

Effectiveness of Competences and Competencies during Transition from Higher Education to Employment: A Case Study of Community Learning and Development (CLD) qualifying training in Scotland

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INTRODUCTION

Transition from Higher Education to Employment

Transition is an on-going process that focuses on interactions between an individual and significant others in that individual's environment, such as peers, professionals, families (Jindal-Snape, forthcoming). Transition is satisfying and fulfilling for some individuals, however, others find it challenging and stressful (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008). One of the roles of education is to prepare people for this transition to work. However, for some, this transition is not easy or straightforward (Gatt & Gatt, 2006). In this paper we will focus on transition from higher education to work and how a competence based curriculum has been designed to aid this transition in the case of professional education of Community Learning and Development (CLD) practitioners in Scotland. Before that, we would like to discuss our conceptualisation of competences and competencies, followed by an introduction to CLD.

The Competence versus Competency Debate

Boyatzis (1982) defined competency broadly as an underlying characteristic that could be a motive, trait, skill, an aspect of their self-image or social role, or body of knowledge which they use. Boyatzis distinguishes between functions, tasks and relevant competences. Fundamentally the distinction is between:

- the aspects of the job that have been with competence; and
- what people need to bring to the job in order to perform the aspects to the required level of competency

Woodruffe (1992, 17) argues that this distinction leads to the following definition of competency:

“A competency is a set of behaviour patterns that the incumbent needs to bring to a position in the order to perform its tasks and functions with competence.”

Woodruffe contends that competency is concerned with people’s behaviour and is a dimension of behaviour that is relevant to performance in the job. From this definition Woodruffe differentiates competency (the behaviours people need to display in order to do a job effectively e.g. sensitivity) and competence (areas of operation and job functions e.g. staff development). To further explain this, Woodruffe states that the job itself consists of a set of deliverables, outputs or roles, each which requires a number of individual competencies.

Eraut (1994, 179) makes a distinction between ‘competence’ which is given a generic or holistic meaning and refers to a person’s overall capacity and the term ‘competency’ which refers to specific capabilities. Gonzi et al. (1993, 5) takes a slightly different view in defining ‘competence’ as “Performance is what is directly observable, whereas competence is not directly observable, rather is inferred from performance.”

And continue to say

“The competence of professionals derives from their possessing a set of relevant attributes such as knowledge, skills and attitudes. These attributes jointly underlie competence and are often referred to as competencies. So a competency is a combination of attributes underlying some aspect of professional performance...[but] attributes of individuals do not themselves constitute competence. Nor is competence the mere performance of a series of tasks. Rather, the notion of competence integrates attributes with performance.” (Gonzi et al., 1993, 5-6).

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2009, 1) offer the following distinction:

“‘Competency’ is more precisely defined as the behaviours that employees must have, or must acquire, to input into a situation in order to achieve high levels of performance, while ‘competence’ relates to a system of minimum standards or is demonstrated by performance and outputs.”

Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) advocate schema that distinguishes excellent performer from average performer, and include these 5 stages, (1) Novice, (2) Advanced Beginner, (3) Competence, (4) Proficiency, (5) Expertise. These have been extended to 7, the last two being (6) Mastery, and (7) Practical Wisdom (Dreyfus, 2001). The emphasis is on critical reflection.

What is Community Learning and Development?

In January 2004 the Scottish Executive published guidance for Community Planning Partnerships which set out a framework for the promotion and development of community learning and development (CLD), and defined it as:

"Community learning and development (CLD) is learning and social development work with individuals and groups in their communities using a range of formal and informal methods. A common defining feature is that programmes and activities are developed in dialogue with communities and participants...[CLD's] main aim is to help individuals and communities tackle real issues in their lives through community action and community-based learning."

Each local authority area (32) in Scotland has formed a CLD partnership comprising all organisations that have an interest in offering or supporting CLD work. The voluntary sector is also a significant provider of CLD services, most particularly in the area of work with young people. There are 45,000 voluntary organisations in Scotland involving up to 130,000 paid staff and over 1.2 million volunteers (Source SCVO).

