



Supported Education

2.3.1 The Impuls career guidance course

Abstract

What?

Description of the career guidance course: contents and organization.

Why?

To support young adults who do not exactly know what they want and what their educational options are; who have difficulties with making choices in this area; or who doubt their academic skills.

Who?

Young adults from 16 years of age and older, who receive treatment or have received treatment because of a severe mental illness and who are interested in going (back) to school in the near future.

When?

The course needs to begin a few months before the application forms for community colleges and universities have to be handed in, so the participants have enough time to, for example, visit open door days and make an informed choice.

Where?

A location of a regular educational organization, so the participants are able to make use of the available facilities and follow the course in a regular class room.

How?

Twelve weekly sessions of 5.5 hours.

A career guiding course named Impuls has been developed in 1999 at a community college in Rotterdam as part of the first Supported Education project in the Netherlands. The Impuls course focuses on supporting (in groups) young adults with psychiatric disabilities in choosing and getting a regular (vocational) education.

The course is based on the psychiatric rehabilitation approach of the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation of the University of Boston (Korevaar, 2005; Unger, 1998). The aim of the psychiatric rehabilitation approach is to help people with psychiatric disabilities from a client perspective to take up their self-chosen citizen role. That role can be related to one of four areas of life: living, working, learning and socializing. The Impuls course is derived from Supported Education, a program developed by the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation of the University of Boston for the life area of learning.

Next to the psychiatric rehabilitation approach, the concept of recovery is also related to Supported Education. Recovery can be seen as an individual process in which a person learns to live with the radical consequences of a psychiatric disability and can give meaning again to life (Korevaar, 2005). Supported Education shows that participation in regular education can contribute to (role) recovery and as such can give an impulse to personal growth and meaning.

Based on the Impuls course, the next paragraphs describe how to organize such a career guiding course and what the contents of such a course could be. In the last paragraph, some experiences with the Impuls course in the Netherlands will be discussed.

A. Organization

Participants

The career guidance course aims at young adults from 16 years of age and older, who receive treatment or have received treatment because of a severe mental illness and who are interested in going (back) to school in the near future. The participants do not exactly know what they want and what their educational options are; they have difficulties with making choices in this area, or doubt their academic skills. For these reasons, they need support in the form of a career guidance course.

In order to recruit the participants for the career guidance course, an information brochure for possible participants and an information brochure for referrers could be sent to mental health organizations, social benefit agencies, employment agencies, vocational rehabilitation agencies, business associations and reintegration agencies, for example.

It is important that the young adults who are interested in the course register themselves personally. When organizations/referrers register these young adults, they need to be requested to ask the young adult to do this himself. A basic principle of Supported Education is that people with psychiatric disabilities work on their own needs and goals and not on those of others (e.g. social workers, social benefit employees and family members).

After registration, the young adults are invited for an interview to discuss their expectations, motivation and goals. If the Supported Education professionals think that the young adult is suitable for the Impuls course, the registration for the course is final. The number of participants should preferably be between eight and twelve.

Costs/fees

The costs of the career guidance course will differ per country/organization, so it is hard to give exact figures. One should take into account that there will be costs for personnel (e.g., teachers and coordinator), materials (brochures/literature/homework, etc.), rooms, and catering.

Location of the course

The goal of the career guidance course is of course to help participants with choosing and getting regular (vocational) education. Besides, the course also helps with the orientation toward and the use of educational facilities and with gaining educational experience and rhythm. Therefore, it is preferable that the participants follow the course at a location of a regular educational organization so the participants are able to make use of the available facilities and follow the course in a regular classroom (with a computer and beamer, etc.). This also prevents the course from becoming a supportive or therapy group.

Start and duration of the course

The course needs to begin a few months before the application forms for community colleges and universities have to be handed in, so the participants have enough time to visit open door days, for example, and make an informed choice. The course often lasts twelve weeks, with one course meeting of 5.5 hours per week.

