

# Progression measurement in Adult Guidance in Ireland: a contested discourse

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## **Abstract**

*This article discusses the findings of a research study on the longitudinal measurement of individual progression in the Irish Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI). The research was underpinned by a critical constructivist methodology in its examination of the three main discourses of the client, practitioner, and policy maker in the field of adult guidance. In line with the current discourse on the role of the user in quality assurance, a specific focus of the study was an analysis of the client's contribution to the design of a quality tracking system for outcome measurement. The implications for policy, practice and research in the adult guidance sector in Ireland will be explored in this paper.*

## **Introduction**

This paper explores findings from a longitudinal case study that examined the development of appropriate methodologies to measure the long-term outcomes for clients of the Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI). The AEGI was established in 2000 by the Department of Education and Science (DES, 2000) as a support measure for adults accessing education. In addressing the main research question of how progression is measured in the current longitudinal tracking system in the AEGI the study examined a number of specific issues. These issues relate to definitions of outcomes, rationale for measurement and the development of suitable methodologies for outcome evaluation within the context of current policy objectives informing adult guidance practice.

The analysis of the impact of interventions is now a priority in the Irish guidance sector which is primarily driven by an economic agenda and the need to justify investment in publicly funded services. Although the advancement of

adult educational guidance is still relatively new in Ireland, it is now evident that appropriate mechanisms are required in the AEGI to evaluate the long-term outcomes of provision. Such propositions reflect a broader discourse on outcome measurement and the need to develop performance indicators and benchmarks in career guidance at a national, European and international level. However, an important critical discourse has emerged on the difficulties involved in outcome measurement for evaluation of the efficacy of interventions and long-term impact on the individual and society.

The overall aim of the research study was to consider the development of a 'best practice' framework for the longitudinal tracking of individual progression in the AEGI. As the focus of the research was primarily methodological, it explored claims that the current methods employed to measure long-term outcomes involving quantitative, objective indicators are insufficient as they disregard the subjective experiences of clients. At present, the Department of Education and Science (DES) employs a top-down, quantitative approach in the AEGI to monitor clients' progression in terms of the hard outcomes of education and employment attainment. These outcomes are tracked and monitored through the AEGI's national database, the Adult Guidance Management System (AGMS). One of the specific objectives of the study was to address an identified gap between policy and practice in the field, namely, harnessing the voice of the user in the quality assurance process (NGF, 2007a). Specifically, it evaluated the client's contribution to the design of a quality tracking system to measure progression in the AEGI. This paper will examine existing research in the field, present the methodological approach and findings of the study and then discuss the implications for policy, practice and research.

### **Background of Research**

The necessity for individuals of all ages to safeguard their career paths in the face of growing globalisation is now at the heart of national, European and international guidance policy discourse. The development of adult guidance in Ireland has been and still remains to be influenced by education and labour market policies at a national, European and international level. Adult guidance is firmly positioned within the lifelong guidance paradigm to achieve the three OECD public policy goals of lifelong learning, labour market and social equity (NGF, 2007a). Lifelong guidance refers to the provision of guidance throughout the lifespan to help citizens manage transitions between education, training and work as a consequence of the changing nature of labour markets (Sultana,

2008). The necessity for the development of quality assurance and standards in guidance provision is now a key policy goal to support lifelong career transitions for citizens (Council of the European Union, 2008; NGF, 2007b).

Key arguments for monitoring and evaluation in education and guidance are accountability, improvement and the regulation of outcomes (Scheerens et al, 2003). Since its development in 2000, the AEGI has expanded to forty national services and undergone a series of developmental changes. Such changes have been influenced by the needs of the guidance services on the ground and the requirements of the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) and the DES. This has included formative evaluation in 2005 and summative evaluation in 2008.