Professional Training in CLD

Professional qualifying training in CLD in Scotland is awarded by four Higher Education Institutes (HEI) at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This is after academic approval through HEI quality assurance processes and professional endorsement. Since the 1990's, CLD training in Scotland has been competence based with competence being defined as the 'product of an integration of knowledge, skills and values' with qualifying practitioners able to:

“Demonstrate their understanding of the value base and principles, to demonstrate that they are able to conceptualise, reflect and analyse competing theories, ideologies and models of practice, and to demonstrate these in the fieldwork practice as educators.” (CeVe, 1995, 17).

This definition emerged as a result of a revised functional analysis which was carried out in 1994. In this, the purpose of occupational area was identified, with purpose being broken down into key roles, which were further broken down into elements of competence. As illustrated, there is a demand on professional training to provide the need for the 'competent' practitioner to have both personal attributes and be able to apply these effectively within a relevant setting demonstrating an integration of these personal attributes with professional performance. Therefore, CLD professional training to date, we would suggest, is akin to that advocated by Gonzi et al. (1993) that attempts to construct a curriculum that provides competence as a combination of personal abilities (competency) and their effective application in professional role (competence).

This paper is based on an analysis of the findings of research carried out to explore whether current CLD training in Scotland is meeting these demands and preparing students for transition to work in an ever evolving field.

METHODOLOGY

The project employed a multiple phase design. Primarily quantitative, complemented with some qualitative data, was collected from CLD employers using questionnaires.

A total of 63 responses were received, out of which 36 were from voluntary and 27 from statutory sector. This shows a return rate of 32%.

On the basis of issues and themes emerging from the questionnaires, focus groups were used to collect in-depth qualitative data from an even wider group of stakeholders (CLD students, n=4; newly qualified practitioners [NQP], n=10; employers/agencies, n=15; minority groups, n=2 and training providers, n=8).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Role of the CLD practitioner

All participants indicated that the role of the CLD practitioner was to work with people to meet their identified needs. For this they need to have a strategic and theoretical overview, have the ability and skills to operate in a locality/community at a group and 1:1 level, the ability to work towards meeting these needs in partnership with local people and related professionals and agencies; leading to the development of purposeful community engagement. This requires the development of the critically competent practitioner, engaged in socially situated learning and development which is aimed towards social justice and inclusion.

Desirable abilities and attributes of a CLD practitioner

Table 1 shows the questionnaire respondents' perspective on the personal experience and attributes that a newly qualified CLD practitioner should have. As can be seen communication skills and honesty/integrity were perceived as highly essential.

Table 1: Personal experience and attributes perceived to be essential

Personal experience and attributes	CLD Managers	National Agencies primarily Voluntary Sector	Primarily Voluntary Sector Employers
	Percentage (ranking in brackets)	Percentage (ranking in brackets)	Percentage (ranking in brackets)
Sensitivity	42.1	71.4 (4)	64.3
Confidentiality	52.6	57.1	85.7 (3)
Flexibility	73.7	83.3 (2)	60.7
Dependability	77.8	66.7	75.0
Coping Skills	57.9	57.1	60.7
Communication Skills	84.2 (2)	83.3 (2)	92.9 (1)
Willingness to learn	73.7	66.7	67.9
Time Keeping	68.4	42.9	42.9
Time Management	61.1	57.1	57.1
Honesty/integrity	84.2 (2)	85.7 (1)	89.3 (2)
Working with the Public	89.5 (1)	57.1	78.6 (4)
Working in a Team	78.9 (4)	57.1	71.4
Empathy Skills	52.6	33.3	60.7
Record Keeping	31.6	42.9	42.9
Creativity	42.1	57.1	32.1

The focus group participants split the key attributes and abilities required into **soft** and **hard** knowledge and skills areas. On the matter of soft skills, similar to questionnaire data, the identified skills were honesty, flexibility, adaptability, empathy, optimism, motivation, good communication skills, integrity, analytical skills, approachability and being ethical. Hard skills were organisational skills, evaluation and research skills, partnership and team working, group work and facilitation, understanding of policy and sociology, and project management skills.

