

Central Regional Hub-funded project

Project Report



Employability and Professional development: Counselling students' perceptions of counsellor education and beyond

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Table of Contents

Project Summary.....	4
Methodology.....	4
Results and Findings.....	4
Information about graduates' work.....	4
Counsellor development.....	5
Key elements for counsellor development.....	6
Formal professional development.....	7
Key recommendations for good practice	7
References	8
Acknowledgments.....	8

Project Summary

This research aimed to consult students who had completed the postgraduate distance counsellor education programme (Hermansson, 1988) at Massey University within the last five years about how different elements of the counsellor education/Professional Development workshops prepared them for:

- Continuing development as reflective practitioners
- Professional employment
- Gaining professional membership and appropriate progression in the guidance and counselling field.

Methodology

The study used mixed methods: firstly, an online questionnaire adapted from Miller (2007) was sent out to 75 graduates of the programme and secondly, telephone semi-structured interviews. The qualitative data derived from both the online questionnaire and the 3 telephone interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 2003; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). The survey initially gained a poor response rate. The New Zealand Association of Counsellors provided current contact details for members who had given permission and these were contacted again. Finally, remaining non-respondents were mailed hard copies of the questionnaire. The final response rate of 31%, while disappointing, seems typical in light of two earlier studies of counselling graduates from other New Zealand universities (Miller, 2007; Cornforth & Sewell, 2004).

Results and Findings

Information about graduates' work

Year and qualification completed

All 22 participants graduated in 2000 or later with eleven questionnaires completed by graduates from the most recent three years (2006 – 2008). Fifteen (71%) had graduated with Master's degrees and 6 (29%) with a Postgraduate Diploma. 1 participant did not respond to this question.

Present position

22 graduates responded to a question about current employment. All but two (91%) were employed in full-time paid counselling or counselling related roles. One (4%) was employed part-time as a counsellor and one (4%) was not employed. Seven respondents (32%) were engaged full or part time as school guidance counsellors, six (27%) were employed by community agencies and eight (36%) were in part or full time self-employment as private practitioners. Of the latter, three indicated that they held registration as ACC counsellors and three were engaged as counsellors for the Family Court.

Professional membership

Of the 22 respondents, 17 (77%) indicated that they were members of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) with one about to apply for membership. Other professional bodies represented were the New Zealand Nurses Association (1), Australia New Zealand Association of Social Workers (1), Post Primary Teachers Association (1), Career Practitioners Association of New Zealand (1), Careers and Transition Education Association (Aotearoa) (1), Drug and Alcohol Practitioners Association (1) and the Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association (1).

Hours of counselling

There was a spread in the number of counselling contact hours with seven counsellors (32%)

engaged more than 20 hours a week and an identical number for less than 10 hours. Five (23%) indicated contact hours ranged between 10 and 15 and three (14%) had between 15 and 20 counselling hours per week. The lower contact hours tended to be associated with graduates who held complementary teaching, lecturing or management roles.

Counsellor development

What helped you decide on this university counsellor education programme?

There were 19 responses to this question. The two most consistent reasons were accessibility because of the delivery mode or proximity to campus (fourteen graduates (63%)) and eclectic approach taught (four (21%)).

Future career plans

There were 21 responses to a question about future career plans with eleven (52%) graduates indicating that they were considering or planning to continue, expand or move into private practice. Three (14%) planned further graduate study toward advanced degrees. For the most part, the remainder planned to remain in their current positions or areas of work with some shifts in focus.

Areas of development during and after training

Counsellors were invited to rate their development on seven dimensions using a ten point scale where 1 was extremely uninformed/undeveloped and 10 was extremely knowledgeable/developed. They were asked to do so retrospectively for two previous career points: before training and after training; as well as for now. The mean values of those responses are displayed in the chart in Figure 1. These data demonstrate increases in self-assessed knowledge and development across all seven facets and those advances continue both during and after training. The largest gains during training appear in the areas of generic counselling skills, specialized intervention skills and the sense of being a professional counsellor.

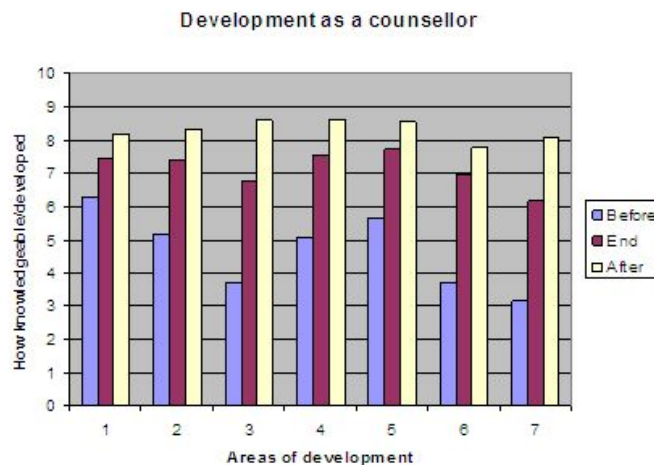


Figure 1.

