellor is able to design programmes regarding educational and vocational developments which are appropriate to the needs of the clients and to implement them, if needed, on his/her own. This includes combining counselling services with supportive educational services in a useful way.

The society

G 1	In regard to the counselling process, the counsellor is able to consider recent social framework conditions. He/she has the relevant knowledge from different relevant sectors and is able to provide this knowledge regarding clients' needs in a proper way. This includes the use of proper methods for the knowledge provision.
G 2	Through professional action the counsellor is able to strengthen the ability of the client to self-organisation of competences in response to growing uncertainty in life and career.
G 3	The counsellor supports the client in maintaining and raising their employability through developing specific competences. He/she supports self directed action on the employment market and contributes through this directly by optimising the workforce.
G 4	The counsellor is able to contribute by his/her actions to the goal of equality of opportunity. Social status, cultural background, gender and regional background should not affect the individual learning and development efforts of the client. Inequality should not be maintained or even enlarged.

Comprehensive standards

Ü 1	In regard to the counselling process, organisation and policies, the counsellor is able to respond to the needs and the resources of the client and to appreciate her/him as a capable individual.
Ü 2	The counsellor is able to establish transparency for all players in regard to the counselling process, organisation and guidance/counselling policies.
Ü 3	The counsellor agrees that ethical aspects are an important dimension in regard to the counselling process, organisation and guidance policies. It is the counsellor's task to further concretise the ethical aspects in discussion (e.g. in teams, professional organisations).
Ü 4	The counsellor is able to adopt integrated quality strategies for both the counselling process and the organisation and to support the development and implementation of a quality concept. This supports evaluation of the impact of counselling.