COMMITTEE OF DIRECTORS OF STUDIES IN GUIDANCE COUNSELLING

COUNSELLING COMPETENCIES FOR GUIDANCE COUNSELLING EDUCATION PROGRAMMES: INTERIM GUIDELINES

Convened and Chaired by the National Centre for Guidance in Education - NCGE

March 2011
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A. BACKGROUND TO THE GUIDELINES

The Committee of Directors of Studies in Guidance Counselling (CDSGC) is convened and Chaired by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE). The Committee (see Appendices 1 and 2) meets four times a year to examine policy, social and practice issues in guidance counselling and the implications of these for the development, delivery, content and review of initial education and training programmes in guidance counselling.

These guidelines arise from discussions at recent meetings of the Committee. Concern was expressed about the lack of clarity concerning the counselling competencies of the guidance practitioner. There was particular unease about ambiguity concerning role boundaries.

The outcome of our discussions is the present document, which is an attempt to identify the minimum competencies required by students for their counselling role. The guidelines are drafted mainly to assist the programme providers in the counselling dimension of education and training for guidance counsellors and are subject to ongoing review. However, we hope that they will also provide a reference point for students and other relevant stakeholders (e.g. the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, the National Centre for Guidance in Education, the Department of Education and Skills).

No initial education/training programme in guidance and counselling can focus exclusively on counselling, since this domain represents only one aspect of the education/training provided. However, while our programmes vary in their emphasis, counselling is one important focus of them all. These guidelines are intended to apply to one-to-one and group activities with both adolescents and adults. The Committee of Directors of Studies in Guidance Counselling may review these guidelines when and where appropriate.

B. RATIONALE FOR COUNSELLING COMPETENCY GUIDELINES

Competency in counselling is an important component in guidance counsellor education/training programmes (Wannan & McCarthy, 2005). In addition to academic performance, students are expected to develop relevant personal qualities and be able to use counselling skills appropriately in the practice

\[\text{1} \text{ NCGE is an agency of the Department of Education and Skills operating under the aegis of Leargas, whose role includes promoting the implementation of best practice in guidance and counselling in accordance with the requirements of the Education Act 1998, and advising on high quality and relevant initial guidance counselling education and training.}\]
of guidance. Given the potential damage to clients where practitioners are insufficiently prepared, guidelines can serve as a useful benchmark for client work.

In 2008 the Council of the European Union included counselling in its resolution on the integration of lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies. Irish sources (IGC, 2008; NCGE, 1996) define the guidance function in terms of three interlocking activities: personal, educational and vocational/career counselling. The multifaceted nature of the guidance counsellor’s role is also expressed in the National Guidance Forum’s definition of guidance:

Guidance facilitates people throughout their lives to manage their own educational, training, occupational, personal, social, and life choices so that they reach their full potential and contribute to the development of a better society (2007, p. 6).

Much of the current literature on guidance and counselling emphasises a “whole person” (integrative) approach in addressing the guidance needs of clients (Amundson, Harris-Bowlsbey & Niles, 2009; Zunker, 2008; Nathan & Hill, 2006; Kidd, 2006). Clients may present with an educational or vocational issue, but exploration of the issue frequently leads to personal issues requiring counselling (McCarthy, 2004, p. 175).

These guidelines identify a number of counselling competencies, general and specific, that student guidance counsellors ought to aspire to if they are to be effective in assisting adolescent or adult clients. The “whole person” approach implies that these competencies will be just as necessary for educational and career issues as for personal ones.

The responsibility for curriculum design rests primarily with the institutions offering the education/training programmes. All our programmes approach competency development differently, utilising the strengths of the teaching staff and institutional resources and emphasising the unique local needs and circumstances of students. However, each programme is designed to provide future guidance counsellors with the basic knowledge, skills and attitudes that, when coupled with practice and experience, prepare them appropriately for their role. This preparation leads not only to the acquisition of professional competencies, but also to a clearer understanding of the counselling role.

