

Quality criteria for group work

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This paper reports on a practical rather than a scholarly exploration of how quality assurance in career learning for groups is approached across the different sectors of career guidance largely in the UK. In some sectors (career education in schools is an obvious example) group work is a main mode of delivery and we would expect all quality criteria to address it. In others, where the one-to-one interview is seen as the professional's key contribution to client progression, we could expect that group work would be sufficiently different to require its own set of quality criteria. With these expectations I conducted a small exploration across the spectrum of career help that was available in early 2010.

Quality criteria include formal lists of standards for practitioners and services, but other measures too, some of which are subsumed in the standards but not always spelled out. Group work is mentioned somewhere in most professional practitioner standards, but in some cases the implication is that the competences are just the same, only applied to more than one person at a time. I spoke with managers and practitioners as well as researchers and writers of standards, for career work with adults in employment and unemployment, and for young people (and adults) in secondary, further and higher education, and also those not in education, employment or training. Where possible I looked at the standards and materials myself. While I found good and interesting approaches in some sectors, in others there was a surprising lack: not only of specific formal practitioner standards, but also of any sense that they might be needed – either because the differences with one-to-one work were not appreciated or because group work was so strongly the expected mode of delivery that it was not seen as even potentially problematic.

The writing of lists of standards is of necessity a dry and technical skill. In order to be of use in assessment and quality assurance they require a precise grammar and logic. But the gap between the grammatically correct standard on the one hand, and the reality of good professional practice on the other is an extremely difficult one to bridge. The necessary formality has a way of sucking the underlying meaning out of something that needs to be lively and creative. This may contribute to why standard writing for group work collapses: when formalised, the career planning content may look so like one-to-one work that it is not worth repeating separately. But I will suggest that one consequence of this is that not enough attention is paid to the great benefits of good group work, ones that cannot be achieved in one-to-one situations. Its strengths and differences lie not only in the career content, but in the pedagogy, and it should not be seen as an alternative to individual work but in addition to it. If the real advantages of group work could be reflected better in professional quality criteria it could do more to improve the way we help individuals.

Conversations with practitioners suggested at least three ideas that would merit further investigation:

- i. some of the best group work was done without using detailed quality standards
- ii. sometimes, where certain quality criteria were used, it made things difficult and actually worse for the clients and the staff.
- iii. it is not helpful to look at group work itself, or the quality criteria, in isolation from their context.

This is a rapidly changing field. My examples are taken mainly from the situation in Britain in early 2010, with some from a European context. But while the details may change, the issues may be more enduring. As always, some cross-fertilisation between sectors of practice can be helpful.

Themes

i. Career standards 'nested' within other standards

Career learning in groups is often offered within or alongside other programmes that have their own systems of quality assurance. This means it is hard to find standards for group guidance that stand alone, and do not need to be read alongside other standards. For example, career education and guidance in schools is quality-assured as part of all educational programmes by Ofsted. Ofsted standards (Ofsted 2010) themselves do not go into detail about careers work (although many of the outcomes that Ofsted looks for do come from careers work. See Barnes, 2010; Ofsted, 2009). So the Department for Children, Schools and Families also developed detailed standards for Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) (DCSF, 2009). These standards give detail on the content the programme should cover, and are used alongside and within the more general Ofsted ones. While this nesting is complicated and contributes to the sometimes extreme stress of the whole inspection regime, the detailed IAG standards do give teachers an idea of what the curriculum should be - and also what they need to be doing with other interested parties such as parents and local employers. But perhaps because it is so obvious to practitioners that it does not need stating, they do not cover more generic points about group pedagogy and its potential in careers work:

- That people (of any age) can learn from others in the group
- That group work can build up peer support
- That group work enables an organiser to

bring in outside speakers and specialists.

Group work in a school setting (or other initial education including further and higher education) has advantages that are not available to much group provision for people outside it. These could be the basis for additional quality criteria in other sectors:

- That group work is supplemented by individual career guidance
- That with continuity from year to year the programme can be improved gradually and teachers can develop good practice.

Another reason for the invisibility of group work among quality statements comes from another version of the nesting problem. It is difficult to draw a clear line between standards for group guidance and standards for one-to-one work: many of the skills needed overlap. But even where standards include groupwork they rarely explain what is different about it. The International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) lists 91 competence statements but only one, 4.4, is about groups and all it says is 'Use group counselling techniques' (IAEVG, 2003).

ii. Multiple stakeholders

Career work can be funded by more than one government department or other organisation, each with its own quality criteria, for example in provision for unemployed adults which has several different government sources for funding as well as an extensive voluntary sector. Jobcentre Plus programmes are directly linked to the payment of benefits, so involve an element of compulsion for the clients. In the spring of 2010 the national careers advice service for adults was called *nextstep* (now replaced by its successor Next Step). Although there was no compulsion to use it, funding for one-to-one help was free of charge to some clients, but others could only have face-to-face help (as opposed to web or telephone help) if it was in groups.