Supervision within the course

It is important here to stress that the participants do not attend the course as a patient/client, but as a student. Within that structure, one can work with the questions, needs and educational preferences of the participants. The structure of the program is meant to give some grip on that. The influx of students is (as far as background and educational experience are concerned) very diverse. This calls for a very flexible attitude in the teacher/Supported Education specialist (and the participants) with regard to the content and pace of the program. Important is that the underlying structure of the program—exploring, choosing, getting and keeping—remains present.

Participants often have the following expectation about the course: 'In the course, I will hear which study is best for me.' Therefore, from the start, but certainly also during the course, it is important to mention that the participants have to take action themselves in order to get a positive result.

Preferably, the course is given by a pair of teachers: one who is educated in the psychiatric rehabilitation approach and who monitors the aim of the program, helping with choosing and getting a study; and one who is an expert by experience and maybe has been

a participant on the Impuls course himself. This co-teacher assists with activities in subgroups and with supervising the group process. He might also teach a few theme lessons individually such as time management, stress and coping, and group processes.

Most activities take place as a whole group. Participants receive an introduction to a certain theme and have to elaborate this theme individually or in a subgroup through an assignment. Afterwards, the assignment is discussed with the entire group. The teachers are available to support the individual participants with the assignments.

At the start of the course, each participant will be assigned a mentor (being one of the two teachers). During individual coaching, participants can discuss what is difficult for them during the course, but they can also discuss what goes well. Often themes like current expectations about a study, self-esteem and support, one's experiences, or whether the supervision is in line with one's personal needs are discussed. Also, more personal themes such as how to subsume a difficult situation at home into your new study or how to cope with the change from being a client to being a student might be topics that are addressed during coaching. The individual coaching often takes place during breaks or at the end of the day.

B. Contents of the course

Structure

The contents of the decision making course can be divided into two parts:

1. Setting an educational goal

- describing educational alternatives
- identifying personal preferences
- choosing an educational goal

2. Getting and preparing for a study of one's own choice

- applying for a college or university
- listing and practicing critical competencies
- listing and organizing critical resources

Ad 1. Setting an educational goal

During the first part of the course, a list of studies in which the participant is interested is composed. Books and brochures that the teachers have collected can be used in this activity, as well as an internet search. Further information is gathered by attending open door days of colleges and universities. After a list of possible options has been made, a second

list is composed that contains personal preferences—for instance, whether a study is directly focused on work or not—that the participant considers important when choosing a study. Subsequently, these two lists are put together and the study that mostly fulfills the personal preferences of the participant is chosen. Subsequently, an educational goal can be set. Such a goal describes when the participant wants to go to what particular study at what particular school. An example of such a goal is: “In September 2015 I want to start the information technology course at level 4 at the Alfa College in Groningen”.

Ad 2. Getting and preparing for a study of one’s own choice

After the educational goal has been set, a plan is made in which it is written what needs to be done in order to be able to start with the study. One has to register at the particular college or university and sometimes one needs to work on getting financial support from a social benefit agency. When one is eligible for financial support, one has to apply for a student grant.

There are two other things that need to be considered before starting with a study: these are skills and support. During the course, one explores which skills are critical to start and maintain a study. This does not include the skills one gets taught during the study, but it includes skills one does not get taught there. These skills can vary from person to person. For instance, one participant has difficulty planning his homework, and another participant finds it hard to give a presentation in front of his classmates. However, it could also be a skill that is not directly linked to achievement at school—for instance, talking to a classmate in the canteen, or getting up on time in the morning. Critical skills can be practiced.

As far as support is concerned, the same procedure is followed. One explores what kind of support is critical in order to study successfully and it is ensured that this kind of support is actually available. This support can be given by a person, but also things, activities and places can be important resources. Examples of resources are a person who helps with homework, a relaxation exercise, or a room to which one can go and relax for a while. Although the necessary skills and support are different for all participants, they are discussed in the group. Consequently, people can help each other and practice together. To summarize, during the decision making course the participants work on four things: choosing a study; arranging things in order to be able to start with the study (registration, finances, permission, etc.); listing and practicing critical skills; and finally listing and organizing critical support.