The impetus for this case study arose from an earlier quantitative study which I carried out for the Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults (REGSA) in 2005. REGSA is an AEGI project based in the Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). The 2005 study found that although there are merits in using a primarily quantitative approach to measure and analyse the outcomes of guidance for a large cohort of adults, there are significant methodological limitations. Fundamentally, the analysis produced objective results that downplayed the subjective and contextual experiences of the clients' progression over time. I believed that further elucidation through an interpretive approach was needed to examine the long-term outcomes of guidance intervention for clients of the service.

The inadequacy of using a positivistic approach to evaluate long-term outcomes is becoming more and more recognised in the field (Bimrose, 2006; Reid, 2006; Savickas, 2000). Increasingly, there have been calls for more democratic approaches which reflect the clients' subjective experiences and their engagement in the evaluation process (Plant, 2005). As the adoption of new methodologies to evaluate provision still has to be coherently addressed within the AEGI the case study focused on addressing this current deficit. Whilst the clients were the primary data source, the perspectives of practitioners and policy makers on the complexities of outcome measurement were also explicated.

The findings from existing research indicate that the analysis of individual progression is part of a wider debate about the development of quality standards and evaluation of the long-term outcomes of guidance intervention. Quality in

guidance is measured for a number of reasons which include political motivations, securing funding, measuring learner progression, service improvement, monitoring, strategic planning, practice/policy development and the efficient use of public funds (Sultana, 2008; Watt, 1998). Recommendations to address the diffuseness of quality standard approaches include the introduction of monitoring and feedback mechanisms, criteria for the establishment of performance targets, and the involvement of users in the design, implementation and evaluation of quality assurance systems (OECD, 2004).

However, a critical discourse has emerged in the guidance field on the evaluation of the economic outcomes of guidance intervention. Consensus still needs to be reached on specific performance indicators and benchmarks that reflect the effectiveness of guidance and the progressive impact of interventions (Kidd, 2006; Hughes & Gration, 2002). Whilst evidence-based research, such as longitudinal studies, is viewed as crucial for evaluating effectiveness, divergence occurs in relation to the rationale for measuring outcomes and the ability to measure them adequately from the perspective of the client, practitioner and policy maker. Speaking about information, advice and guidance services (IAG), Hughes & Gration note:

Much of the performance of IAG services is monitored in terms of targets that are often seen to be imposed 'top down' from policymakers and funding bodies, and are often restricted to those that are most easily observable and measurable such as volumes of delivery, qualification levels and employment statistics. Hughes & Gration, 2009, p.5

Concerns have also been raised about the use of cost-benefit data to ensure efficiency and value for money through systems of monitoring which may undermine professional practice across the guidance sector (Bimrose, 2006; Brown, 2006; Herr, 2003).

Even though client tracking is viewed by some as a mechanism for surveillance and social control in the pursuit of hard targets for funding and accountability, it is favoured as a methodology to evaluate progression. Specifically, longitudinal studies have the capacity to track individual change and progression and to enable longer-term analysis of key findings and trends within the discipline (Bimrose et al, 2008; Pollard et al, 2007; Kidd, 2006). Nonetheless, progression as an outcome is difficult to define and measure. Currently, as identified

by McGivney (2002), there is an overemphasis on linear, vertical progression to give value and meaning to adult learning and career advancement at the expense of non-linear processes. This is reflected in the strong focus of some stakeholders, such as policy makers, educators and employers to measure progression into education and/or employment in terms of hard, tangible outcomes. It is argued that greater consideration needs to be given to the broader range of softer, intangible outcomes that reflect the distance travelled during times of personal change and transition for individuals (Bimrose et al 2008; Dewson et al, 2000).

On the other hand, McGivney (2002) argues that delineation between hard and soft outcomes is not straightforward as the acquisition of softer outcomes can lead to the hard outcomes of qualifications and employment through increased self-confidence and empowerment. From this perspective, the issue of time is critical in making judgements about clients' educational and career progression in adult guidance practice. In some instances, progression is determined by the client's readiness to pursue learning and work goals. Furthermore, for disadvantaged adults in particular, appropriate time scales need to be considered in the assessment of client outcomes as some clients will have setbacks that prevent them pursuing their goals (Hawthorn & Alloway, 2009). Therefore, a longitudinal perspective can deepen understanding of the multi-faceted and subjective nature of progression, as well as illuminate the personal and structural obstacles that hinder adults in their education and employment transitions (Clayton, 2004; Lynch, 1999).

