

Enhancing South Korea's Vocational Counselling Certification System: A comparative analysis with Australia

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Abstract

This study examines strategies to enhance South Korea's vocational counselling certification system, drawing on the Career Development Practitioner scheme in Australia. An analysis is provided of Australia's model, which involves practice-oriented competencies defined and updated by the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA). This research recommends several key initiatives to improve provision in South Korea, including enhancing eligibility criteria, implementing maintenance and revocation mechanisms, instituting a centralised governing authority akin to the CICA, and introducing specialised undergraduate and graduate programmes focused on career counselling. These insights contribute to the advancement of South Korea's vocational counselling certification system.

Key words: Career Development; Career Counselling; South Korea; higher education; professionalism

Introduction

In South Korea, there is an ongoing discussion regarding the legal status of counselling certifications in Psychology. Presently, within the domain of counselling, national

certifications encompass the youth counsellor, which is exclusively geared towards adolescent counselling, and the vocational counsellor designation, which centres on the provision of career and vocational counselling services. However, the vocational counsellor certification has been the subject of discussions for its shortcomings in assessing practical competence, supervision, and insufficient continuing education (Choi et al., 2013; Jung et al., 2018; Kim, 2021).

Vocational counsellor qualification is administered by the Human Resources Development Service of Korea, a subsidiary of the Ministry of Employment and Labour. As of the year 2021, subsequent to the initiation of the nationwide vocational counsellor programme in 2000, a combined aggregate of 69,635 associate counsellors and 1,086 professional counsellors have obtained official certification (Human Resources Development Service of Korea, 2022). The demand for employment services has been increasing in both public and private sectors, including the national employment support programme and university career centres (Lee & Choi, 2019). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes to the job market, leading to a growing interest in career professionals who can provide career services in the field of career and vocational counselling (Kim, 2021). Nonetheless, a requisite for enhancement exists within the vocational counsellor certification system, particularly in aspects pertaining to qualification attainment, sustenance, and pedagogical backing, warranting due consideration of global benchmarks (McMahon, 2004) as well as facets encompassing system augmentation (Choi et al., 2013).

In this study, I introduce the Registered Professional Career Development Practitioner scheme operated in Australia, to provide insights for improving South Korea's vocational counsellor certification system. Through the analysis of both countries' certification systems, including qualification acquisition, maintenance, and training, I discuss recommendations for enhancing the Korean system.

Methodology

This study conducted an analysis based on literature and online resources from relevant institutions to compare the vocational counsellor qualification system in Korea with the Professional Career Development Practitioner qualification system in Australia. To analyse the vocational counsellor qualification system in Korea, data from the relevant agencies under the Ministry of Employment and Labour (such as the Human Resources Development Service of Korea and Korea Employment Information Service) were utilised. The analysis of the Professional Career Development Practitioner qualification system in Australia was conducted using public documents provided by the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA), an organisation that is a council of several professional associations for career development practitioners.

Findings

Vocational counsellor qualification system in Korea

Vocational counsellors engage in the collection, analysis, and provision of comprehensive information related to occupations, employment, and career development, drawing upon the principles and techniques of counselling (Korea Employment Information Service,

2023). While vocational counsellors do not actively address clients' psychological issues, from a lifespan career development perspective as proposed by Super (1980), individuals' vocational and career paths are intricately linked to other aspects of life and may be intertwined with psychological challenges. Therefore, for vocational counsellors to effectively understand and address clients' career issues, it is essential for them to have a clear understanding of their own scope of competencies and possess a range of skills, including in-depth counselling, to provide professional assistance to clients. However, the current qualification acquisition system for vocational counsellors in Korea primarily focuses on assessing knowledge through subject-based examinations, rather than evaluating competencies. Furthermore, systematic post-qualification education and training for vocational counsellors are currently insufficient.

The qualification examination for vocational counsellors is classified into two types: The examination and the course assessment. The examination type evaluates the relevant knowledge in the form of written tests, while the course assessment grants qualification upon completion of an accredited course and successful internal and external evaluations. The qualification for vocational counsellors is divided into two levels: Level 1 and 2. Regarding the vocational counsellor Level 2 examination, as of 2023, the examination is conducted three times a year and is at a level comparable to a regular technician certification. There are no restrictions on eligibility based on educational background or other factors. The written test consists of five subjects (vocational counselling, vocational psychology, vocational information theory, labour market theory, labour relations, and regulations) with 20 multiple-choice questions per subject. Upon passing the first round, candidates are eligible to take the practical examination, which requires a written response to address vocational counselling practices.

