



## *Where are the jobs for our graduates?*

The theme of my first column for 2013 is summed up in its title. Let me put it even more bluntly. How many of the individuals we graduate every year with qualifications in counselling or psychotherapy are actually going to find work? If the answer is 'far too few' (as I am pretty sure is the case) then further questions follow: What are we training them for? And how appropriate is it to continue to graduate many more trainees than we can expect to find work? These are confronting questions, but they interlock with issues of selection and assessment that we've engaged with in earlier columns, and we need to face up to them if we are to become a profession worthy of the wide recognition we aspire to gain.

The hard reality is that there are still relatively few jobs open to graduates in counselling, as compared with the large numbers available to psychologists and social workers (who are seen by most employers as fully qualified to occupy counselling positions, whether or not this is actually the case). Even in positions not formally tied to membership of one of the established helping professions, it remains difficult for counsellors to compete, since many employing organisations automatically prefer psychologists or social workers. Applicants trained as counsellors may be eligible for positions in case management or client support, but these rarely include counselling in their job descriptions, and applicants with a strong interest in counselling may even be actively discriminated against.

Some relationship counselling agencies are still willing to employ individuals without a psychology or social work background, but many counsellors steer clear of conjoint work, so it is not an option for them (though I personally think it would do many counsellors a world of good to gain some experience of relational work). A range of jobs in drug/alcohol rehabilitation programs, women's health centres, family support work, youth work, and other welfare-related areas remain open to counselling graduates, but such jobs usually will be poorly paid and offer little prospect of career advancement. Some organisations that employ counsellors possess only a limited concept of what 'counselling' actually involves; they don't know, and I suspect they don't much care either. Instrumental concepts of counselling (it is supposed to somehow 'get clients into employment' or 'teach them to manage their disabilities') are common, and there is limited understanding of how counselling, as an interpersonal process actually works. Our graduates might be forgiven for complaining that they seem eligible only for 'bottom of the shit heap' positions, or that they are forced into the procrustean bed of six-session 'outcomes-focused' treatment models, regardless of whether these models are suited to the client population—a recipe for failure if ever there was one.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the allure of private practice. In the case of training programs in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, which are usually offered to mature people who possess a recognised professional affiliation, and who (at least in theory) already have all the necessary basic human qualities and counselling skills to work successfully with a range of clients, entry into private practice following the completion of psychotherapy training may be quite appropriate. This is far less likely to be the case with new graduates in counselling, where training programs are typically limited to two years,

and intensively supervised long-term work with clients as a trainee is rarely possible.

Some counselling training programs allow their trainees to form the impression that setting up a private practice immediately upon graduation is not only perfectly acceptable, but also likely to succeed. The fact that many trainers themselves run successful part-time practices strengthens this impression. The reality, as many readers will be aware, is very different. Only a small proportion of new counselling graduates succeed in private practice—usually those who possess entrepreneurial skills and great self-confidence. Often these are people who have had a successful career in a related area

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(alternative therapies, body work, career coaching, personal training) and can transfer both their skills and their extensive network of contacts to their private counselling practice. New graduates who lack such a background rent rooms, send out brochures, visit local medical practices, and wait for clients who simply don't come. Building a successful practice takes years, not months, and creating a referral network is much easier when you have held a salaried position within the sector, built up reliable professional contacts, and acquired a good reputation.

Aside from all of these factors, the plain fact is that few new counselling graduates have the depth and breadth of experience and wisdom to be working on their own. That is precisely why reputable training programs will always advise trainees not to even think of starting in private practice until they have first worked in relevant paid employment for at least five years (preferably more). And that, of course, brings us back to where we started—where is this 'relevant paid employment' that should form the backbone of a counsellor's early career? Where are the opportunities for the newly qualified counsellor to see lots of clients under good supervision, to field many different contingencies, to liaise with a wide range of other services and professionals, and to acquire calmness in the face of a range of potential crises? There are far fewer such positions than the number of new counselling graduates seeking them.

The standard response to this dilemma goes something like this: 'It isn't the role of educators or educational institutions to ensure jobs for their graduates. No university or training college can guarantee employment. It doesn't matter if we graduate more students than there are jobs for—the market will decide, and the best students will get the jobs. If the rest fail to gain employment in counselling, well,

they will still have gained skills and knowledge that may be useful in some other field of work. Even if they don't get any job at all, they will have been enriched by self-awareness and relational skills that will stand them in good stead in their personal lives. And anyway, isn't it the case that, despite quotas, we often end up training more teachers or nurses than there are jobs for? Or, for that matter, more accountants and lawyers?'

