




FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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Developing an Accountability Framework for Career Development Practices

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Over the last few years, outcome evaluation of career development services has been discussed extensively. Choosing methods and criteria to rigorously evaluate career interventions results is a complex exercise that needs thorough reflection. This proposed framework is offered as “food for thought” in this regard.



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The continuation of the Food for Thought series was recommended by delegates to Working Connections: The Pan-Canadian Symposium on Career Development, Lifelong-Learning and Workforce Development held in November, 2003. Each article is intended to continue the dialogue started at the Symposium. Contributions are invited. Please submit them to:
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Context:

Following the pan Canadian Symposium, The Canadian Research Working Group on Evidence Based Practice in Career Development was formed with researchers from seven universities, and representatives from CCDF and HRSDC. In September, 2004, the group undertook a preliminary research project to determine the state of evidence based practice in Canada. The results of this study will be published by the end of June, 2005. This initiative is a direct result of recommendations of delegates to the Symposium. The Working Group is also planning a longer range research study in order to develop and test a comprehensive evaluation framework to guide policy and practice development and accountability. This framework which this article describes is an initial contribution towards the longer range objective. Vivian Lalande is a member of this Working Group.

Introduction and Background

The Alberta Symposia on Career Development and Public Policy held in 2002 and 2003 affirmed that the evaluation of career development practices is important for all stakeholders. The Alberta Symposia consisted of a series of forums and working group meetings that included career practitioners, policy makers, and representatives from the private sector. One of the working groups focused on research and evaluation. During these consultations, a need was identified for creating shared understandings of evaluation procedures and the desired outcomes for career development practices. The development of career practitioner competencies regarding evaluation procedures was recognized as important. Policy makers indicated the need to consider a wider range of indicators of effective career development practices and programs. There was agreement that the purpose of effective evaluation of career development services is to provide useful, concrete feedback to program managers, practitioners, policy makers and other interested parties. Stakeholders agreed that career practice is informed by evaluation, but it could be better informed. Service providers agreed that improved evaluation procedures are needed to help them meet the increasing demands from program funding organizations for accountability.

The working group on research and evaluation confirmed the importance of measuring outcomes from a variety of stakeholder perspectives using quantitative and qualitative methods. The group also recognized a primary need for the identification of *predictable* relationships between interventions and outcomes, and the ability to compare interventions across evaluation studies. Three priorities were identified:

- (a) a communications strategy for all stakeholders;
- (b) the clarification of desirable or acceptable outcomes for career development practices; and



- (c) the development of a system for archiving and easily obtaining information about career intervention evaluation research.

The development of improved processes for the evaluation of career development practices has been identified as a priority nationally and internationally (Plant 2001; Maguire and Killeen 2003; Mayston 2002). The development of an accountability framework or taxonomy is a step towards improved evaluation and accountability.

An Accountability framework for career development practices

An accountability framework (see Figure1 at the end of the article) is proposed as a basis for elaborating a comprehensive framework of evaluation for career development services (Huston and Lalande 2004). This model considers 4 categories relevant to evaluation and is based primarily on the work done by Plant (2001) and Maguire and Killeen (2003):

1. The *focus* of the evaluation (clients, programs, larger initiatives, such as public education regarding career development).
2. *Types of career practices* (interventions; strategies, methods of delivery; focus of intervention as either individual, organizational, or societal).
3. *Outcomes* (individual, organizational, social/economic).
4. *Evaluation procedures* (types of evaluation, evaluation indicators)

Focus, the first category consists of the individual, program or larger career development initiative that receives the service(s) and hopefully, experiences some type of change as a result of the service(s). Each subcategory of individual, program or larger initiative needs to be defined. Types of individuals can be defined by socio-demographic data, goals, etc. Types of programs can be defined by client composition, desired outcomes, etc. Types of career development initiatives can be defined by the target populations, specified desired outcomes, etc.