The qualification course for level 2 vocational counsellors, based on course evaluation, was first introduced in 2018. It requires a minimum of 12 hours of vocational basic competency training and 330 hours of essential competency units (Human Resources Development Service of Korea, 2023a). The training curriculum includes various counselling-related subjects such as vocational assessment, initial consultation, career counselling, employment counselling, and vocational reintegration counselling. As of 2023, there are 18 vocational training institutions and one 4-year university offering training programmes. The training period spans 3 to 22 months, totalling 500 hours. Since its implementation in 2018, until 2021, a total of 970 individuals obtained the qualification through the course evaluation method, accounting for 68.4% of the total 1,302 trainees (Human Resources Development Service of Korea, 2022).

In the case of the professional career counsellor (1st grade) certification, a qualification examination is conducted once a year. The Human Resources Development Service of Korea specifies psychology, management, economics, legal studies, educational psychology, and related fields as relevant majors for obtaining the qualification, but it does not specifically require a certain degree (Human Resources Development Service of Korea, 2023b). Eligibility for the 1st grade examination is granted to those who have obtained the 2nd grade vocational counsellor qualification and have worked in the field for at least 2 years or have worked in the career counselling field for at least 3 years. The examination consists of written exams, similar to the 2nd grade examination. The first written exam includes multiple-choice questions covering advanced career counselling, advanced career psychology, advanced career information theory, labour market theory, and labour relations

regulations. The practical exam requires the completion of a descriptive task on career counselling practice.

The course evaluation-based 1st grade Professional Career Counsellor qualification requires a minimum of 24 hours of basic career competency training and 540 hours of essential competency units. It includes subjects such as in-depth career counselling and career counselling supervision, which enable training and supervision of 2nd grade qualification holders. As of 2023, 8 vocational training institutions and 1 four-year university offer training programmes for 1st grade Professional Career Counsellors. Training periods range from 4 to 12 months, comprising 840 hours. The course evaluation-based qualification system for 1st grade Professional Career Counsellors was introduced in 2021. In that year, out of 154 trainees, 89 individuals obtained the qualification, resulting in a pass rate of 57.4% (Human Resources Development Service of Korea, 2022).

The institutions responsible for conducting vocational counsellor training programmes were predominantly private institutions such as vocational education and training, lifelong education centres, and private academies, with only one four-year university for each level of certification. Furthermore, both the written and practical examination types do not impose specific educational requirements to sit for the qualification examination. This indicates that the qualifications for vocational counsellors are not equivalent to the prestigious counselling certifications offered by the Korean Counselling Psychology Association (2023) or the Korean Counselling Association (2023) in terms of the eligibility criteria. While considered a nationally recognised counselling qualification, the vocational counsellor certification in Korea does not fully meet the rigorous standards established by these private associations.

The study conducted by Jung et al. (2018) on employment service practitioners, which interviewed vocational counsellors, revealed a significant dissonance between the self-evaluation of vocational counsellors' job competency levels and the perceived importance of their job responsibilities. This incongruity suggests a decline in vocational self-efficacy among vocational counsellors, indicating a discrepancy between their perceived competence and the actual demands of their professional roles.

It is evident that the vocational counsellor qualification system currently implemented in South Korea necessitates remedial measures. Australia's qualification framework operates by prioritising competency-based qualifications that connect education with practical skills and competencies (Kang et al., 2003). It provides a useful benchmark from which to identify improvement to the Korean vocational counsellor certification system.

Australia's career development practitioner qualification system and training programmes

Australia operates a Professional Career Development Practitioner qualification system, the "Registered Professional Career Development Practitioner," based on the career industry quality standards of OECD advanced countries (McMahon et al., 2004). The usage of the term "practitioner" is intended to collectively refer to various professional groups engaged in the career industry field. In practice, qualifications are conferred upon career professionals, including career advisers, career counsellors, and career coaches, with the goal of ultimately enhancing the quality of services. CICA plays a fundamental role in managing the service quality in the career industry sector in Australia.

CICA was established in 1999 in response to the demands of the field. Professionals in the employment services sector and scholars researching careers in Australia recognised the need for an institution to monitor and support the domestic career industry. This institution was envisioned to serve as a central entity that could address national issues related to career development, deemed important in both the public and private domains as well as within the community. The primary objective was to share and provide optimal practical models for addressing national career development issues. The initial discussions began during a conference of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG), focusing on collaborative efforts and partnerships across Australia's career industry landscape. Various representatives from career-related associations united to establish the central entity, CICA. This collaborative effort commenced with the formation of the Career Industry Consortium Committee in 2000, and officially culminated in 2003 with the incorporation of CICA as a legal entity (Career Industry Council of Australia, 2023).