Evaluating the long-term impact of guidance is methodologically challenging, costly, time-consuming and may depend on the point of view of those evaluating it, such as the policy maker, service funder, practitioner, client. In terms of target measurement, whilst positivistic models may provide reliable quantitative indicators; it is argued that interpretive approaches can reveal the broader range of softer, qualitative outcomes in relation to the client's personal development and change over time (Hawthorn & Alloway, 2009; Bimrose et al, 2004). In particular, a responsive constructivist approach could serve to integrate the viewpoints of all key stakeholders in the construction of a wide range of outcomes for measurement in adult guidance (Kelly, 2004; Killeen, 1996; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Plant (2005) suggests two reasons for the involvement of guidance users in policy discussions in adult guidance. The first reason relates to active citizenship and participatory democracy, and the second to guidance policies and services meeting the needs of guidance users. Firstly, within the context of adult education, citizenship refers to the active involvement of citizens in shaping the overall direction of society, culturally, socially, economically and environmentally (DES, 2000). Secondly, it is strongly argued that guidance policies and services must attend to the needs of individuals and the community both locally and nationally (Plant, 2005). This argument is found in the personalisation paradigm in public sector management in the UK which advocates a 'bottom-up' approach that "focuses on government creating the environment for individuals to take decisions about their own lives" (Ravenhall et al, 2009, p.2).

The advancement of sustainable 'bottom-up' approaches which move beyond the provision of customer service-style feedback is required in the adult guidance sector (Plant, 2005). At a national level such activities need to involve the active contribution of the client in quality assurance and policy formation which has been unsatisfactory to date in guidance (NGF, 2007a; Plant, 2005; Wannan & McCarthy, 2005). Therefore, the proposal for a democratic inclusion of clients in outcome evaluation underpinned the methodological approach used in the current study.

### **Research Methodology and Methods**

A critical constructivist methodology was employed to examine the competing discourses of the three key stakeholders involved, the client, practitioner and policy maker, on the topic of outcome measurement (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). Constructivism emphasises how people construct, deconstruct and reconstruct their education and career experiences over time (Patton & McMahon, 2006). From a critical perspective, career counselling has a powerful influence on individuals' lives and it is imperative that guidance practitioners are reflexively aware of their own discursive practices (McIlveen & Patton, 2006). This is relevant within the context of the interweaving of the lifelong guidance paradigm with the lifelong learning paradigm which has gained credence in Irish guidance policy discourse in recent years.

In specific terms, the research analysed the subjugation of clients' subjectivities in the DES's scientific model of tracking that prioritises education and employment outcomes over personal outcomes to measure impact (Foucault, 1982).

In using this methodology, ideology critique helped identify and challenge the conservative ideology and hegemonic practices inherent in guidance policy that privileges some outcomes (hard) over others (soft) to meet the needs of the labour market in adult guidance practice (Brookfield, 2005). As a result the study was able to dispute the dominance of the positivist paradigm by examining the transformative processes of personal development, change and transition for clients' post-guidance intervention that need to be accounted for in evaluation systems.

As the primary focus of the study was the clients of REGSA, a bottom-up single-case study framework contextualised and investigated the changes in a number of clients of REGSA over a period of time (Yin, 2003). In addition, perspectives on outcome measurement were gained from the discourse of practitioners and policy makers in the field. In evaluation research case study methodology is used to assess changes in clients and explain the causal links in real-life interventions (Depoy & Gilson, 2008). Yin (2003) proposes that a single-case design can be representative, typical and revelatory in its uniqueness on a particular topic and context. This single-case study highlights the multiple realities of client's experiences, as well as the emergent issues located in the discourse of the other two stakeholders. However, the reliability and validity of case studies as a scientific method is challenged in some quarters (Yin, 2003). Therefore, the research does not claim generalisability, but argues that the learning gained from the case study is typical and transferable to other AEGI projects.

