

Career Guidance and Counselling Provisions at a South African University: Career Advisors' Reflections

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ABSTRACT The study sought to establish the state of career guidance and counselling provisions at a South African university as reflected by the university's career advisors. A qualitative design was employed. Three career advisors participated in an in-depth interview. Data was thematically analysed. The study revealed that the university's career advisors' main activities included coordinating orientation for new students, conducting career advising workshops for students, graduate deployment programmes and sometimes making high schools career guidance visits. The university had some career brochures and Compact discs (CDs) for graduate careers. The career advisors collaborated with the Department of Education, District coordinators, principals and student counsellors. The university did not have career counselling centres, the career advisors were short staffed and under qualified. The career advisors also believed the services were not taken seriously. Implications and recommendations to improve the guidance and counselling provisions were discussed in detail in the study.

INTRODUCTION

Children normally go to school to acquire education so that they can have a better future. The education they receive should prepare them for future occupations (Hughey and Hughey 1999). Thus, the education the students receive should make them aware of the basic personal qualities required to succeed in any occupation (Mapfumo et al. 2002). This is usually possible through guidance and counselling services.

Career guidance and counselling is a process which enables individuals to acquire the skills they need to make choices and decisions about their future (Jayasinghe 2001). UNESCO (2002) views career guidance and counselling as a process that connects students to resources so that they become knowledgeable about jobs and occupations. The process also assists students to be active managers of their career paths. The students are helped to select careers appropriate to their capabilities, interests and needs (Chireshe and Kasayira 2006). From the above, it can be concluded that career guidance is about building capacity in the youths so that they are able to make their own decisions and start thinking about the future (Mapfumo and Chireshe 2006). Varalakshmi and Moy (2009) state that career guidance encompasses information, guidance and counselling services to assist students in making educational, training and occupational choices.

Ibu and Maliki (2010) believe that with the increasing complexities in society, industry and technological development all going hand in hand, the succeeding generation will find it difficult to adjust themselves to society, work, family and schools. Hence, there is the need for career guidance and counselling.

Although schools are supposed to play a significant role in career counselling, the opposite obtains in most cases. For example, Prinsloo (2007) established that life orientation teachers in rural schools in South Africa did not have information for career guidance and neither were they formally trained in the area. Similarly, Rosenberg et al. (2009) found that very few teachers had been trained in life orientation and its career component while some teachers used life orientation periods to do more 'important' subjects. Rosenberg et al. (2009) cite studies for example, Cosser and Du Toit (2002) who found that 60% of the learners in South Africa had not received career guidance and counselling at school. Maree and Beck (2004) revealed that schools in disadvantaged communities in South Africa were underutilizing the career guidance programmes. In a similar vein, Maree (2009) argues that in 2009 many learners who passed their matric examinations had not received career counselling and thus did not apply for enrolment into the much sought after areas of study at higher education institutions. Recent media

reports after the release of the 2011 matric results criticize the lack of career guidance and counseling in South African secondary schools (Gernetzky 2012; Modiba 2012).

In a nutshell, learners ever receive career guidance and counselling in their schools and as a result, these learners do not have a clear sense of their prospective careers (Maree 2011). Those that receive the career guidance services at high school are not satisfied with the services (Nicholas et al. 1999). These learners end up in higher education institutions where they are supposed to pursue programmes that are in line with their career prospects. The students are supposed to be exposed to effective career guidance and counselling services in higher education institutions to cover up for the lost opportunities in junior and high schools. Unfortunately, career guidance services are inadequate in several countries' Higher Education Institutions (Watts 2006). For example, Oluwole (2003) cited in Adejmolola and Olufunmilayo (2009) observed that some Nigerian students' career choices had either been based on trial and error or on the advice of ill-informed relations and acquaintances. Adejmolola and Olufunmilayo (2009) also lament of many jobless graduates from Nigerian universities because there are no career guidance and counselling programmes that create a spirit and culture of entrepreneurship in the youth. Similarly, Vidal et al. (2003) state that guidance provisions are not clearly regulated in Spanish universities. They further state that Spanish universities do not have a defined model as to how guidance services should be organized. Authorities in Spanish universities are also reported to have limited interest in guidance services.

Watts (2006) states that career guidance is crucial to the success of lifelong learning policies while Varalakshmi and Moly (2009) argue that career guidance in higher education institutions provide assistance and advice to students so that they make better and informed future educational and career choices suitable for them. Earlier on, Jayasinghe (2009) argued that students will have a clear understanding of self, their attitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources and limitations from career counselling. Thus, the graduates are helped to find out their interests and abilities and to obtain their dream job in society. They are also guided into various entrepreneurial activities. Career counselling intimates

graduates with economic situation and opportunities, education, training, advancement and other benefits for sustainable self-reliance and self-worth. Students are to achieve and live fulfilled lives and contribute meaningfully to the development of their country in all spheres of life once they receive appropriate career counselling (Adejmolola and Olufunmilayo 2009).