CICA maintains affiliation with 11 career-related associations. To become a Registered Professional Career Practitioner recognised by CICA, an individual must be a full professional member of at least one of these 11 CICA council member associations. Each association has distinct qualification criteria for full professional membership, aligned with its core specialisation areas. However, these criteria primarily adhere to the qualification standards corresponding to the recognised Professional Career Practitioner qualifications endorsed by CICA.

The Career Development Practitioner qualification system in Australia consists of two hierarchical tiers: Professional and Associate. Professional practitioners hold supervisory responsibilities over associate practitioners, who predominantly undertake supportive roles. Professional practitioners are required to meet the criteria for a graduate certificate (Australian Qualification Framework; AQF Level 8), while Associate Career Development Practitioners are obligated to successfully complete the Certificate IV (AQF Level 4) course endorsed by CICA to obtain the qualification. The AQF, representing the Australian Qualification Framework, serves as the nationwide framework governing regulated qualifications across Australian education and training, encompassing levels from 1 (Certificate I) to 10 (Doctoral Degree; Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013).

As of March 2023, there are a total of 11 courses offered by 8 institutions accredited by CICA. CICA validates qualifications based on their alignment with the Professional Standards for Australian Career Development Practitioners. The endorsement procedure mandates cyclic renewal over a span of a few years. Among the endorsed programmes, 7 institutions are in Australia, and 1 institution is situated in Singapore. In this study, I focused on analysing 6 courses out of the 11 accredited courses for several reasons. The analysis excluded courses from Singapore and three courses with different educational levels. It also excluded a Certificate IV course and specific university courses with expiring accreditation in 2023 due to limited information. Therefore, ultimately, 6 courses were included in the analysis, specifically focusing on graduate certificate courses that operate Professional Career Development Practitioner qualification programmes. The analysis summary is presented in Table 1, with the institutions indicated by alphabets.

In Australia, there were five universities and one specialised vocational education institution that offered professional career development practitioner training programmes.

Completing these programmes would lead to a graduate certificate qualification, making a bachelor’s degree or higher (AQF level 7) a common prerequisite for admission. In cases where applicants did not hold a degree, an equivalent advanced diploma and a minimum of two years of work experience or five or more years of work experience were required. The training duration varied among institutions, with options including a six-month part-time programme, or a one-year part-time programme. The training costs ranged from AUD \$8,950 to AUD \$15,480. While the specific subjects exhibited variation across institutions, the curriculum consistently encompassed a spectrum of components, such as career development theories, career counselling, assessment methodologies, professional practices, and subjects related to policy considerations.

Upon successful completion of the programmes outlined in Table 1, graduates attain eligibility to obtain the qualification enabling them to become Registered Professional Career Development Practitioners, a recognition endorsed by CICA. Once registered as a Professional Career Development Practitioner by CICA, individuals must renew their qualification annually and complete 15 hours of continuing professional development each year to maintain their accreditation. Continuing professional development is furnished by CICA as well as pertinent professional associations affiliated with CICA, encompassing both complimentary and fee-based offering.

Table 1. Professional Career Development Practitioner Training Programmes in Australia (as of March 2023)

Educational Level	Institution	Admission Requirements	Cost	Duration (months)	Subjects Offered
University	A University	Degree or Associate diploma + 2 years of full-time work experience or 5 years of full-time work experience	AUD \$11,300*	6 months full-time	Introductory Educational Counselling Career Development Theory and Policy Career Development and Professional Practice Career Counselling
University	B University	Degree	AUD \$9,804*	6 months full-time	Counselling for Career Development Educating for Lifelong Career Development Professional Practice and Development Career Assessment Theory and Job Search Advising Advanced Coaching for Change Advanced Assessment for Coaching

Educational Level	Institution	Admission Requirements	Cost	Duration (months)	Subjects Offered
University	C University	Degree or 4th level certificate in career development + work experience	Domestic AUD \$11,620* International AUD \$16,020	8 months full-time	Career Development Theories and Tools Career Development Professional Practice Labour Market and The Future of Work Career Counselling
University	D University	Degree or work experience in relevant areas	AUD \$10,080	1 year part-time	Practices in Career Design Applied Professional Practice in Career and Life Design
University	E University	Degree + English proficiency test (IELTS 6.5)	Domestic AUD \$11,400 International AUD \$13,440	6 months part-time	Lifelong Career Development Career Development in Educational Settings Introduction to Counselling in Educational Contexts Consultation and Communication: Theory and Practice
Specialised institution for career education	F Institute	Associate diploma in career development or career counselling or work experience	AUD \$8,950	1 year part-time	Legal & Ethical Practice Strategic Career Service Delivery Career Development and Counselling Professional Development 120 Hours of Essential Placement

* Commonwealth Supported Fee available, which reduces approximately 80% of the fee.

Discussion

This study seeks to improve South Korea's vocational counsellor qualification system through a comparative analysis with Australia's Professional Career Development Practitioner system. The study's findings lead to the proposal of four strategic avenues for enhancement.