### **Methods of data collection and analysis**

The single-case study design was guided by an ethical framework and a reflexive approach in the multiple methods of data collection and analytical techniques selected. A combination of methods was used during the data collection and analytical phases. The three sources of primary data collection in the fieldwork were: individual interviews with clients of REGSA, focus group interviews with adult guidance practitioners in the United Kingdom (UK) and observation visits to external adult guidance providers. The source of secondary data collection involved analysis of a range of key Irish policy documents which have contributed to current adult guidance practice.

Fieldwork involved the use of grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006) to collect data from five clients, three male and two female, who were purposefully sampled from the earlier exploratory study I conducted in 2005. The selected

clients ranged in age from the late 20s to late 50s. Four of the clients were Irish citizens and one was an American/Irish citizen. With regards to intervention, four of the clients had received one-to-one guidance in 2001 and one client in 2003. The five clients were interviewed face-to-face in 2006 and four agreed to a follow-up telephone interview in 2009, thereby giving a longitudinal time span of between six and eight years. A constructivist approach was adopted in the interviews to elicit the clients' meanings of terms, situations and events for a hermeneutic and interpretive understanding of their subjective experiences of progression (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000).

At the time of the interviews in 2006 each client had reached a different point in their progression towards a qualification and/or employment. Some were further along in the process than others. By 2009, the clients' situations had changed again. Whilst all four of those interviewed had a qualification at some level, two of them had left the education system without completing their degree course, one had a new career and one had returned to a previous job from which she had taken a career break.

During the fieldwork stage triangulation was used to enhance the validity of the case study. Two focus group interviews with adult guidance practitioners were conducted in the UK during 2006. This produced greater insights into issues involved in client tracking by practitioners working in an established sector which had similarities with the AEGI in Ireland. There was also two observation visits to adult guidance providers in the public employment service in Ireland (FA S, 2006) and in Finland (PES, 2006) to investigate the client data management in both organisations. In addition, a secondary data source involved the use of content analysis on a representative sample of Irish policy documents produced between 1997 and 2008. These documents were interrogated to gain a deeper understanding of the (a) the position of adult guidance in Irish policy discourse; (b) the role of lifelong guidance to support the OECD public policy goals, (c) and the construction of progression.

Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional framework of discourse was used as a critical analytical framework to describe, interpret and explain the current discursive practices and power relations involved in the evaluation of outcomes in adult guidance. As discursive practices render particular aspects of reality meaningful they are open to intervention and regulation through instruments or technologies such as documentation, computation and evaluation (Edwards,

2008). In adult guidance evaluation, power is secured through meaning as it legitimises some discursive practices (positivist) over others (intepretivist). In the study finding meaning on the discourse of measuring progression in client tracking systems raised a number of important questions, for example:

1. *What is measured?*
2. *What is not measured?*
3. *Who is measuring?*
4. *What is the purpose of measurement?*
5. *How is measurement communicated?*
6. *What subjectivities are brought forth in client monitoring systems?*

In addressing these questions, the analysis focused specifically on Foucault's (1982) theory of 'scientific classification' whereby government monitoring systems decentre the subjectivities of citizens making them objects of knowledge through quantitative indicators. A critical approach helped to emphasise the limitations of the positivist paradigm in capturing the contradictions and inconsistencies of human behaviour in adult guidance practice. In particular, it challenged the prevailing assumptions embedded in Irish educational guidance policy which emphasises the importance of education and employment (hard) outcomes as successful indicators of individual progression. A discussion of the findings and an examination of the implications for policy, practice and research address will be provided in the next section.