Both with Jobcentre Plus programmes and with *nextstep*, group provision mainly took the form of job-getting skills: one-off workshops on some aspect of self-awareness or of job-search, like CV-writing

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or interview skills. These were usually short, some only lasting half a day. There were some on-going group options that people could drop in or out of up to a fixed time limit of a few weeks, before going off to vocational skill training or, hopefully, into a job. They did not offer full career guidance or career education, or career management, but they were a part of that work. Just as much as more substantial programmes they needed meaningful quality criteria.

Perhaps because neither staff nor clients had much choice, a feeling had developed among both that group work was less use than one-to-one help. It is true that some of the advantages of group work we saw in schools are absent here:

- There was no time for the group participants to build up peer support
- The funding was never good enough to employ experienced, qualified staff
- The funding was never long-term enough for them to develop expertise and improve their programmes.

Some of this group provision suffered badly as a result. But in spite of this there were good examples of what is possible within the remit. The agencies that actually delivered this service were subcontracted on an open market and varied considerably in nature, so clear, official quality standards on how to strengthen and extend this good practice to others would have been helpful. But none of the official quality arrangements available in early 2010 that were used for these programmes, including practitioner standards, were specific to group work. *Nextstep* staff had qualifications in one-to-one work but there was very little about the career potential of group work in their qualification: the two elements in the NVQ 4 unit on group work focus on group management rather than on career content (Edexcel, 2006). These standards were being revised at the time of this enquiry, but drafts of the new standards were not significantly different with respect to groups (Lifelong Learning UK, 2010). *Nextstep* providers had to be accredited against *matrix* quality standards,

but these were somewhat ‘open-weave’¹ and contained nothing specific about group work. The quality criteria used for programmes commissioned by Jobcentre Plus focused either on compliance with legal requirements, such as health and safety or equal opportunity requirements, or on hard outcome measures such as numbers getting into a job or joining a training programme rather than the more difficult to quantify outcomes like increased confidence or longer-term career management skills (Lintern, 2010). It is these which are particularly achievable through good group-work.

In spite of this vacuum, or perhaps because of it, some interesting quality measures emerged. In the case of *nextstep*, government funding was deployed through regional agencies that then subcontracted its delivery, including groupwork, to local providers. Regional agencies had an interest in ensuring good quality among those subcontractors (they were mindful of the next tendering round), and some developed their own standards for groupwork. Those used by *nextstep* East Midlands during this period were exemplary (*nextstep* East Midlands, 2010):

- were tailored to the reality of what could be offered in that particular funding programme
- were short, clear and user-friendly
- covered the career-related content
- covered the processes in preparing for and in running a group
- required that client feedback be collected, and included detail about what that should cover.

Even more complicated than this varied picture of government programmes, work with unemployed adults in the voluntary sector was hugely varied. It could be funded by public money from local, national

¹ When standards are used for formal, external assessment there is a tension between their specificity and their application. Being very specific limits their application but being more general makes them vaguer, and therefore more open to abuse through ‘box-ticking’.

or European sources, but the work was run by third sector organisations. Its strengths compared with the Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Business, Innovation and Skills programmes were that:

- It could be targeted at groups with specific needs such as ex-offenders, or older adults, or people from one very local community, or one trade union group
- It could take whatever form the providers can negotiate with the funders
- It can often go on over a longer period than the official programmes
- Group members can gain confidence from their peer support
- It can be quite informal. (Hawthorn and Alloway, 2009.)

But the quality criteria they used are as varied as the funders and agencies themselves. They ranged from overly-tight to the overly-loose: funding through the European Union can require lengthy and detailed information about beneficiaries, inputs and outcomes, while other funders may only suggest client satisfaction questionnaires, with no particular requirement as to how the information collected is used. There is no single picture for this sector, but it seems reasonable to assume that quality guidelines could be helpful.

iii. Client Satisfaction

Client feedback is important, and if the right information is collected and then used critically it is essential to a good quality service. Too often a provider refers only to the percentages that show satisfaction rather than listening carefully to the few negative comments. There are benefits of light touch quality assurance in group work using only client feedback, but perhaps only if other controls are in place. One example from yet another sector, career advice for adults facing redundancy, comes from the

Human Resources unit for the BBC². The BBC has not traditionally experienced the high staff turnover that is characteristic of the media industry more generally, but recent pressure to reduce its costs has resulted in a policy to shed jobs. Again unusually for this industry, the BBC currently maintains its own outplacement advice service. It is a high quality service for all staff up to grade 11 (redundancy support to senior management is contracted to different external provider). Employees who are facing redundancy are offered mainly group activities but with one-to-one help also available. People can choose several kinds of group session that include getting-a-job skills but also career guidance. The only quality criterion they use is a carefully monitored client satisfaction level, but the service is provided in a way that engenders a continuously improving service. It is contracted out on a long-term basis to a specialist team that, as noted with schools, is able to build on their continuity of provision from year to year. The service is well-funded compared to provision in the public sector so staff have time and resources to develop their own professionalism and programme.