Key to areas of development

- 1 Personal values related to counselling
- 2 Professional values related to counselling
- 3 Sense of being a professional counsellor
- 4 Personal growth related to being a counsellor
- 5 Growth as a person
- 6 Generic counselling skills
- 7 Specialised intervention skills

Integration of an eclectic approach in practice

Research participants were asked to what extent they were still using the core eclectic framework learned during their professional training. There were nineteen replies to this question. Twelve (63%) responses point to the approach as underpinning much of their work. A further six (32%) suggest they use it to some extent. One respondent said they no longer use it at all.

Key elements for counsellor development

What was helpful

When asked what specific aspects of the programme the counsellors found most helpful, nine (47%) of the seventeen respondents mentioned the live and filmed counselling sessions with trainer feedback provided during the on campus workshops. Six graduates (35%) mentioned the cultural and particularly the bi-cultural input. Three of these specifically mentioned the learning from the noho marae (overnight stay on a marae). In addition four answers (21%) mentioned Kiva (therapeutic group-work) and three (16%) highlighted the trainer workplace visits.

What was unhelpful

When also asked what was not helpful, 6 of 17 counsellors (35%) identified Kiva. There were some varied comments about some of the workshop lectures and content.

What we should include that was not there

The strongest theme here from 14 responses was for more depth on specific approaches and perhaps less of them, more on couple, family and organisational work, particularly the former and some call for greater input from a human development perspective and also more from a medical model mental health view.

What we should do more of that was perhaps there already

Five of 16 responses (31%) wanted more depth on specific intervention strategies and four (25%) of the replies suggested more Kiva therapeutic group work.

What we should drop from the programme content?

4 of 15 responses suggested that Kiva should be dropped or changed. There were no other strong themes though several comments about some of the lecture style presentations were again present.

Helpful professional development events during but outside training

Asked to describe helpful events outside the programme, nine of seventeen (53%) indicated clinical supervision as important, seven (41%) indicated their placements and counselling practice were key elements of their learning, six (35%) included personal life experiences, six (35%) mentioned external trainings and four (24%) found professional networking beneficial.

Rating the learning events

In an attempt to rank what we saw as the likely significant learning events both within and without the programme, we asked the participants to rate sixteen experiences encountered during their development as professional counsellors on a 10 point scale of importance/usefulness. The mean scores for these are displayed in graphic form in Figure 2. We have omitted the category 'other' from the graph as it only drew two responses. These results tend to replicate the data from the more open questions portrayed above. Most significantly, 90% or more respondents rated the following at greater than 7: fieldwork counselling practice, fieldwork supervision, the workshop video processing with trainers, and learning they did for themselves. Not evident in the qualitative data, 88% also rated self-reflection at greater than 7. Conversely, and not manifest here because we did not include it, was the importance of the cultural/bi-cultural learning experiences that was a strong theme in the qualitative data.

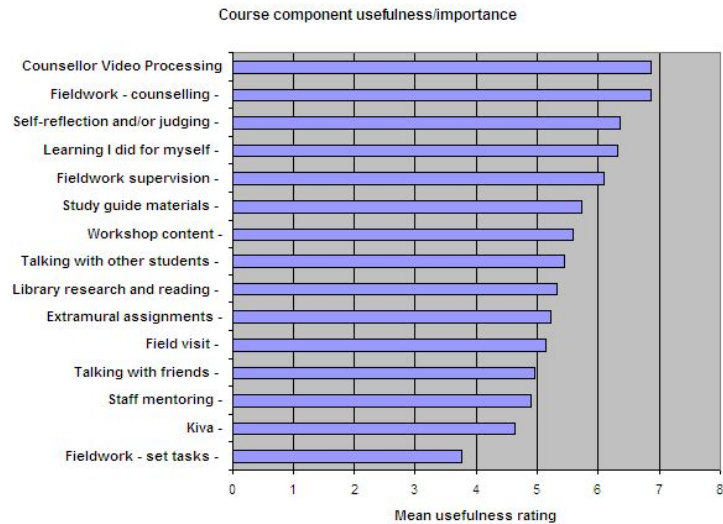


Figure 2

Formal professional development

We asked participants to list the significant activities (e.g. books read, articles read, conferences attended, courses attended, seminars and workshops attended, seminars or workshops offered/delivered, etc) and to assess how these activities have improved their counselling. This resulted in 17 responses and a diverse and extensive range of books, workshops, conferences and other professional development activities. The strongest evidence from this question was that all respondents were engaged in extensive ongoing learning and professional development.

Key recommendations for good practice

Information provided by participants, alongside other sources, has led to the following recommendations for good practice:

- There is a need for educators to consider how programme content can be made more relevant to the requirements of private practice.
- Further research is suggested to establish what aspects of students' bicultural experience were helpful and how these contributed to their sense of being competent practitioners.
- An emphasis on reflective journal writing as foundational for professional learning from practice is recommended. This is probably in preference to personal therapy.
- The findings have informed curricula and pedagogical changes in the practicum element of the counsellor education programmes at Massey University. Notably, we have reduced the requirement to engage in intensive therapeutic group work in favour of expanding the focus of developing good, independent, reflective practice. Thus, the teaching model aims more for autonomous self-discovery for life-long professional learning and development. The teaching team, while retaining an integrative model as previously taught, are revising the nature of that to a more pluralistic and flexible approach that is likely to better serve graduates in a changing future professional environment. This is being designed to more readily accommodate the key themes indicated by this research.

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Acknowledgments

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