#### **Research Findings: Progression Measurement as a Contested Discourse**

The findings from the research were that the longitudinal measurement of progression within the context of the three OECD public policy goals of lifelong learning, labour market and social equity involves a set of complex and contested issues. These issues are concerned with ideologies, power relations and the privileging of certain interests over others in adult guidance practice. At the discourse level, it was found that the variances in perspective relate to the definition of progression, the rationale for measurement and the methodologies employed for long-term analysis.

In definitional terms, the study clearly illustrates that progression is a subjective and context-specific construction which is extremely difficult to define, measure and capture through quantitative methods. The discourse of the clients and practitioners in the study show that as the attribution of meaning on pro-

gression is value-laden, and its generalisability is problematic. Specifically, the particularity and uniqueness of the five client cases underline the difficulty of quantifying the various elements of personal progression through the conventional paradigm.

The evidence suggests that there is a major disparity between the value assumptions espoused by Irish policy makers and the personal experiences of clients and guidance practitioners on the ground. The current emphasis of national policy to achieve hard, tangible outcomes is obviating the measurement of a broad range of softer, intangible outcomes that capture the personal progression of clients. The construction of learning and employment outcomes as a more desirable measurement of progression by the DES reflects a logical-positivist perspective which sits uncomfortably with the developmental aspect of clients' progression. The logical-positivist perspective tends to value individualism, ignores the subjectivity of clients, and disregards the importance of the personal development outcome for clients. Furthermore, the transitional elements of "change, shifts in identity and agency as people progress through the education system" are not revealed through this approach (Field et al, 2009). However, this issue is synonymous with a broader policy discourse in education and guidance that views hard outcomes as more valuable than the softer, personal outcomes experienced by the individual. In particular, the research found that securing employment has been the key hard outcome in Irish policy discourse for the last decade. In light of the recent downturn in the economy it is likely that adult guidance services will come under increasing pressure to ensure this outcome is achieved despite the inadequate resources made available to them.

In Irish education policy progression is viewed as advancement or movement forward from a less favourable position to an improved higher level position and with prescribed outcomes related to education and employment. The findings corroborate McGivney's (2002) claim that the process aspect of learning and guidance is overlooked by the DES in the drive for standardised and measurable parameters in the AEGI. Instead progression is predominantly represented in policy as a linear, vertical process of upward mobility from one level of qualification to the next. The variations in the five clients' experiences show that this may be an incongruous concept for adult learners as a number of the clients had non-linear and unstable education pathways. Moreover, as adults tend to bring their past learning experiences to new situations, progression can also be

measured retrospectively by clients who left school early or experimented with different learning options before they found their niche.

A key finding in the study was that there are a broad range of factors that impact on education and career progression including age, decision-making, motivation, expectations, goals, economic contexts and structural and personal obstacles. In spite of the increased level of supports within adult education provision since 2000, clients continue to experience economic, institutional and personal barriers that hinder their access, retention and progression in education and into employment. Whilst, the DES (2000) claim that the dismantling of structural blockages to educational progression is central to Irish adult education policy, barriers are an issue for many adult learners. Three clients in the study encountered the structural obstacles of course postponement, inflexible provision and course attrition due to lack of support, which hampered their progression over time.

Notwithstanding this, however, it was found that personal obstacles were more common for the clients, signifying that the more immediate dispositional barriers of self-concept, blocks to learning and the realities and responsibilities of everyday life can interfere with clients' progression. Even though Lynch (1999) argues that the financial obstacle is regarded as the primary barrier to participation in Higher Education it was only a significant obstacle for two of the clients in the study. Instead, age was the prevalent theme that emerged in relation to the clients' capacity to manage education gaps during transitions from one stage to the next. As has already been identified by (Bimrose et al, 2008; NGF, 2007a), family responsibilities, health issues, lack of support from family and friends and low self-confidence were consistent personal obstacles for the five clients. In addition, poor time-management and the constant juggling of family and work commitments led to personal compromises and a reduced quality of life for the majority of clients at some point in their progression history.