Many developed countries, for example, Finland and USA have well developed career guidance services in their entire educational system. In these countries, Higher Education Institutions have career centres (Varalakshmi and Moly 2009). UNESCO (2002) states that career counselling centres should have resources that enable students to access information independently so that they make sound career decision-making. The career counselling centres should have books and journals on careers, videos, well-classified information on careers, career tests and computer-based information. UNESCO (2002) goes on to indicate that effective career counselling centres have trained career counsellors, career advisors and peer advisors. Effective career counselling services have strong collaboration with librarians who maintain occupational shelves and acquaint career advisors with new guidance and counselling materials reaching the library. In addition, a teaching staff from each subject area should be part of the career guidance centre (Varalakshmi and Moly 2009).

Career advisors' tasks in effective career guidance services include career information and guidance, job application and job interview training, the imparting of transferable skills and time management (Rott and Gavin-Kramar 2006). Egbochuku and Akpan (2008) argue that effective career centres have adequate information of current trends in the labour market while Jayasinghe (2009) states that effective career counselling programmes have computer aided career guidance system. The present study seeks to establish if the reflections of career advisors at a South African university confirm the availability of the above services in their university.

The university under investigation's career guidance unit functions as per its founding document includes designing and coordinating the orientation programme of all new students, providing academic counselling to all students, setting up and supporting peer study groups, providing psychometric assessments and coordinating the graduate placement programmes. The

present study sought to establish the extent to which the career advisors perceived the unit as meeting its mandate in relation to career guidance and counselling.

Goals of the Study

The goal of the study was to establish the state of career guidance and counselling provisions at a South African university as reflected by the career advisers from that university. The study was guided by the following main research question: What are the career advisors' reflections on the career guidance and counselling services they provide at the university?

METHOD

Design

A case study design which was mainly qualitative in nature was adopted for this study. Qualitative designs are usually used where opinions, feelings and experiences of participants are sought (Best and Khan 2006). A qualitative design was adopted since the study sought to obtain the career advisors' experiences, opinions and feelings about the career guidance provisions at their university.

Sample

Three out of four career advisors employed by the university under study participated in the study. The fourth one did not make up for the interview appointment.

Instrument

An in-depth interview schedule was used to collect the data. The items focused on the type of services they provided, the resources at their disposal, whom they collaborated with and the challenges they faced.

Procedure

The researcher interviewed the career advisers individually at agreed times. Participation was voluntary and the respondents were free to withdraw from the study at any time of the study. Two of advisers were interviewed telephonically because they were located at far away campuses

from the researcher. The participants' responses were recorded down in a note book.

Data Analysis

The data was thematically analysed. Responses were categorised on the basis of the meaning they conveyed.

Trustworthiness

Each participant was given an opportunity to comment on the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation of their responses. The researcher summarised each participant's responses at the end of each interview session and asked each of them if the summaries were a true reflection of their perceptions of the services they provided.

RESULTS

Themes that emerged from the participants' responses guided the presentation of the results.

Career Advisors' Activities and Strategies

All the three career advisors revealed that their duties included coordinating the university's orientation programme, conducting career advising workshops for students and implementing the graduate deployment programme. The graduate deployment programme targeted final year students. It focused on how to write CVs, writing application letters. The graduate deployment programme also included hosting career expos. The career advisers also indicated that they sometimes made career guidance visits to schools. One of them also indicated that they sometimes sent questionnaires to high schools to identify feeder schools and trying to establish if they had received career guidance and counselling and from whom. They all indicated that they made use of notice boards to advertise their services. They also indicated that they collaborated with the Heads of Departments, Department of Education, District Coordinators, School Principals and student counsellors. The following verbal quotes illustrate some of the participants' activities and strategies:

"We coordinate the orientation programme"

"Our graduate deployment programme addresses CV and application letter writing"

"We work with School principals, District Coordinators and Department of Education"

Resources

The three career advisers indicated that they did not have career guidance centres. They used their small offices. They had some career magazines, some compact discs for graduate careers, career expo books for final year students. One of them had career tests in her office. The following are excerpts from the descriptions of the participants' reflections pertaining career guidance resources:

"We do not have career guidance centres"

"I use my office"

