

The Duty Interview: an erosion of guidance or a successful innovation?

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As careers advisers in higher education struggle to meet the demands of their clients, resources are stretched and shorter interviews are offered. In this study, the description 'duty interview' refers to the short guidance interventions offered at a higher education institute where clients were limited to twenty minutes of careers adviser time for all appointments. Brief interviews were initially introduced as they seemed to be the fairest way to cope with the student demand.

This study set out to find out whether the needs of the client could really be met through such a short intervention.

Defining the duty interview

There has been an increasing trend towards shorter 'duty' interviews throughout higher education careers services. Despite the proliferation of the term 'duty interview' in higher education only Watts has attempted a definition, referring to them as being used 'partly to diagnose students' guidance needs' and also as a means to 'signpost them to appropriate resources' (Watts, 1997). He also described the trend of 'long individual guidance interviews' as 'increasingly being complemented by short 'duty adviser' interviews' going on to say that 'this is viewed by some as a serious and regrettable erosion of quality; by others as a welcome move towards a more student-driven system' (Watts, 1997).

The increased use of shorter interviews could be for a number of reasons. Recently, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services and the Association of Graduate Recruiters described 'in-depth guidance as under threat' (AGCAS/AGR, 2001). They attributed the increased prevalence of the duty interview to the limited resources which higher education careers services command. So as small numbers of career advisers in an institution strive to meet the guidance needs of individuals, they stretch the resources available by shortening the interviews. This argument implies that the duty interview is a negative consequence of cutbacks.

However, there could be reasons other than economies of scale for the duty interview becoming increasingly relied upon, including:

- the type of enquiry posed by higher education students, such as CV checks, lending themselves to a shorter contact;

- higher education students may be able to articulate their needs more readily than younger students, so perhaps needing less time for exploration at the start of interviews;
- students themselves preferring shorter interviews, which they can access more immediately;
- finally, and perhaps most controversially, careers advisers may themselves prefer to see students for less time as they may not have the counselling skills to enter into the in-depth interviews which longer slots of time might demand.

Proving effectiveness

Researching the effectiveness of careers interventions is as complex as the interventions themselves. However, despite the difficulties of proving our effectiveness, we need to be seen to be actively evaluating what we do. This is partly to meet external demand for accountability, for example, when Baroness Blackstone, Minister for Higher Education, spoke of the need for 'standards to rise' (June 2000) but it is also to enhance the service which we provide. Lau (1995) makes an important point about why services should be continually evaluated:

'as students' opportunities increase and job opportunities change, it is quite likely that the usage and effectiveness of different kinds of guidance will also alter' (p.219).

Despite the need for evaluation, the lack of it when implementing a new approach to guidance seems endemic in the work of most careers practitioners. As Watts and Kidd stated:

'Since the Second World War, little attention seems to have been paid to evaluating the effectiveness of careers guidance in Britain despite the major changes which have taken place in approaches to guidance – moving from primarily a diagnostic and advisory approach based on the trait and factor theories to a careers education and counselling approach based on the developmental theories.' (1978, p.235).

Holland *et al.* (1981) also made the point that despite a plethora of recently created careers interventions little evaluation was taking place. Furthermore, they complained that practitioners frequently laid on the 'treatment' that they thought was best for their clients.

Just as the types of guidance vary, so must the means of assessing it. Killeen and Kidd (1991) usefully summarise

possible measures for evaluating guidance into four categories:

- *Process Measures*: a simple count of activity.
- *Client Reaction Measures*: the client's own feelings about the guidance that they receive are recorded. Although Killeen and Kidd acknowledge that the feelings of the client towards the process itself are important if they are to engage fully, they doubt the objectivity of this measure.
- *Vocational and Educational Measures*: the final destinations of the client are taken as the ultimate measure of success, these measures might include 'job satisfaction, job changing and course completion'.
- *Learning Outcome Measures*: these are measures of the knowledge, skills and attitudes, which may be engendered by guidance or, in fact, what the client has really learnt by attending an appointment.

This study used a combination of methods to evaluate duty interviews in the context of the number of clients seen, their reactions to the process and also their learning from the process:

- Semi-structured interviews with three careers advisers;
- Feedback from twenty clients before and after their interviews;
- Review of six interviews.

Vocational and educational measures were deliberately excluded from the study despite their use as ultimate tests of success in the past. As a number of authors point out including Killeen and Kidd (1991) and Clarke (1984) they are not without their problems. Inevitably, there has to be a delay between delivering guidance and measuring the clients' final destinations. Between these two points, it is difficult to assess the factors that may have interceded to influence the clients' actions in addition to the careers guidance. The data being measured could be erroneous; for example, low levels of job changing could equally indicate a lack of achievement as success in a particular field as the result of guidance. Finally, as Killeen and Kidd point out, 'recommendations may merely confirm existing, realistic intentions and conflict with unrealistic ones' (1991, p.1). Thus the measures say more about the client's level of compliance and the practitioner's ability to predict this, rather than any real benefits for the client. These measures often demanded proper controlled experiments, which for 'practical and ethical reasons....are difficult to achieve' (Killeen and Kidd, 1991, p.1).

Central to the study were the 'Measure of Guidance Impact' questionnaires developed by the National Foundation for Educational Research. These allowed not only the clients' subjective views of the process to be gathered, but also enabled the objective measurement of the effectiveness of the guidance, in the areas of self-awareness, opportunity

awareness, decision making and transition skills (the 'DOTS' model), thus incorporating the advice offered by Killeen and Kidd to focus on learning outcome measures.