C. COMPE TENCE AND REFLEXIVITY

Competence involves marshalling knowledge, skills and attitudes to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources in a particular context. The guidelines are designed to clarify for programme providers, students and other relevant stakeholders the counselling element of the guidance counsellor’s role. The knowledge, skills, and attitudes identified here are regarded as prerequisites for competent work with clients on personal issues.

In focussing on both the educative and training dimension of preparation for the counselling role, we are adapting the insight of the educational philosopher, Richard Pring (2004, p. 72), on the dual purpose of teacher education and training. As applied to guidance counselling, this insight indicates that a well-trained practitioner is useful, but an educated one is better - one whose competence is informed by an intellectual grasp of the nature of guidance and counselling, of the social context of the client and of the values worth pursuing. Hence, practitioners can be educated through training - that is, training conducted in a particular way, through the acquisition of critical reflection on what the practitioner is doing and through a perspective which places the practitioner’s specific role within a wider context of
values and changing circumstances (Communiqué of the European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training, the European Social Partners and the European Commission, December 2010).

In presenting these guidelines, we advise caution about its capacity to fully specify the qualities of a competent practitioner. In practice, the guidance counsellor’s personal qualities and disposition towards clients, and the nature of the counselling process and the counsellor-client relationship, cannot be easily verified or measured against a set of competency guidelines. Developing competence in counselling is a lifelong task, requiring ongoing commitment to the process of personal and professional development. Education and experience affect the depth of the individual counsellor’s knowledge, skills and attitudes. Our goal is to help ensure that every guidance counsellor possesses the basis for competent practice. Although specific skills vary across settings, the attitudinal components tend to remain constant. The development of effective practice in counselling depends on the presence of attitudes reflecting openness to alternative approaches, appreciation of diversity, and willingness to change.

The guidelines require guidance counsellors to reach a level of personal and professional maturity that allows them to take different perspectives, make independent judgments and take responsibility for their actions. Underlying these guidelines is the notion of reflective practice in the counselling process and the need for individuals to be reflective practitioners. Reflective practice is ‘best seen as a successive process of analysing and reanalysing important episodes of activity, drawing on multiple levels of representation’ (Stedmon, J. and Dallos, 2009, p 4). Thinking reflectively demands an engagement with the counselling process. It includes reflection in and on practice (Schön, 1983). Reflection in practice is akin to ‘thinking on our feet’, attending to our experiences, connecting with our feelings, and attending to the theories used in the counselling process. Reflection on action entails looking back over the counselling process and involves spending time exploring why we acted as we did and what was happening in a counselling episode. In so doing we develop sets of questions and ideas about our activities and practice. For example, having mastered a particular counselling technique, reflection on practice allows practitioners to think cyclically about this technique, assimilate it, relate it to other aspects of practice, change or adapt it and so begin the process again in a new cycle of feeling, thinking and doing.

As an element of reflective practice, reflexivity implies the use of metacognitive skills (thinking about thinking), creative abilities, and taking a critical stance. It is not just about how practitioners think, but also about how they construct experience more generally, including their thoughts, feelings and actions concerning their counselling role. For Etherington reflexivity is a key skill of the counsellor. This involves:

An ability to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications and understandings. To be reflexive we need to be aware of our personal responses and to be able to make choices about how to use them. We also need to be aware of the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we live and work and to understand how these impact on the ways we interpret our world (2004, p. 19).

Reflexivity involves not just the ability to apply a basic method routinely, but also the ability to deal with change, learn from experience, and think and act from a critical stance (Haverkamp 2005; Rennie 2004). Mc Leod sees reflexivity as the “awareness of self in relationship” which allows the counsellor “to monitor their own reactions to the person and to use this information to build a more effective helping relationship” (2007, p.132).