iv. Meta-criteria

Professional codes of practice are potentially important quality criteria, though like professional standards not always explicit enough about work with groups. One exception to this is the work of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS). This has gone far beyond a simple statement of principles. AGCAS runs a professional qualification with its own set of learning objectives. This includes four days of training entirely about group work, covering nearly all the elements we might look for in a set of quality standards for any sector and built around specific learning outcomes. (AGCAS 2010). The course includes:

- theories underpinning group work
- planning, delivery and evaluation

² Personal communication with Katharine Edwards and Una Murphy, joint Managers of CareerLink Plus, BBC HR Direct

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- the management, facilitation and communication skills needed, including using a range of facilitative skills
- the place of group work in the guidance process within the context of their organisation
- how to select, adapt, design and implement appropriate materials
- how to recognise and respond to the needs of different client groups

and involves the delivery of two assessed groupwork sessions.

For ensuring the quality of provision, the national body responsible for quality in universities, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) involved AGCAS in developing quality guidelines (QAA, 2010), again detailed and specific about content and method. An important feature is that these national QAA quality criteria are recommendations only, on the assumption that universities will have their own quality assurance systems. So the QAA offers its standards as precepts – universities can check their own standards against the QAA precepts, to be sure they are covering everything they should. There are some parallels here with the ‘nested’ standards in the school sector. The advantage of this ‘meta-criteria’ approach – criteria for assessing criteria - using precepts, is that they provide a framework but let locals decide for themselves exactly what they want to do.

The meta-criteria approach is particularly useful when trying to devise standards that would apply to all target groups within one country, or across a number of countries. Because of the precise grammar of standards they are very culture- and language-specific, and date quickly. For this reason the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, CEDEFOP, and The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network, ELGPN, have adopted the meta-criteria approach in recent reports and recommendations about quality

assurance³ But if their meta-criteria frameworks are to be useful for group work, they must make very clear what are the most distinctive features of good group work. Neither of these two European systems, nor as mentioned earlier the international standards of the IAEVG, do this.

Conclusion

The examples of group work so far have included at least three different kinds: career education/ career management (learning about careers), career guidance (about making immediate choices), and ‘getting-a-job skill’ workshops (with no wider education or guidance content). We have also seen a number of stakeholders, each with slightly different but overlapping interest in maintaining high standards:

- The government, thinking about value for public money
- Providing organisations, hoping to win future contracts
- Professionals, concerned about professional integrity and therefore with an eye on their own career development
- Clients and their families.

All of the first three are of course concerned to improve and deliver the best possible guidance work for their clients. But two at least also have an interest of their own, to obtain future funding or jobs. Quality criteria that cannot be used superficially to ‘tick boxes’, without actually meeting the needs of clients, are difficult to design and implement. This applies to all those measures that I have touched on in this paper:

- quality standards for provision
- professional qualifications standards

³ See, for example, CEDEFOP(2009) in which all the so-called ‘client-interaction competences’ contain a subtitle which says they should all apply to ‘working with individuals or groups, face-to-face, by telephone or online’ but do not specify what the differences between these might be. ELGPN mission for WP4 Quality can be found at <http://ktl.jyu.fi/ktl/elgpn/themes/wp4>.

- 'precepts' or meta-criteria
- pedagogy and theories of learning a specified curriculum with associated learning outcomes
- professional codes of practice
- legal obligations (e.g. health and safety)
- 'hard' outcome measures
- 'soft' outcome measures
- client satisfaction feedback

funding agencies (thinking about value for money); it could help encourage and motivate professionals and managers, and it could improve the experience of a very large number of recipients.

They all have different but overlapping uses. Some can be used for external formal assessment and quality control, some internally as a tool to improve provision gradually, and some for either. Given the variety of contexts and purposes of group work, the most effective quality assurance system would be worked out at a local level according to kind of provision, with particular goals, and for specific target groups.

But I suggest these could usefully be drawn up within a framework set by meta-criteria that are agreed at national level, and could be made relevant to all the target groups mentioned above. Meta-criteria for group work should cover process and organisational issues such as funding, premises, resources and staffing. While requiring the skills and understanding involved in one-to-one guidance, professional standards for staff should also require those specific to group work including an understanding of its particular benefits. Much of the necessary work here has already been done by AGCAS but other professional associations should be involved in refining their work to ensure ownership across the board.

This development of a flexible, informative quality framework for group work could particularly benefit work with adults away from or less well positioned in the labour market, or in community settings, where help with career planning and management is particularly fragile in resourcing and continuity, but also more likely to be offered in short-term groups. It would not just benefit the

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Notes

Based on a talk given in Vienna in June 2010 at an event organised by *abif* (Analysis Consulting and Interdisciplinary Research), on *Qualität in der Berufsorientierung und Berufsberatung* (Quality in career guidance and counselling).