Although a few respondents in other groups mentioned the softer skills and attributes (such as enthusiasm, commitment, motivation, willingness to learn, passion, empathy, strong values), it seemed that more respondents from the voluntary sector saw them as highly important. Also, perhaps due to the needs of the voluntary sector, the respondents emphasised finance and funding.

When asked what they look for when appointing a newly qualified CLD practitioner, the focus group participants said that the qualities being looked for were relevant experience and an aptitude for the job. The soft skills referred to earlier were regarded highly by employers as was constructive problem solving. Knowledge of relevant CLD policy and planning and evaluation approaches and methods was also seen as important. NQP asserted that a graduate in CLD should have the skills to be critically competent and know where to look for information and guidance based on professionally –led social science-based education.

Views on the current set of competences used to assess initial qualifying performance in CLD

The questionnaire respondents were asked to indicate their views through a rating scale. Details of competences that were highlighted as essential can be seen in Naulty, Jindal-Snape, Bidwell and Patrick (2008, 34-36).

For some key areas there was a fairly equal split, however, in case of others there was a big variation in the importance placed on them. Overall, not surprisingly the first key area ‘To engage with the community’ was seen by all to be the most essential area. Interesting differences appeared in the importance of ‘reaching and engaging with traditional non-participants’, with CLD Managers and Voluntary Sector employers rating it as highly essential (81% and 70.8% respectively rated it as essential competence) and only 50% National Agencies rating it as essential. However, we cannot attach too much importance to this as the number of respondents from National Agencies was much smaller than the other two groups and the three groups statistically might not be comparable. The rating for competences within the key area, ‘To develop relevant learning and educational opportunities’, seems to be quite varied across the three groups. Again, it is interesting that none of the National Agencies saw ‘Community led development’ and ‘providing potential participants with appropriate guidance’ to be essential competences. However, it should be added that 66.7% and 80% saw them as important respectively.

This was further explored with focus group participants. All newly qualified practitioners were familiar with the professional competence framework and liked the

process of evidence-based professional development. However, they observed that the practice of how the professional competences are embedded with the curriculum for professional training varied between the training providers with the competences either being embedded across course modules or as a discrete area within the curriculum. Most respondents felt that the competency approach was a good focus for personal professional growth and development.

CLD Employers and Agencies felt that the competency approach was a relevant one but the current array of competences should be refreshed in light of developments to take into account the growing diversity of CLD practice. They also felt that the current array of competences were not all relevant to initial training with some, particularly those related to the management of resources and staff being of more relevance to post-qualifying CPD. It was also felt that the softer skills of interpersonal and effective communications that underpin the range of the competences should be more explicitly identified and assessed within the assessment of practice.

Training Providers were of the view that the notion of competence as currently defined by Community Education Validation and Endorsement (CeVe) was a good definition (that it is the product of an integration of knowledge, skills and values with the competent community educator being able to think, to act and to critically reflect on practice) but within the current array of competences it was considered that the ability to critically reflect on practice could be more strongly identified as a practice skill. They also said that the competences should be aligned with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Levels statements for appropriate qualifications.