At the heart of the guidelines is the ability of individuals to think critically for themselves, seek moral and intellectual maturity, and take responsibility for their learning and their actions.
The guidelines adopt the following definition of counselling in the context of guidance:

In counselling, the guidance practitioner gives professional support to help those experiencing personal difficulties and to promote their personal growth and wellbeing. The process emphasises the establishment of a strong, trusting relationship between counsellor and client. It uses a variety of approaches based on theory established through research and practice, ethical standards, and recognition of human diversity. The counsellor may work with individuals or groups.

A competency based approach to counselling, as used in these guidelines, refers to standards which can be evaluated. However, these standards must always be interpreted in contexts where guidance counsellors engage with the “whole person” and his or her well-being. Many of the counselling competencies in these guidelines build upon those identified in the report of the National Guidance Forum (2007, pp. 15-16).

In the discussion above, we have referred to knowledge, skills and attitudes. The formation of a trusting relationship with the client is also crucial in counselling. Therefore, we propose that the guidance counsellor should possess and demonstrate competence in the following four areas: (1) Knowledge, (2) The Counselling Relationship, (3) Counselling Skills, and (4) Professional and Ethical Attitudes and Practice, with each area further subdivided into specific competencies. However, competencies should not be viewed in isolation: each competency qualifies each other competency, and each practitioner achieves a unique integration.

1. **KNOWLEDGE**

   *Guidance counsellors should seek to possess and integrate knowledge of:*

   1.1 Major theories of counselling and psychotherapy;
   1.2 Major theories of the functioning and leadership of experiential groups;
   1.3 Life span developmental psychology and its relationship to counselling;
   1.4 The main factors underlying personal development;
   1.5 Contextual and systemic factors that affect human functioning, including social, biological and family factors;
   1.6 Factors affecting wellbeing and distress;
   1.7 The nature of human and cultural diversity with reference to such factors as age, class, race, gender, ethnicity, levels of ability, language, spiritual and religious beliefs, educational achievement and sexuality;
   1.8 Current professional developments relevant to practice settings;
   1.9 Research underlying effective practice.
2. THE COUNSELLING RELATIONSHIP

Guidance counsellors should seek to exercise the following competencies when working with client(s):

2.1 Explain the scope of practice and attend to clients’ expectations of counselling including the responsibilities of both the guidance counsellor and client in the counselling relationship;

2.2 Explain confidentiality and its limits and obtain informed consent where required;

2.3 Be able to contract and set boundaries appropriately;

2.4 Develop the ability and the confidence to establish and maintain a collaborative, congruent and effective relationship with the client informed by a theoretical framework;

2.5 Demonstrate core conditions of the counselling relationship (empathy, genuineness and unconditional positive regard);

2.6 Employ an eclectic and balanced approach to assisting clients by attending to sensations, feelings, thoughts and behaviour;

2.7 Demonstrate a range of individual and group counselling and communication skills such as active listening, clarifying, focusing, paraphrasing, questioning, probing, reflecting feelings, and goal setting;

2.8 Pay attention to the significance of non-verbal communication and respond appropriately;

2.9 Help clients to change the focus of discourse (i) from past towards present, (ii) from others towards self, (iii) from facts towards feelings, and (iv) from reflection towards appropriate action, while remaining sensitive to their views regarding what constitutes appropriate change in their lives;

2.10 Have the confidence to challenge clients when it is appropriate to do so, and to be challenged in turn;

2.11 Recognise and manage conflict in the client counsellor relationship;

2.12 Monitor the quality of the client-counsellor relationship on an ongoing basis;

2.13 Be able to provide clients with accessible explanations about their approach and techniques;

2.14 Demonstrate an ability to appropriately support clients on a range of issues such as bereavement, bullying, health issues, relationship issues, suicide and self-harm, transitional difficulties, stress, personal/sexual identity and peer pressure;

2.15 Facilitate clients in identifying options, making decisions, resolving difficulties and making a personal life plan;

2.16 Identify and respond to clients’ vulnerabilities, strengths, resilience and resources;

2.17 Demonstrate an awareness of and sensitivity to the unique familial, social, cultural, and economic circumstances of clients and their racial/ethnic, gender, age, physical, and learning differences;
2.18 Be aware when losing grounding and take appropriate action (which may include re-grounding, seeking supervision, or referring the client to other professionals);

