Career Development Research for Evidence-based Policy

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Given that the current issue of the *Australian Journal of Career Development* is devoted to career development and social inclusion, it is appropriate to consider the contribution that the field of career development can make to national policy agenda and formulations on the basis of research. At the *International Symposium for Career Development and Public Policy* held in 2009 in Wellington, New Zealand, there was a call for better exploiting the evidence of impact that career development interventions have upon individuals, for the purposes of formulating public policies and programs. Indeed, there is already a quantum of empirical evidence indicative of the capacity of career development interventions to make significant changes in the everyday lives of individuals. Accordingly, it is worth considering how this ever-growing evidence-base can be extended to audiences and applications beyond the career development profession itself, so as to make additional contributions to the macro-level of fundamental areas such as education, employment and social inclusion; and this point is particularly relevant for those targets identified by the Council of Australian Governments.

What is presented below is a précis of an evidence-base to illustrate its currency and how it can be used at an institutional level. In this particular case, the précis refers to how career development research can be used to improve students' educational experiences and outcomes—indeed a matter of national significance given the current world-of-work and international issues of labour supply.

Evidence-based Practice

Folsom and Reardon's (2003) review of research conducted over a 25-year period summarised the evidence of career development learning having a positive impact upon educational outcomes such as selecting a degree major, course satisfaction, retention and graduation rates, and grade-point average. Moreover, it is evident that career-related self-efficacy, occupational decidedness, interests, and personality traits predict academic performance and engagement with studies (Steven D. Brown, et al., 2008; Rottinghaus, Lindley, Green, & Borgen, 2002; Sandler, 2000; Scott & Ciani, 2008) and that career education improves career decision-making skills, career decidedness, and vocational identity (Folsom & Reardon, 2003; Fouad, Cotter, & Kantamneni, 2009). In other words, career development learning can effectively facilitate students'entry into and transit through education, and onward toward the world-of-work. These are not trivial outcomes. Consider the potential loss of educational resources and opportunities brought about by students' poor decision-making and not fully engaging with studies: higher failure rates and drop-out rates, and failure to prepare for the world-of-work. More importantly, consider the obverse situation in which a higher number of students have made clear career plans, know why they are studying their courses, and know how to prepare for the world-of-work. Research into individual career counselling—a specific type of career development intervention used in educational settings—has amassed significant evidence of its impact (Kirschner, Hoffman, & Hill, 1994; Oliver & Spokane, 1988; Rochlen, Milburn, & Hill, 2004; Whiston & Oliver, 2005; Whiston, Sexton, & Lasoff, 1998). Again, it must be emphasised that what is presented here is a small sample of the evidence in the scientific literature of the field. Given the volume of evidence, it is no longer appropriate to ask the generic question of whether career development works—it does: for some people, with certain problems, responsive to particular interventions, provided by some practitioners, seen at some particular point in time.

Accordingly, there is scope to determine how best to implement particular types of interventions (cf. Heppner & Heppner, 2003) so as to achieve the greatest degree of impact, and to design and critically test new interventions based upon relevant evidence so as to enable the field to progress with an ever evolving world-of-work. This type of research would better enable the formulation of evidence-based policy that targets particular problems experienced by particular groups of citizens.

Let us go somewhat further with this educational research. If, on the basis of current evidence, we assume that career development interventions (e.g., career counselling, career education classes, the provision of quality career information) have a useful impact upon students' experiences and outcomes of education—primary, secondary, and tertiary—then we should ask what can be done to optimise the application of career development interventions in educational settings to concordantly enhance experiences and outcomes? By way of example, consider *work-integrated learning* as it is implemented in higher education. While there are concerns regarding part-time work undertaken by undergraduate students, particularly for those whose financial circumstances warrant their seeking income to subsist (McInnis & Hartley, 2002), there is evidence of the positive impact of work when it is combined with studies (Derous & Ryan, 2008). Work-integrated learning is not simply a matter of bolting coursework and part-time work together; there must be a sound foundation to its curriculum (Patrick, et al., 2008) and it must address how students might best engage with their work and learning so as to achieve optimal experiences and outcomes according to their limitations, aspirations and use of available resources. Given the evidence that career development learning can serve as a specific personal pedagogy that improves career decision-making skills, career decidedness, and vocational identity (Folsom & Reardon, 2003; Fouad, et al., 2009) it could be used to facilitates students getting the most out of their work-integrated learning by enabling them to self-assess their capacities for the world-of-

work, and then enhance those capacities through formal coursework experiences that are targeted toward enabling their transition into and through the world-of-work (Smith, et al., 2009). Such an approach is well served by a career development learning framework which ultimately aims to facilitate students' career self-management as a *graduate attribute* (Bridgstock, 2009). So, in summary, we can see how the evidence-base for career development can be used to inform curriculum, in this case work-integrated learning (Smith et al.), and then be extended higher to inform institutional goals and outcomes pertaining to graduate attributes and employability.

Evidence-based Policy

Governments and educational institutions should not implement initiatives on the basis of goodwill and good ideas alone; there must be a firm evidence-base to formulate rational policy (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004). There are literally thousands of empirical studies within the scientific literature that constitute the multidimensional corpus of evidence accrued for the career development field, and there are those empirical studies that bring thematic coherence to the many studies through statistical procedures such as meta-analysis (e.g., S D Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000). But, is this good enough to properly inform governments (and institutions) which have to make strategic decisions and implement programs? How could this career development research be inter-related with government's own research and data on policy indicators? It is not the role of government to conduct career development research per se; this responsibility belongs to the field's community of scholars and practitioners. Yet, it is government's role to provide for the infrastructure which facilitates the sustainable production and application of evidence that is useful for its formulation of policy and programs, and for establishing systems that enable it to achieve its policy and program goals. However, government may not be in a position to readily consume and interpret the multitude of studies as evidence for its policy formulations;

it may prefer to have the raw research presented in a condensed form that answers specific policy-related questions (see Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004). Operationally, this would entail the collection, collation and review of evidence on a large-scale—national and international—and then the coordination of its dissemination in forms that make it suitable for various critical audiences according to their needs. Beyond the functions of a clearinghouse, this would require an organisation which provides focused leadership and strategic advice that appropriately informs government policies and programs targeting key outcomes for education, employment, and social inclusion.

If such an organisational entity were to be established with the support of government, it might consist of specialists in the career development field (e.g., researchers, practitioners) and those from other disciplinary fields (e.g., economics, labour market studies) that have a rational link to the objectives of career development field (e.g., improving educational progress, developing employability, recovering from injury, facilitating well-being in the balance of work and non-work). Furthermore, it would be appropriate to consider how the field's peak professional regulatory body, the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA), might take a leading role in such infrastructure.

What is proposed here is an initiative that will transform the capacity of the career development profession that makes millions of micro-contributions measured as real differences in the lives of so many individuals around the world who experience career development learning in its various forms. Its capacity would be enhanced so that the career development profession can responsibly present evidence-based contributions to the formulation of policy and programs that affect the lives of citizens on the macro-scale in terms of education, employment and social inclusion. The call for the better exploiting the evidence of impact that career development works, at the *International Symposium for Career Development and Public Policy*, is not at all unreasonable. Indeed, governments

should not be expected to plan and act in the absence of evidence, and systems that enable

effective utilisation of evidence. The challenge to be addressed is how the profession and the

government can collaborate to serve its needs and those of the nation. Perhaps the true

measure of impact is what we do with the evidence already in our hands.

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