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Enhancing Professional Standards in Career Guidance:

The Postgraduate Programme in Lifelong Career Guidance and Development and its Impact on Graduates

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of the Postgraduate Diploma and Master in Lifelong Career Guidance and Development programme offered by the University of Malta. It delves into the rationale for the programme's development and examines its impact on the graduates' professionalism and career outcomes. By tracing the programme's evolution, including its transition to a master's degree and the integration of research and practical components, the paper highlights its continued relevance and effectiveness. The paper draws on data from a survey conducted among programme graduates to evaluate their employment and educational outcomes, revealing high employment rates, diverse job opportunities, and positive career trajectories. Furthermore, the paper explores the programme's influence on

graduates' personal and professional growth, highlighting improvements in the quality of their work. Concluding reflections emphasise the pressing need for further professionalisation in the career guidance field, urging active government involvement to establish recognized standards and credentials for career practitioners.

Keywords: career guidance; career outcomes; postgraduate diploma; master; professionalism.

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to analyse the Postgraduate Diploma and Master in Lifelong Career Guidance and Development (PGD&M.LCGD) offered by the University of Malta (UM). It delves into the rationale, development, and impact of the programme on graduates' professionalism and career outcomes. The paper concludes with reflections on the programme and a call for increased government involvement in the field.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAMME OF STUDIES

The channelling of individuals into suitable occupations based on abilities and societal needs has been practised since ancient times. However, the contemporary career guidance movement is much more recent and is attributed to Frank Parsons, an American intellectual who lived at the end of the 19th century. The formalisation of career guidance as a distinct occupation is a relatively new phenomenon. In several countries, the occupation is still in the process of establishing itself among other helping professions. In Malta, career guidance is not warranted and does not yet benefit from legal professional status. In practice, this means that work opportunities in the field have to date attracted persons with varying qualifications, knowledge and skills, and the quality of services offered has not always been acceptable.

The PGD&M.LCGD programme at the UM, the only one of its kind in the country, was thus developed “to promote and develop the services of career guidance in Malta by raising its professional standards” (UM, 2021). This was not the first UM programme about career guidance. For example, a Diploma

programme in Educational Guidance and Counselling started to be offered by the Faculty of Education back in 1985 (Degiovanni, 1997). However, the aspect of career guidance in such a programme was gradually sidelined, making space for personal counselling. In 2003, the Centre for Labour Studies offered a Diploma in Social Studies in Occupational Guidance and Career Counselling to cater for the arising needs of Malta's public employment services (then called the Employment and Training Corporation). But the LCGD programme, offered for the first time in 2006 as a postgraduate diploma programme was unique for a number of reasons. Unlike previous programmes of studies, it was developed as a collaboration between the Centre for Labour Studies and the Faculty of Education, emphasising its multidisciplinary nature. As implied in its name, the programme did not just focus on young students or initial career choices; it comprised a more holistic lifelong career development perspective. It was also UM's first programme at postgraduate level solely dedicated to career guidance. The decision to offer the programme at a postgraduate level was made to upgrade the skills and qualifications of students and place them on par with graduates of interconnected occupations such as counselling and teaching. The two-year programme was developed on the basis of a review of some of the best-known courses across Europe, taking into consideration the realities of Malta and the needs of potential applicants. It was offered on a part-time evening basis to cater for the needs of workers, many of whom were already working in the field.

The programme of studies, which has been offered five times to date, has evolved considerably over the years, adapting to the changing needs of the field and the participants. The most significant change took place in 2014 when the programme was upgraded to a master's degree, increasing its length to three years, with the last year dedicated to the writing of a dissertation. The transformation of the programme of studies strengthened its research and practical components. Both changes had often been recommended by students and alumni. Dissertations generate useful empirical data about career guidance in Malta. The programme now also contains two study units entirely dedicated to practice, including the recent "Career Guidance Practice" unit,

where students have the opportunity to develop and carry out a career guidance intervention of their choice. The programme's mode of delivery has recently transitioned from being totally on campus to mostly online. This change was driven by student requests and was greatly facilitated and accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Through its connections with industry, education and public employment services, the programme has attracted contributions from many stakeholders and career guidance practitioners over the years, providing hands-on knowledge and skills to students. Additionally, it is enriched by the services of numerous visiting lecturers from around the world. These lecturers, through the UM's collaboration with the Malta Career Guidance Association (MCGA), also make valuable contributions to the continuous professional development of career practitioners.

CAREER OUTCOMES OF GRADUATES

After discussing the programme of studies, this paper will now delve into the career outcomes of the programme's graduates. The data for this analysis derives from an online survey conducted in 2023 among PGD&M.LCGD graduates. Participants were first sent an email from the Centre for Labour Studies, informing them about the survey. Subsequently, they were contacted by phone and invited to take part in a telephone interview or fill out the survey online. Out of 41 graduates from four different cohorts (three that obtained the postgraduate diploma and one that obtained the master's), 32 individuals replied, representing 78% of the population. Among the participants, 81% were female, 16% were male and 3% identified as other. The largest group of participants (47%) was aged between 40 and 55 years, while the second-largest group (44%) was between 25 and 39 years old.

EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Almost all graduates currently work (97%). They have typical employment arrangements, working as full-time employees on indefinite contracts (97%). Over two-thirds of the employed graduates (71%) have professional

occupations, mostly working as teachers (including guidance teachers and PSCD teachers), followed by career advisors. The rest of the professionals work in a variety of other mainly people-oriented occupations, including social work and youth work. The remaining 29% of participants occupy senior or managerial roles, often in the field of education. Over three-fourths of the graduates (77%) are employed in the public sector, mostly in education, with a few working in the social or health sectors. A few graduates work in the private sector, in iGaming, education, or consultancy. Graduates appear to be generally satisfied with their jobs. Indeed, their present job matches the expectations of nearly three-quarters (71%) of the graduates, while it moderately matches the expectations of the remaining graduates (29%). Only a small minority (10%) are actively seeking employment. Since obtaining their LCGD qualification, virtually no graduate has been unemployed and seeking employment. However, their career trajectories have varied. 41% have always kept the same job, 28% have held two jobs, while, 31% have held three or more different jobs.

Nearly half (44%) of the PGD&M.LCGD graduates obtained other subsequent qualifications. A third (31.3%) obtained a master's degree, most often in career guidance. Other graduates specialised in a variety of related areas such as occupational psychology, research in education, youth and community studies, educational leadership and management, counselling, and disability studies. 12.5% of the graduates are currently pursuing a tertiary educational programme, two of whom are pursuing a doctorate. Nearly half of the respondents (44%) would be interested in furthering their studies in a topic related to Lifelong Career Guidance and Development. Presumably, many of these would like to upgrade their postgraduate diploma into a master's degree.

PERCEIVED INFLUENCE OF THE PROGRAMME ON GRADUATES AND THEIR CAREERS

Qualitative feedback indicated that graduates appreciated the contribution

that the course made to their personal and professional development. They mentioned how the course helped them grow both personally and professionally by enabling them to reflect on themselves and their work practices. Graduates increased their confidence in their work by gaining a deeper understanding of their role in career guidance. They also mentioned the networking opportunities they had throughout the course.

Graduates working in the field of career guidance stated that the course provided them with technical knowledge, skills, experience and insights through which they could provide a better service to clients. They acquired a more holistic perspective on the field of career guidance, which facilitated their work. Some graduates specifically mentioned the improved quality of their work when they started basing their interventions on sound theory, and the fulfilment they experienced when they were able to put their learning into practice. Graduates working in fields peripheral to career guidance, such as human resource management, also mentioned the utility of such technical knowledge and skills. Many graduates, including those who do not work in career guidance, mentioned the utility of generic skills they learned in the course, such as academic writing, analytical skills, work management, interpersonal skills, and decision-making skills. Through their studies, graduates were sensitised to appreciate the need for continuous professional development to remain in touch with the continuously evolving world of work.

The programme of studies also improved the career prospects of graduates in other ways. A quarter (26%) specifically required the course to apply for their current job. Several respondents expressed their appreciation of the new career opportunities, both in full-time and part-time employment, that they obtained through the programme. The personal and professional development acquired through the programme of studies motivated some graduates to venture into more challenging work opportunities. For example, after obtaining the PGD&M.LCGD, some graduates decided to direct their careers towards leadership roles, not necessarily directly related to their studies.

Even when the career guidance qualification was not explicitly required for the new job, some participants stated that it helped their CV as an additional qualification.

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

The development of the PGD&M.LCGD programme at the UM has played a significant role in enhancing the professionalism of career practitioners and addressing the need for higher standards in the field of career guidance. The programme's evolution over the years, including its upgrade to a master's degree and the strengthening of its research and practical components, has ensured the programme's continued relevance and impact. The programme's graduates have experienced positive career outcomes, with high employment rates and diverse job opportunities in professional and managerial occupations. The influence of the programme on graduates and their careers is also evident through their increased confidence, deeper understanding of their role in career guidance, and the improved quality of their work. Graduates have not only benefited from the programme's emphasis on technical knowledge and skills, but have also been equipped with transferable skills that may be applicable beyond career guidance.

Looking towards the future, the emerging challenges and opportunities in the face of rapid changes in education and employment necessitate further professionalisation of the field and the establishment of recognized standards and credentials for career practitioners to ensure the continued quality and effectiveness of career guidance. The MCGA is a crucial player in the promotion of high quality career guidance services. But stakeholders such as the UM and the MCGA require active government support to improve their impact. Indeed, the government, in its dual role as regulator and major provider of career services, has a vital role to play in establishing a comprehensive and holistic approach to career guidance. Government initiatives such as facilitating the recognition of the profession, enhancing entry and career progression requirements for career practitioners, redirecting Jobsplus to focus on lifelong

career guidance services, and establishing a National Career Guidance Centre are particularly important for the further development of career guidance in Malta. By actively sustaining and facilitating the professionalisation of the field, the government can create an enabling environment that maximizes the impact of career guidance services, resulting in better-informed career choices, reduced skills mismatches, increased productivity, and enhanced social and economic mobility for individuals in Malta.

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