2.19 Recognise when to conclude counselling and facilitate effective closure process.

3. COUNSELLING SKILLS

Guidance counsellors should seek to exercise the following competencies in the process of working with client(s):

3.1 Employ a mode of counselling, with both individuals and groups that is based on a framework of counselling theory and lifespan developmental psychology;

3.2 Work within their level of skill and knowledge in addressing the concerns of clients;

3.3 Be able to prioritise issues, structure and summarise a session, and review the process of counselling periodically with the client;

3.4 Monitor progress toward goals;

3.5 Assist clients in developing a sense of awareness and self-worth;

3.6 Develop an ability to assist individuals and groups to deal with conflict;

3.7 Take into consideration culturally relevant resources for use with clients.

3.8 Identify community resources relevant to client needs.

3.9 Be able to remain grounded in the presence of client distress (including grief, fear, shame and anger);

3.10 Evaluate overall outcomes and the practitioner’s role in the process.

4. PROFESSIONAL AND ETHICAL ATTITUDES AND PRACTICE

Guidance counsellors should seek to exercise the following competencies in professional practice:

4.1 Recognise the professional responsibility of the guidance counsellor to engage with ongoing supervision;

4.2 Demonstrate evidence of evaluating and enhancing their counselling practice by engaging in ongoing supervision, proportional to the counselling workload;

4.3 Develop and implement methods to assess the overall effectiveness of their counselling role;

4.4 Be open to ongoing reflection and dialogue on their own life narrative and its impact on the counselling relationship and have dealt with, and continue to deal with on an ongoing basis, major unresolved/vulnerable/distressing issues in their own lives through appropriate means (e.g. counselling/psychotherapy, personal growth work);
4.5 Take note of the philosophy/mission of the institution where they are working and develop a professional philosophy consistent with this setting;

4.6 Demonstrate knowledge of the professional standards, policies, and practices which govern practice in their work setting;

4.7 Engage in appropriate continuing professional development on an ongoing basis;

4.8 Recognise their own personal and professional limitations and act appropriately to seek supervision or professional support;

Notice if they are not fit to see clients, and desist from practice for an appropriate period;

Differentiate the role of the guidance counsellor from that of other professionals while retaining the capacity to work collaboratively with others;

Be aware when it is appropriate to refer to more specialised professionals, and do so when (a) the client is significantly disturbed and/or distressed, and/or (b) they themselves feel ungrounded or not competent to deal with presenting issues (for example, suicidal thinking, self harm, sexual abuse, eating disorders, addiction);

4.12 Establish secure, effective and ethical systems for maintaining the confidentiality of client records;

4.13 Establish procedures to deal effectively with client crisis and emergency situations;

4.14 Resolve ethical dilemmas in a manner consistent with professional standards;

4.15 Comply with any legal requirements governing the practice of counselling.


**ADDITIONAL SOURCES**


PROGRAMMES REPRESENTED ON THE COMMITTEE OF DIRECTORS OF STUDIES IN GUIDANCE COUNSELLING

- Dublin City University (DCU):
  - M.Sc. Degree in Guidance and Counselling

- National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM):
  - Diploma/ Postgraduate Diploma in Arts (Adult Guidance and Counselling)
  - M.Ed. Degree in Adult Guidance and Counselling
  - Postgraduate Diploma in School Guidance and Counselling
  - M.Ed. Degree in School Guidance and Counselling

- University College, Cork (UCC):
  - M.A. Degree in Applied Psychology (Guidance Counselling)

- University of Limerick (UL):
  - Graduate Diploma in Guidance Counselling
  - M.A. Degree in Guidance Counselling

- Trinity College, Dublin (TCD):
  - M.Ed. Degree in Educational Guidance and Counselling
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The Drafting Committee would also like to extend its thanks to former members and those who contributed to the development of this document:

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