Firstly, it is proposed to enhance the entry-level qualification prerequisites. Countries including Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada require a minimum level equivalent to bachelor's degree or higher for entry into the career development industry (McMahon et al., 2004). A substantial portion of counsellors-in-training, even

when undergoing formal education, often experience a notable lack of confidence in their ability to engage effectively in career counselling (Lara et al., 2011). This highlights the considerable challenge associated with executing career counselling duties without acquiring comprehensive and pertinent educational foundations in this domain. Given the ongoing connection between an individual's vocational well-being and their overall life dimensions (Chen, 2013), a minimum requirement of a bachelor's degree is essential for addressing clients' comprehensive psychological well-being effectively. Adequately trained professionals can elevate career services, assist in career development, and enhance overall well-being (Robertson, 2013; Tang et al., 2021).

Secondly, it calls for the enhancement of qualification systems aligned with international competency standards. Although South Korea introduced National Competency Standards in 2002, it is currently confined to domestic industrial contexts, which may evoke a sense of limitation. In instances where international standards are delineated, as exemplified by career practitioners, it becomes imperative to cultivate a qualification competency framework that harmonises both domestic realities and international benchmarks, thereby aligning with the global milieu. Just as Australia's qualification system operates in congruence with the fundamental competency standards posited by IAEVG in 2003, it is incumbent upon Korean society to prepare individuals to cultivate competencies that resonate harmoniously within the global community. Therefore, it is essential that the current qualification system not only evaluates knowledge but also evolves into a competency-centred, skills-based framework, contributing to the development of global talent.

Thirdly, it is essential to enhance the ongoing education of career counsellors and establish a system for maintaining and revoking qualifications. Specifically, the implementation of continuous supervision programmes, rooted in the establishment of a strong working alliance with a supervisor, holds the potential to markedly elevate the satisfaction levels and the overall quality of the learning experience for career counsellors (Parcover & Swanson, 2013). The commendable efforts undertaken by the National Institute for Lifelong Education at the Korea University of Technology and Education, particularly in offering professional development programmes such as career counselling courses for employment service practitioners, warrant further expansion into mandatory training. This expanded training should encompass aspects such as supervision and ethics education, aimed at safeguarding the interests and well-being of clients. Moreover, a system should be implemented to address unethical conduct through qualification suspension, probation, and revocation. The absence of a systematic qualification maintenance system in areas where continuous training and development are vital, such as labour market information and counselling, can undermine trust in the national vocational qualification system. Therefore, the government should either establish an organisation with corporate status, similar to CICA in Australia, or support existing relevant agencies to fulfill the role of mandatory continuing education and qualification management.

Fourthly, it is recommended to establish undergraduate and graduate programmes in universities and colleges specialising in career development and counselling to provide high-quality career services. The OECD pointed out in 2003 that there was a lack of appropriate training and qualification programmes for career development practitioners in several advanced countries (OECD, 2003). Subsequently, efforts have been made in countries like Australia to develop and implement graduate-level programmes for training

career development practitioners. These efforts have not been fully realised within the Korean context. Therefore, considering the increasing demand in the field of career industry, it is important to introduce new undergraduate and graduate programmes dedicated to career development and counselling, which will systematically train professionals in higher education and contribute significantly to the revitalisation of the career industry.

Lastly, there is a need for overall improvement in the compensation within the career services industry. While the average salary of career development practitioners in Australia exceeds the overall workforce average (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Indeed, 2023; Labour Market Insights, 2021), it has been observed that the remuneration for career practitioners in South Korea is more than 20% lower in comparison to the average earnings of Korean workers (Statistics Korea, 2021). In order to attract exemplary talent and augment the overall quality of the industry, the establishment of an equitable compensation system becomes imperative. This system should ideally transcend the average wage threshold, or at the very least, align comparably with the prevailing salary norms in South Korea. Such a framework is pivotal in facilitating the seamless integration of well-educated professionals into the career industry, thereby effectively catering to the escalating need for career services.

Conclusion

In summary, this study conducted a comparative analysis of South Korea's vocational counsellor qualification system with Australia's Registered Professional Career Development Practitioner qualification system. It underscores the necessity for enhancements within the Korean system while also addressing the broader trajectory of the career industry. By capitalising on the benefits of systems that align with international standards, the qualification system can be effectively elevated, thereby diminishing the necessity for trial and error. Executing the Korean vocational counsellor system with enhanced efficacy empowers vocational counsellors to effectively aid individuals in their pursuit of career counselling services. This, in turn, engenders a cascade of personal, societal, and economic advantages, thereby constituting a substantive contribution to the broader landscape of national development.



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