Career practices, the second category refers to the complex variety of career development services that are available. These are largely defined by the Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners (2001) and include definitions of career counselling, career assessment, provision of labour market information, work development and community capacity building to only mention a few. This document seems to be more relevant for individual and program evaluation than for larger career development initiatives. The variety of career development services can be described according to the method of delivery, for example, group counselling, career education curriculum, internet etc. and assessed according to how well the method of delivery matches the intended use.



Assessing how closely the method of delivering an intervention matches how it was intended to be delivered is called “process-based” evaluation (McNamara 1998). The Career *Practices* category includes the elaboration of specific goals related to the types of career practices that are delivered to either individuals, groups or larger populations. The inclusion of goals in this category highlights how evaluation commences at the development stage of a treatment plan. Assessment procedures such as needs assessments, career development inventories, etc. can be used to identify treatment goals leading to the specification of measurable outcomes. This goal specification provides direction for the next category in which evaluation outcomes are defined.

The third category, *outcomes*, includes a variety of outcomes or desired, measurable results of career development services on a continuum from short term to long term. For individuals, examples include increased knowledge, skills, or behaviour changes relevant to their career needs. The Blueprint for Life/Work Designs provides a framework of learning outcomes that could be used to identify criteria related to individual learning outcomes. Other criteria can be identified as relevant for organizations and/or other stakeholders such as program funders, or the community (Obrecht 1999). The benefits for society that are attributed to career development services have been outlined by Mayston (2002) and provide an initial starting point for defining possible societal outcomes.

The final category, *evaluation procedures*, includes the variety of evaluation procedures that are available to assess the quality and effectiveness of career development services. A taxonomy of evaluation terminology needs to be included that provides a list of terms used in evaluation and accountability along with the definitions. The document from the OECD titled *A Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management (2002)* provides a starting point for this part of the framework. Specification of evaluation methods can be provided that includes the linking of specific measures for particular outcomes and/or interventions. Options for measurement tools such as interviews, questionnaires, observations, etc. can be provided along with guidelines for their appropriate use according to the type of client, program or initiative; the activities to be checked; the question to be evaluated; the resources available; and the outcomes to be measured.

Each evaluation procedure also can be described in terms of how to apply it and how to use it to analyze results. Procedures can be identified that increase the reliability and validity of the evaluation results. In all types of evaluation studies, it is important to determine if the treatment actually *caused* the outcome (the principle of causal inference). Causal inference is possible when (a) the treatment (cause) precedes the outcome or change; (b) the cause and effect covary; and (c) it is possible to eliminate other possible causes for the outcome or change (Vingilis and Pederson 2001).

This accountability framework is an input-output model and it is important to note that such models are not necessarily suitable for evaluation of services for all client populations, particularly when considering cost effectiveness (Plant 2001). Clients from diverse backgrounds, who are disadvantaged or have multiple issues, may not show direct benefit from receipt of one generic career development service. Specialized programming or long-term participation in many services may be more appropriate for these clients. Evaluation measures for diverse client populations may need to demonstrate the extent to which the career development strategy or intervention aligns with relevant research and theory (a quality measure). Longitudinal evaluation procedures may also be indicated for these populations.



In order to elaborate a comprehensive framework of career services evaluation procedures, it would be useful to initially choose one area of the framework to develop in greater detail. This would provide guidelines for accountability for one area of career development practice that could be implemented before considering other parts of the framework. The purpose of the project would be to develop an evaluation framework that would identify particular effective evaluation procedures suitable for specific clients and career practices. Consideration would be given to the relevance of diversity to effective evaluation, various stakeholder needs, and how to make the evaluation procedures available to practitioners. The framework could be used to develop a set of evaluation competencies required for practitioners to allow them to integrate effective evaluation into the program design and delivery.

A starting point

This proposed accountability framework for career development practices represents a preliminary conceptualization of how the variety of factors related to evaluation and accountability can be systematically construed. The topics of accountability and evaluation in relation to the large field of career development practice are complex and multifaceted. One could argue that it is impossible to represent this in one framework and the value of this approach is limited, however, levels of complexity can be added to various categories as indicated. Hopefully, this preliminary framework will provide a starting point for future conversations to further elaborate and develop meaningful processes for the evaluation of career development practices.

