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**Supporting innovative counselling and guidance: building
dialogue between research and practice**

Alan Brown, Jenny Bimrose and Sally-Anne Barnes

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Contact details:

sally-anne.barnes@warwick.ac.uk

j.bimrose@warwick.ac.uk

alan.brown@warwick.ac.uk

<http://www.guidance-europe.org>

**Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick,
Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK**

Supporting Innovative Counselling and Guidance: Building Dialogue between Research and practice

Alan Brown, Jenny Bimrose & Sally-Anne Barnes

Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, England.

contact: alan.brown@warwick.ac.uk <http://www.guidance-europe.org>

ABSTRACT

A team of researchers and professionals from the UK, Denmark, Finland, Greece and Slovenia are piloting the development of a network for guidance and counselling, supported by ICT, to strengthen the evidence base for practice (and therefore its impact) in the area of equal opportunities. The formation and operation of the network (comprising practitioners, managers, researchers, trainers, students and policy makers, together with others in related fields) will be supported by the development and implementation of the 'European Guidance and Counselling Research Forum' (EGRF) website, specially designed to support collaborative participation in a dynamic community of interest for guidance and counselling. The website is designed for interactive and focused knowledge sharing and transformation. A shared knowledge base will be constructed, not from an a priori comprehensive blueprint, but by being grown more organically from the contextualised problems faced by practitioners, researchers and policy-makers. This, initially, involved the formation of expert groups, selected from the target groups for the website, in each of the five participating countries who would meet face to face to discuss issues

INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the development of a five country network for guidance and counselling, supported by ICT, to strengthen the evidence base for practice (and therefore its impact) by integrating relevant research with practice. The formation and operation of the network has been supported by the development of the EGRF website (see <http://www.guidance-europe.org>). The initial UK development of this highly interactive platform has already been internationally acknowledged as a significant

innovation in guidance internationally (Brown *et al.* (2003) paper presented at OECD careers conference). The project aims, objectives and composition are given below:

Aim: To develop guidance and counselling network, supported by a website (EGRF) that will bring research and practice closer for the improvement of services to clients.

Objectives:

- To develop an innovative and imaginative way of linking processes of knowledge acquisition, development, transformation and creation with approaches to tackling the core problems of counselling and guidance practice;
- To facilitate, by establishing a network supported by ICT, interactive and focused knowledge sharing and transformation for practitioners, managers, researchers, trainers, students, policy makers, and others as collaborative participants in a dynamic community of practice;
- To examine the ways in which learning to practise guidance and counselling is created and shared (beliefs, concepts, ideas, theories, actions) in the search for new understandings about effective guidance.

The pilot project website and web-based tools will be developed specifically to provide a rich experience of developing and re-using knowledge by participating in goal-based mini-projects together with other users. In addition, by providing a highly usable and comprehensive knowledge-repository embedded within the collaboration tools, the project will deliver a wide range of flexible, on-demand learning opportunities. The overall purpose of this pilot project is, therefore, to improve the evidence-base for practice by supporting the integration of relevant research with practice.

Partners:

The Institute for Employment Research (IER), University of Warwick;

Guidance Research Unit at the Danish University of Education;

Institute for Educational Research, University of Jyväskylä;

Department of Psychology at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens;

Kadis a Slovenian SME providing HR services for companies and unemployed;

Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby;
Knownet research and software development SME, Wales, UK.

CONTEXT

The European Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000) emphasises the need for universal access to good quality information and advice and argues for more holistic services in guidance and counselling that will need 'to be linked more firmly into networks of related personal, social and educational services' (p.17). Additionally, the importance of guidance and counselling to promote equity is emphasised by the OECD (2003). For individuals who are socially excluded or at risk of being so, and / or who may be suffering disadvantage in relation to access to education, training and employment, guidance and counselling can be vital. For these individuals, access to vocational education, training and lifelong learning is likely to bring benefits, and holistic, impartial, client-centred guidance and counselling can help people make the best choices for their circumstances and skills. The rationale for this project, therefore, relates to the need to enhance the quality of guidance and counselling through processes of knowledge development and sharing across Europe so that guidance and counselling will: improve access to lifelong learning; facilitate vocational integration and reintegration; help improve the skills and competences of people (especially young people); and promote employability. In addition, the need for improvements in guidance and counselling practice in the area of equal opportunities has been noted in a recent international review of policies for information, guidance and counselling services: 'While there has been a recognition of the need for a European dimension (in Europe) and for an inter/multicultural approach in guidance worker's training, there is little evidence of this materialising' (McCarthy, 2001, p.7). Support in the development of practice that is sensitive and responsive to social equity issues is, therefore, clearly required. With the special focus on equal opportunities, the project helps address this gap in provision.

NETWORKS

The project seeks to support the design, development, testing, evaluation and dissemination of innovative methods and approaches in guidance and counselling through the establishment of a network, supported by ICT, that will focus on the

application and integration of research with practice. Particular emphasis is given to research and practice into aspects of equal opportunities that will improve the quality of, and access to, vocational training and the lifelong acquisition of skills and competences for flexible working practices.