When asked about additional areas of competence that they saw as important and the challenges over the next 5 years for new graduates, the following themes emerged from the questionnaire responses (not in any particular order):

- Emphasis on financial skills (response seemed very specific to voluntary sector respondents)
- Partnership and interagency working, especially for local authority

- Self-evaluation, evidence of outcomes and impact,
- Emphasis on experience and personal qualities of graduates (seemed important primarily to voluntary sector respondents)
- Working with change
- Specific context and issue related work
- CLD policy and context (seemed important primarily to statutory sector respondents)

NQP were of the view that the current competences were comprehensive but there should be an area of competence that identifies working in 'Partnership and Collaboration' as this is now a growing area of professional interest. It was also viewed that the current competences should be re-examined in the context of the wider and more diverse field of CLD practice and evaluated on this basis for their fitness for practice. Minority Groups were of the view that any revision of the current competences needs to include the areas of working with diverse and multi-cultural communities.

NQP felt that the development of professional competence should start from an analysis or audit of existing related skills and experience such as the construction of a Personal Development Plan. This would also help as a starting point for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). There is also the need to address the on-going CPD needs of CLD practitioners within an articulated and progressive professional development framework as part of any professional registration system.

Views about Training Provision

Over 85% questionnaire respondents said that current training provision was good to excellent, with 12% saying it was adequate and 3% that it was inadequate or very poor. Graduating students said that qualifying training in CLD should be generic in nature and specialist training should be gained at the post qualifying CPD level. The focus group respondents overall were of the view that training in CLD should be built upon the soft skills as a pre-requisite for initial training and that qualifying training provides a theoretical understanding in the development of practice expertise but there

should be more assessment of the development and application in practice of these soft skills. Initial training has also helped with the development of an ethical basis upon which to practise, that being the professional value base. The final general point that respondents made was that initial training had also helped with the development of reflection and inquiry skills and the ability to evaluate personal and professional practice.

Readiness of newly qualified CLD practitioners for the transition to employment

In the questionnaires when asked how the respondents would rate the preparedness for employment of the newly qualified staff with them, 83% thought it was good to excellent with only 7% saying that it was adequate. In terms of their capacity to undertake their work, 88% thought that they were good to excellent. However, 12% indicated that they were only adequate. When asked in focus groups, whether they felt that the current knowledge base of students and newly qualified CLD practitioners is relevant to the demands of working in their particular area of practice, Newly Qualified Practitioners felt that qualifying training has provided them with the ability to reflect and evaluate their practice and with the development of a professional knowledge and skills base.

Strengths of newly qualified CLD practitioners

According to the questionnaire respondents the main strengths of newly qualified practitioners were (in no particular order):

- Enthusiastic, keen to learn, motivated, commitment, eagerness, fresh approach, flexibility, new ideas, challenging existing staff to reflect on their own practice, sometimes naïve but thoughtful questions, sceptical, creative and open
- Integration of theory and practice
- Up-to-date understanding of theoretical perspectives

Gaps in preparedness for transition to employment

The questionnaire respondents were asked to use the skills and attributes they had referred to earlier to give their view on what were the gap areas for prospective CLD employees.

Table 2: Personal experience and attributes perceived to be biggest gap areas for prospective CLD employees

Personal experience and attributes	CLD Managers	National Agencies primarily Voluntary Sector	Primarily Voluntary Sector Employers
	Percentage (ranking in brackets)	Percentage (ranking in brackets)	Percentage (ranking in brackets)
Sensitivity	10.5	50 (1)	10.5
Confidentiality	0.0	0.0	0.0
Flexibility	36.8 (2)	20.0	36.8 (2)
Dependability	21.1	20.0	21.1
Coping Skills	42.1 (1)	33.3 (3)	42.1 (1)
Communication Skills	31.6 (4)	42.9 (2)	31.6 (4)
Willingness to learn	22.2	16.7	22.2
Time Keeping	10.5	0.0	10.5
Time Management	26.3	16.7	26.3
Honesty/integrity	0.0	0.0	0.0
Working with the Public	26.3	28.6	26.3
Working in a Team	21.1	33.3 (3)	21.1
Empathy Skills	15.8	33.3 (3)	15.8
Record Keeping	36.8 (2)	28.6	36.8 (2)
Creativity	26.3	33.3 (3)	26.3

As can be seen, CLD managers and voluntary sector employers thought that the biggest gaps were in the area of coping skills. The national agencies representatives thought that the biggest gap was in the area of sensitivity. Reassuringly nobody perceived any big gaps in the areas of confidentiality and honesty/integrity.