Biography

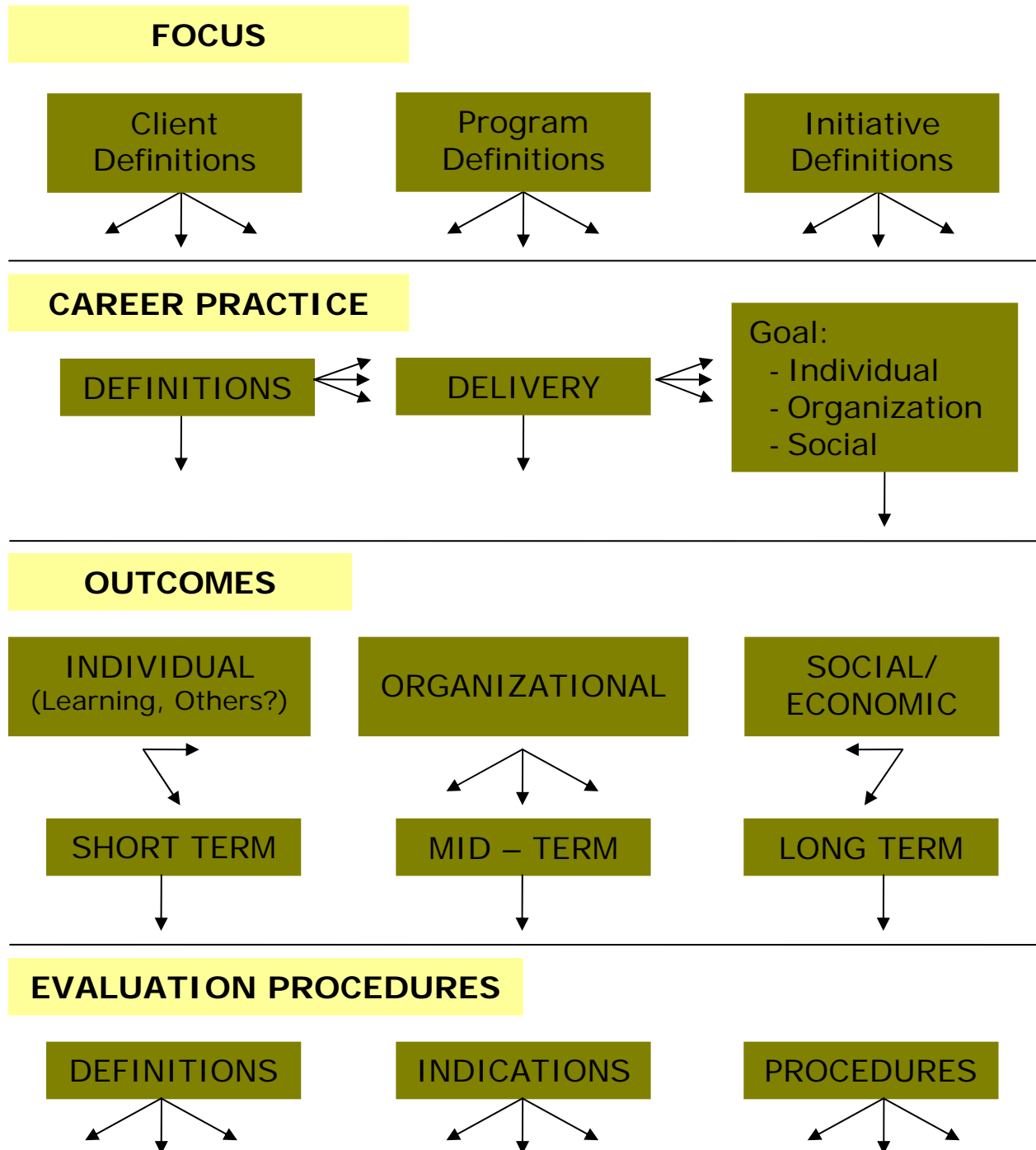
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Figure 1:

ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK



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