Target groups: Those comprising a European community of interest in research and practice in guidance and counselling. This will include the following groups: guidance and counselling practitioners, managers, researchers, trainers, students and policy makers, together with others interested in integrating findings from guidance and counselling research with practice to improve its quality and impact.

Target sectors: those involved in the delivery of guidance and counselling services within educational institutions (universities, colleges, schools), employment services and agencies, workplaces, public authorities, voluntary and charitable organisations. In addition, research centres, guidance and counselling training organisations and other organisations employing those involved in guidance and counselling research, policy and practice together with other those in allied fields.

Potential users of project results: members of the European guidance and counselling community together with all those interested in improving the quality and impact of guidance and counselling services by promoting innovative, evidence-based approaches to practice, particularly in the area of social equity.

WEBSITE: KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT, SHARING AND TRANSFORMATION

The website comprises a telematics platform designed for interactive and focused knowledge sharing and transformation. Its focus is on research for practice which is relevant to equal opportunities for men and women, with a view to combating discrimination in training and employment. A shared knowledge base will be grown organically from the contextualised problems faced by practitioners, researchers and policy-makers. This, initially, will involve the formation of expert groups, selected from the target groups for the website, in each of the five participating countries who would meet face to face to discuss issues of policy and practice related to equal

opportunities. These discussions will be continued on-line. The groups will form a centre of expertise and have several tasks. Specifically, they will:

- Identify gaps and key areas or problems related to equal opportunities in guidance;
- Create a structure for a knowledge repository and outline ways to navigate that structure;
- Offer a mediated commentary on key documents and research findings;
- Develop support services for others with particular interests in this area. For example, these groups can provide a focus where people can pose particular questions and complete relevant 'team tasks'.

Summaries of discussions from each country would then be translated into the languages of each partner, together with more extended commentaries available in English, as part of a continuing process of 'new knowledge creation' for the network. The material on the website would also be stored for continuing reference in a library section as discussions develop. This approach will, therefore, ensure the development and transfer of innovation in training and continuing professional development to the wider community of guidance and counselling, through the use of ICT. Note also that besides the obvious link to the initial UK (NGRF) site, the telematics platform will link to other European websites like the CEDEFOP virtual community for guidance (which is incidentally facilitated by two members of the EGRF team) and the new OECD Brussels-based site focused on careers policy. This site offers a distinctly different ICT facility for knowledge sharing and transformation that is fully inclusive, with representatives of the target groups centrally involved in the process of knowledge development and combination, using 'team tasks' to ensure a focused approach to new knowledge formation. The project team is deeply committed to producing user interfaces that are accessible and usable by the widest possible range of people (conforming to standards of Webdesign for people with disabilities (2003)). We will produce accessible, web-standards-based content and interface delivery formats and will endeavour to provide a range of alternative navigation, content-delivery and interaction mechanisms to account for the needs of users of all levels of experience and ability.

The project will facilitate processes of knowledge development and creation that will provide informal, inductive learning opportunities based on collaborating, inquiring and reflecting, as well as providing a substantive knowledge base that can support both self-directed and collaborative learning. This knowledge base can then be used as a resource by trainers and managers in order to create 'tailored' solutions to their particular requirements. It is this commitment to process of knowledge combination, whereby different forms and types of knowledge are fused, that Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) identify as key to the development of knowledge creating organisations. Crucially the web-based infrastructure and the collaborative processes and approach to knowledge creation, combination and development that underpin the project will significantly enhance the skills and competencies of participants of the guidance and counselling community. The participants will improve both their capacity to share their knowledge, expertise and understanding and to collaborate in the development of new forms of contextualised knowledge (formed from the 'combination' of explicit knowledge and more tacit 'ways of knowing').

The value of network and website participants learning how to engage in processes of knowledge creation, combination and development cannot be over-estimated. These processes are fundamental to the development of forms of 'new' contextualised knowledge that underpin the whole Lisbon process of moving towards a European knowledge-based society. In such a society, communities have to be able to learn through the co-construction of 'new' knowledge, rather than just relying on retrieval of information from existing knowledge resources. Helping the guidance and counselling community to develop these skills is particularly valuable, because these are precisely the skills they also wish to encourage in their clients. The innovative approach of this project involves: new processes in response to existing problems; new forms of co-operation/networking between partner organisations; and new opportunities to link knowledge-based systems to inform practice across countries. The important feature of this development is that it is the combination of opportunities to meet and talk through issues, engage in development work and link to continuing on-line discussions that will facilitate the collaboration necessary for active knowledge creation. Overall, the key to developing a learning community to enhance career guidance practice is to set up a

genuinely collaborative environment for a wide range of participants. By working together, participants develop greater competence using what group members already know as an important component and co-constructing plans of action to extend that knowledge (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994).

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