New skills required of a CLD practitioner for smooth transition in a constantly changing field

The questionnaire respondents considered the following to be the future needs of employers within a broad CLD sector:

- Strong development of professional identity, role and function within a multi-agency context
- Inter-disciplinary work-experience for students on qualifying programmes
- More placement experience
- Graduates with a generic qualification, with experience of all three areas (Youth Work, Adult Learning and Capacity Building and Community Development)
- Experience of wide range of contexts for transferability
- Funding to provide good salaries and increase staff retention
- Funding to release staff to access ongoing training
- Locally based training programmes, part-time, work-based routes, need more alternatives
- Need to boost its academic and professional image through registration body and stringent candidate selection for courses

The focus group participants were asked to reflect on the policy developments and strategic priorities of their organisation over the past 5 years and consider what the main skill requirements might be over the next 5 to 10 years. Newly Qualified Practitioners felt that the requirements needed were Partnership Working, Conflict Management, Facilitation and Meeting Skills, that CLD was a distinct approach to working with people based on a professional value base and needs parity of recognition with related professions, that there should be more emphasis on social policy, community planning and partnership working and focus on contemporary issues such as sustainable development (e.g. climate change, digital inclusion, migrant workers etc). Child Protection is also a big issue and there is a need to make sure that the teaching and learning approach adopted by training providers in the development of a qualifying curriculum is relevant and flexible in this respect. CLD Employers and

Agencies stressed that a CLD worker needs to be multi skilled and able to operate across the broad field of CLD.

Newly Qualified Practitioners said that Web based learning could be used more within qualifying training; that inter-professional training between relevant professionals (e.g., social work, teaching, health) should be further pursued within curriculum design; staff development for tutors should include field-based secondment as well as research opportunities.

CONCLUSION

All participants believed that the role of the CLD practitioners was to work with people to meet their identified needs through purposeful community engagement as critically competent practitioners. The key attributes and abilities were divided into hard and soft skills and knowledge base areas. There was a feeling that NQP were well prepared for employment. NQP felt that qualified training has provided them with a good professional knowledge and skills base.

Current modes of qualifying training delivery were all considered to be beneficial as they give access to a variety of training opportunities and parity across these modes needs to be assured. However, it was emphasised that all training modes should follow the SCQF framework and be progressive within a common articulated framework.

Most participants felt that the competency approach was appropriate for professional development and as a preparation for transition to work. However, the current array of competences should be refreshed in light of developments to take into account the growing diversity of CLD practice. Inter-professional and Partnership Working were two areas highlighted. Further, training providers felt that the competences should be aligned with the SCQF level statements and other relevant frameworks across Europe (e.g., LLUK Occupational Standards for CLD) and embedded in a continuous professional development framework that supports the CLD practitioner from entry to exit, drawing on the notion of progression from novice to expert. Also, participants

emphasised that it was important to focus on soft skills (competencies) which indicate the process rather than the outcome driven hard skills (competences) alone.

Since this study, CLD Standards Council for Scotland was launched in March 2009 and the competences framework has been refreshed in light of changes and developments within the broadening field of CLD. This framework does mention some soft/process skills; however they are mainly implicit within the achievement of competences. The challenge for the training providers now is, firstly, to refresh the competences within their programmes. Secondly, there is still work to be done on how the soft skills/competencies can be made more explicit in the curriculum and to pilot ways of developing these attributes and competencies in qualifying students and those on CPD programmes taking into consideration notions of progressive development. At present the systems of assessing them are through student reflections and practice tutor assessments. We need to question, one, whether these systems give a complete and accurate picture? And two, are attributes something that can be developed and assessed in this manner?

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