The questionnaires given to clients were designed to show whether the duty interviews were resulting in enhanced career awareness for the clients, but not why some clients' career awareness might be enhanced by a greater margin than others. With this in mind, it was decided that all of the interviews would be recorded, to allow for the possibility of listening to those interviews which had either an extremely large or a small change in their MGI score. Ultimately, six interviews were chosen for analysis.

The Bedford model for assessing careers adviser's skills against seven dimensions (1982) was selected for assessing the interviews, as this would give a structure to the observation. This model seemed particularly apt for this study, as like the MGI it focused attention on the progress made by the individual as the result of an individual guidance intervention. Whilst focusing on this, it had the added benefit of showing how the progress made by the client related to the skills of the adviser.

The skill of 'challenging' was added as research since Bedford's had shown it has a vital role in the careers counselling process (Beven, 1996; Ali & Graham, 1996; Kidd *et al.*, 1996). Hence the following list of eight skills was used to assess the interviews:

- Establishing the purpose of the interview;
- Creating a friendly atmosphere;
- Gathering information;
- Identifying the young person's needs;
- Giving information;
- Summarising progress;
- Clarifying next steps;
- Challenging.

Key results from the study

The results from this study showed that attending a duty interview can increase client career awareness and so benefit the client in their career planning. On average, clients' career awareness using the four planes of the DOTS model increased by 4.7 points on the MGI score. A related t-test was undertaken to check whether these results could have occurred by chance alone (Robson, 1999; Hinton, 1999). It was found that the scores had a less than one in one hundred chance that they could have occurred by chance alone and so these findings would appear to be highly significant.

Whilst there seems to be a definite and significant increase in the scores, it should be noted that when piloting the MGI test, NFER (1993) found that on average their clients' scores increased by 10.9 points on the MGI scale following careers interviews. These results were from a survey including 807 participants.

There could be a number of reasons why the results obtained in this study were lower than those found in the NFER pilot:

- The client groups were different. The participants in the NFER group were mostly under the age of 35, which compares well with the sample in this study. Only 10% of them were at NVQ 4 level or equivalent and perhaps even more significantly 75% of the NFER population were unemployed.
- The length of guidance delivered in this study was short. The NFER study did not give any details of the specific length of the interviews delivered. However, it did report that 75% of them were up to an hour.

Clients gained most in terms of opportunity awareness (averaging a 57% increase in scores) and transition skills (averaging a 67% increase in score). However, clients with a low level of self-awareness tended to benefit least and in fact there was only an 11% on average increase in their scores.

Clients valued the convenience of the duty interviews. 90% of the clients rated the interviews as very easy to book, it would be hard to see how this could be maintained without some provision of shorter appointments. Furthermore, clients could be seen as often as they liked, thus potentially allowing clients to see appointments as part of a career planning process.

Whilst recognising their convenience, advisers sometimes disliked the feeling of 'being rushed' and referred to the interviews as often 'over-running'.

There was a direct correlation between careers advisers' guidance skills and gains made by the students. The skill most often used by careers advisers was that of giving information, whilst the skill least used was that of gathering information. The prime cause for interviews failing to increase client career awareness was the careers adviser spending insufficient time in exploration and contracting and so misunderstanding the needs of the client. In this study, 65% of the clients stated that when booking their appointment they were doing so with a specific issue in mind such as revising their CV and only a minority of students had a career in mind.

Enhancing the service

This study has shown that duty interviews can have benefits for the client as they can increase their career awareness particularly in terms of improving their opportunity awareness and transition skills. Clients also value the convenience of this approach to guidance.

However, whilst the duty interview does have its benefits, the study also highlighted some potential disadvantages. Careers advisers can feel under pressure to perform and so perhaps not spend adequate time with their clients exploring their guidance needs. Furthermore, those clients

with a low level of self-awareness tend to benefit least from this approach to guidance.

With limited resources and enhanced demands from clients, it seems likely that duty interviews are an innovation that will remain with higher education careers services. The following areas for action might enable services to actively maintain the quality of their careers guidance.

- *Encourage students to attend little and often...*

Far from engendering a culture of dependency, this can enable students to see career choice as a process, which they are central to. To enable this to work well, services need to keep records of their client contact in order to monitor the progress being made (developing an IT system for booking and recording appointments with information which careers advisers can easily access prior to seeing clients is a practical solution). Advisers also need to become very skilled at agreeing clear and achievable plans of action with their clients.

- *Encourage students to prepare for interviews*

Again, this will help students to take responsibility for their own career planning. Such preparation could take the form of students being shown how to use careers library resources by trained reception staff before interviews. Clients could be asked to reflect on key issues before attending their interviews such as: what plans have they had to date, why have they chosen to book a careers interview and what would they like to achieve by the end of the interview.

- *Train careers advisers with specific skills to prepare them to deliver duty interviews*

This study showed the direct relation between advisers' skills, particularly in terms of forming contracts, and positive outcomes for the client. Yet, none of the advisers had received any specific training in order to deliver shorter 'duty interviews', despite these forming a significant part of their workload. Careers advisers need to understand the central importance of the contracting process to the duty interview. They need to be reassured that they cannot meet all the needs of their clients in the time a duty interview allows, and that it is perfectly acceptable, and probably very helpful to the client, to arrange to see them again. Services should consider implementing training plans and peer observation policies, which focus not only on longer interventions, but also support the delivery of short interventions.

- *Ask why?*

Consider whether short interviews are always the best policy. If high numbers of students are accessing the service for particular issues such as CV checks then regular clinics and group sessions might provide better provision. Undertake regular evaluation of the range of products and models of delivery from other services.

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