"The only resources I have are CDs for graduate careers and some career magazines"

I have psychological tests"

Challenges

The three career advisers lamented about the shortage of staff. The university had only four career advisers, one per its delivery site. Thus they were not in a position to cover all the students. The university had a student population of approximately 24 000 students. The following are illustrative excerpts from the participants:

"We are very few. There are often too many students at career exhibitions that you cannot give them the needed attention"

"I cannot service all the students because they are too many"

"With additional staff we can assist many students"

In addition, there were no faculty staff members who were directly linked to the career guidance unit of the university. The following verbal quote illustrates the above finding:

"We do not have faculty career guidance and counselling link persons"

The career advisors were not qualified to use psychological tests or handle psychological problems. The following are excerpts from the participants' reflections on their training:

"I have psychological tests in my office but I am not qualified to use them"

"We need to be trained so that we can handle psychological issues"

"The job requires professional training which some of us lack"

The participants also revealed that they had problems accessing students. This was because the career advising was not on the university time table. The following are illustrative excerpts from the participants:

"Career guidance is not on the university time-table and as such we cannot compete for students with examinable modules that are time-tabled"

"Students seem not to be bothered by career guidance and counselling"

DISCUSSION

It emerged from this study that besides focusing on conducting career advising workshops for students and implementing the graduate deployment programme, the career advisors were the main coordinators for the orientation of new students into the university. The reviewed literature does not indicate career advisors as the main coordinators of orienting new students into the university. One wonders if career guidance and counselling is seriously focused on during this period since orientation focuses on general induction to university life. Orientation involves issues like where to find what, how and when. Its main aim is to assist students to acclimate themselves to university life.

The issue of career expos which the respondents organized for their students to attend is commendable. However, Rosenberg et al. (2009) argue that during career expos, organizations tend to promote what they do, with the learners not being exposed to the job and career opportunities in the organization. In addition, because the learners are too many and many organizations may be exhibiting, the learners may have little time at each exhibit and may therefore have little time to interact with the representatives of the organizations on display.

The study also revealed that the university lacked career counselling centres. This coupled with the lack of resources compromised the quality of the career guidance and counselling services the students received. The available CDs and expo books were not enough for every student. There is a possibility that some students could have received the CDs but did not have access to computers so that they could use the CDs. Literature (Jayasinghe 2002; UNESCO 2002; Egbochuku and Akpan 2008; Varalakshmi and Moly 2009) point to the need for equipped ca-

reer counselling centres for effective career guidance services to be realized.

The career advisors' inability to use psychological tests which the university has reflects poor quality of the services rendered. Although the tests may not be culturally relevant (UNESCO 2002), they are of great value when it comes to students' interest and personality and trying to match these with jobs and occupations. The rural location of the university understudy could explain the absence of highly qualified career advisors. People generally want to work in urban settings where services such as housing, health, educational and entertainment are easily available.

The results on shortage of staff also paint a gloomy picture on the quality of the career guidance services provided. The career advisors could not attend to all students hence some never received the services. This becomes problematic for the students who did not receive career guidance in their secondary school years (Prinsloo 2007; Maree 2009, 2011). Because of shortage of staff, the career advisors were not able to visit all the university's feeder schools to market the university programmes and entry requirements.

It is surprising to note that none of the career advisers mentioned that they liaised with librarians in executing their functions. As Varalakshmi and Moly (2009) indicate, librarians play a key role in updating career advisors with current career guidance and counselling materials reaching the library. None involvement of librarians who are key stakeholders in career guidance and counselling provisions in universities (Varalakshmi and Moly 2009) points to a gloomy picture of the career guidance and counselling services the university offered.

It would appear the university did not put much emphasis on career guidance and counselling. This may be inferred from the lack of faculty staff members working with the career guidance unit and the sentiment that the career advisors had problems assessing the students at the university. The fact that career guidance is not an examinable module makes it unpopular among university staff and students. This argument relates to Chireshe's (2011) view that guidance and counselling services receive low priority to compared to examinable subjects in secondary schools.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the career advisors viewed the career guidance services they offered to students not as effective as they should be. Even though they were trying to address their mandate, shortage of person power, material resources and lack of training compromised the quality of the services they provided.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made: there is need to create well equipped/resourced career counselling centres at the university. More career advisors should be employed to cater for the high student population in the university. Each faculty should have a teaching staff who should link up with the career counselling centres. Peer advisors can be introduced in university to increase the number of students receiving the services. The career advisors need professional training so that they can utilize resources such as psychological tests. There is need for a larger study which may capture university students' views on the career guidance services they receive from their institutions.

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