I'm not sure I agree with this. First, there's no guarantee that the best graduates will get the few available jobs — indeed I often suspect they do not. Just as in private practice, chutzpah counts for more than competence, and some employers prefer youthful enthusiasm and naivete ('She's a likeable young woman, and she's trainable') to the more measured self-presentation of an older graduate, and many organisations simply reproduce, in their staff selection policies, the level of incompetence that prevails within the existing staff. The result is that quite a lot of counselling graduates swallow their pride and accept the frustration of retraining in social work or psychology, recognising that, while they may not gain much in the way of additional clinical skills, they will at least be competing for jobs on an equal footing with other professionals, and (if private practice is in question) will eventually be eligible for referrals from GPs.

As someone who believes in the validity of stand-alone counsellor training, and in counselling and psychotherapy as disciplines distinct from psychology and social work, I can't but see this as a sad outcome, and a poor reward for our graduates, particularly if we have put effort into our initial selection of trainees, and faced up to the necessity of counselling some out of the program, and failing others. I have to accept the reality that we, as a stand-alone profession, have so far failed to convince the wider world that properly trained and well supervised counsellors can offer a particular kind of help for emotional problems that other professionals are less well qualified to provide. We have failed to educate other professionals, and lay people, in how counselling actually works (true, it is a difficult and challenging task, but it is not impossible). Frankly, I don't think we will aid our cause by continuing to admit many more trainees than we can expect will find employment, simply because 'counselling is a popular option' and heaps of people want to study it — often for all the wrong reasons, as most of us are acutely aware!

I accept that trainees who do not gain employment as counsellors may gain valuable skills and self knowledge from their studies. As I've made clear in previous columns, I also accept that personal development must form a significant part of the training of a counsellor. And that makes it impossible to draw a hard and fast line between a personal development course and a counsellor training course. It does make some sense to see some components of counsellor education as equivalent to a 'liberal education' — today's equivalent of the now-extinct study of the classics of Greek and Roman philosophy and literature, which used to encourage young people to think hard about the big questions of life, and the paradoxes and complexities of being a human being. But that doesn't absolve us (as trainers) from the responsibility of preparing our graduates for a workforce many of them will find it impossible to enter. At the very least, we need to be open with them from the point of intake (initial selection) about what proportion of our graduates will gain employment, and that successful completion of a training program is not a guarantee that they will find a job. We can point out to them that they may gain useful life skills, but admit that their training may not lead to employment. Of course, some will then decide not to enrol. Might that not say something about their sense of entitlement, or their inability to accept that life might not always conform to their wishes?

Did we really want to train such people in the first place?

Alternatively, if the reality is that the lack of jobs in counselling leads many counselling graduates to enter psychology or social work programs in order to gain professional status and access to jobs and career opportunities, and if a further reality is that many psychologists and social workers are inadequately or even poorly prepared for counselling roles, but considered (by employers) competent to perform them, then perhaps a radical rethink of our current educational set-up might be in order. I hope to describe my thoughts on this in a later column this year.

In the meantime, serious problems remain. Counselling training must incorporate substantial professional practice in real-world settings. As it is, not only do we have few jobs for our graduates, we struggle to find appropriate work placements for them during their training. The time has gone (I sincerely hope) when 'talking to a real counsellor about their work' or 'sitting in on interviews conducted by an experienced counsellor' would be counted as actual hours of supervised practice. Many agencies are unwilling to take counselling trainees, although they are geared to taking social work or psychology students — again, this seems largely to be the result of ignorance. They are not really sure what counselling is, they have formed the impression (not surprisingly) that it is a 'less than' occupation, inferior in every way to the established professions, and therefore argue that their clients should not be exposed to these poorly-trained students who would necessarily know far less than a psychology graduate.

We have hard work to do, in liaison with such agencies, to convince them otherwise. Other agencies will accept our students, but then insist on keeping the students' 'training wheels' on for month after frustrating month before they are judged 'ready' to see real clients, or ready to work on their own. Again, this shows a failure to understand what counselling is, and how it can be learned. Watching and listening is not what a placement should be about. Other agencies claim they cannot spare staff to provide supervision, or offer it so infrequently that it is inadequate. They see trainee counsellors as a drain on their limited resources, rather than as a potentially valuable resource. Fortunately, when we send them a competent, mature-aged student who conducts herself appropriately and tactfully, some of these agencies change their tune and realise they actually can gain from providing this experience for trainees.

In the longer term, the battle that needs to be won to convince agencies to accept our placement students will contribute to the larger battle to educate the professional community about what counselling is, what counsellors actually do, and how what they do may be different from what social workers or psychologists do. And that, in turn, may contribute eventually to the freeing-up of more jobs for counsellors, or the realisation that some positions may even be more suited to a counsellor than to another professional.



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