Homework

After each course meeting, the participant receives a homework assignment(s). This way, he can get even more out of the course and also practice the critical academic skills at home.

Portfolio

During the course, the participant collects all the theory and all the assignments in a portfolio, together with the description of the personal goals of the participants. A portfolio is a map in which the participant describes what he is working on and which development he is going through. The portfolio can be taken to the intake/interview for the new study. Often the enrollment officer of a course of study appreciates this, as a portfolio gives a good impression of the needs, qualities and learning needs of the participant.

Topics

In twelve weeks, all of the above are addressed in the following topics:

1. Identifying personal interests and capacities
2. Researching educational environments
3. Setting an educational goal
4. Listing one's own (central) qualities
5. Information about learning styles and working in groups
6. Learning personal (academic) skills
7. Learning communication skills
8. Determination of and practicing personal learning goals
9. Organizing the support needed for getting a study
10. Keeping the study of preference

C. Evaluation of the decision making course in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, we have evaluated eight Impuls courses using evaluation forms that the participants fill out after the course and group interviews with the participants. Evaluation forms of 74 participants have been analyzed. This analysis shows the following picture.

The participants appreciated the Impuls course, with a mean score of 4.2 on a five point Likert scale (range 3.9–4.2). They were particularly positive about the fact that the course gives tools for and support with choosing a study. Also, they appreciated that the course gave hope and that it was clear and goal-oriented. Some participants were less positive about the diversity of the group (participants with autism were found to be difficult to deal with); the information about the different studies (they would like to have received more information); and about the fact that there was a large portion of self-study in the course. A suggestion for improvement was to learn more about the experiences of students with

psychiatric disabilities. In addition, more attention could be paid to time management and to how to work efficiently. Finally, a better balance between theory and practice would be appreciated. From the 74 participants, 63.5 percent had chosen a study after completing the ImpulSE course. Unfortunately, we do not know whether the participants maintained and completed their studies. It is therefore recommended to stay in touch with the participants in order to follow their academic careers and hence to get a glimpse of how effective the decision making course is.

We conclude with the description of the experiences of two former participants of the ImpulSE course in Groningen, the Netherlands.

Case 1.

Peter is a young man who is 26 years of age. During his higher general secondary education, he experienced his first psychotic episode. Several times, he was hospitalized for several months. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia. After his last hospitalization, he remained in day treatment for two years. He lives with his parents and sister. He finished his higher general secondary education, but after his graduation he did not go on to another type of education. His case manager told him about the ImpulSE course. He enrolled, got accepted and finished the course. After he finished, he said that the course helped him to get insight into his preferences and possibilities. He thinks the study of his choice is the right one: a three year full time course in information technology. He is happy with the Impuls course: "Without Impuls, I don't think I would have started with a new study." Besides the support he gets within the course, he gets a lot of support from his parents, friends with whom he was in treatment and from a fellow student at the Impuls course.

Case 2.

Karen is a woman who is 27 years of age. She was diagnosed with ADHD when she was 19 and she quit her social work course at a university of applied sciences. She became severely depressed and went to day treatment for a couple of years. She received medication that helped her well and that she still uses. Three years ago she started working as a volunteer at a day activity center for people with psychiatric disabilities. Her mental health practitioner pointed her toward the decision making course Impuls at the Hanze University, Groningen. Karen requested an information and intake brochure and she was called for an interview. She got accepted and started the course. At the beginning of the course, she was very impatient and got annoyed by the slow pace of the course. Through discussing these problems with one of her teachers and doing the exercises, she discovered that she had difficulties with organizing her thoughts. This is why she often goes too fast. By means of the course, she learned to think about her future wishes in a very detailed and concrete way. About the course, she said: "Because you are forced to go and explore several educational options, you get a clear view of the different studies and their locations. Comparing several options makes clear which study mostly fits your own preferences and capacities." She also said that through the course, her self-confidence and self-esteem were enhanced. Eventually, she chose to start again with her social work study, but now part-time. She has already started studying again.