As a result of these obstacles all of the clients demonstrated high levels of emotional resilience in their progression, a concept which is rarely referred to in guidance policy discourse on outcome measurement. The career experiences of the five clients in the case study supports Kidd's (2006) view that individuals "now have to cope with fragmented working lives and continuous transitions across the lifespan" (p.10). Such transitions can be both intentional or outside the client's control and, as Beck (2001) suggests, involve risk and uncertainty as personal and economic situations change over time. In our current economic

climate the concept of resilience has taken on greater significance as individuals are being forced to cope with unemployment and personal change at an unprecedented level.

The range of less tangible outcomes that emerged from both the clients and the practitioners, supports evidence from other longitudinal case studies that the long-term effects of guidance are numerous (for example, Bimrose et al, 2008). They include access to specialist information; development of insight and focus on options; increased self-awareness, confidence and motivation, and opportunities for reflection in the re-negotiation of earlier choices and future alternatives. An appreciation of the importance of these subtler changes for adults must be considered in the development of outcome measures and service evaluation processes in adult education and guidance contexts.

A number of implications for policy, practice and research emerged in the study. It is now advocated that continuous quality improvement of Irish guidance services needs to be pursued through quantitative and qualitative methods (NGF, 2007a). The research has revealed that as hard and soft outcomes are symbiotically linked, quantitative outcomes alone are insufficient measures of individual progression. Qualitative outcomes need to be incorporated into long-term measurement processes. For example, outcomes related to personal, social and economic progression including self-concept, attitudinal change, choices, personal satisfaction, wellbeing, motivation, personal relationships, goals, skills and mobility. In particular, Bimrose et al's (2008) proposition that the concept of distance travelled needs to be "accepted, respected and integrated into service delivery, both by practitioners and their managers at different levels" was evident in the findings (p.58).

Therefore, in terms of the design of an appropriate longitudinal tracking within the AEGI, the study shows that there are particular challenges for policy makers, guidance practitioners, and adult guidance service managers. Specifically, in relation to the collection of client data and feeding it back into the AGMS the issues include cost, human resources, and staff training within an already budget-constrained sector. Furthermore, the inclusion of a broad range of soft outcomes and the capacity to capture the distance travelled by clients would require the democratic involvement of all key stakeholders in the construction of outcomes for evaluation purposes.

In the context of future research in guidance, the implications of the study's findings relate to methodological and theoretical issues. As the research only revealed one aspect of the user's contribution to service improvement in adult guidance, further elucidation from the perspective of other Irish stakeholders such as practitioners, educators and employers is also necessary. From a theoretical perspective, the study provided greater illumination of the progression of a number of clients who pursued third level education. Further research on the tracking of a broad cohort of mature students in third level would provide greater insights into their personal experiences to inform future policy and practice in guidance and education.

### **Conclusion**

Arising from the findings of the study, it can now be argued that the privileging of hard, quantitative outcomes over soft, qualitative outcomes of by the DES to measure progression in the AEGI is a form of hegemonic practice which needs to be addressed. The use of qualitative approaches can provide a greater understanding of the life-changing effects of interventions on individuals and the complexities of measuring individual progression over time (McGivney, 2002). The study has found that softer measures must be accommodated in longitudinal research to enable a longer-term analysis of a broad range of outcomes for clients (Kidd, 2006; Maguire & Killeen, 2003).

As Plant (2005) contends, the adoption of a democratic approach that incorporates the voice of the client at the individual, service and strategic level is imperative in adult guidance. A primary purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the function and scope of client involvement in determining quality issues in Irish provision. So far, clients have had a marginal involvement in such issues within the AEGI. At a strategic level it is recommended that the voices of users are engaged in policy formation (NGFa, 2007). However, more sophisticated evaluation mechanisms still have to be created to achieve this goal. The outcome of the research has been the proposal of a constructivist evaluation framework that would necessitate the democratic inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in the design of evaluation methods to measure a broad range of outcomes. If such a framework were to be adopted in the AEGI it would have implications for users, practitioners, service providers and policy makers in the future.

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