

# **Putting research at the centre of the design, development and operation of higher education careers services: A comparative study from the UK and Finland**

## **Abstract**

This chapter explores the changing nature of information, advice and guidance services within higher education settings in the UK and in Finland. It outlines ways in which career practitioners and managers are being required by policymakers to evidence their work more fully in order to demonstrate efficient and effective resource management. The development of the European Guidance and Counselling Research Forum website that aims to bring guidance research and practice closer together is discussed. The concept of developing a shared knowledge base, grounded in contextualised problems linked to, and supported by, contemporary research findings represents a major contribution to research capacity and infra-structure developments within and across the European Career Guidance and Counselling community.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, European Union (EU) countries have made a strong and clear commitment to developing improved nationwide skills strategies. This has arisen from shared concerns of increased competition from Asia and elsewhere, coupled with accelerated technological advances, which are impacting upon, and transforming, the very nature of learning and work for all young people and adults. Leading academics, such as Rifkin (1995); Sennett (1998); Nolan & Wood (2003); Taylor (2003); Moynagh & Worsley (2003); and Keep & Brown (2006), highlight how for many individuals their working lives are being altered as the content of their jobs change significantly over time. In this context, higher education institutions (HEIs) perform a key role in helping to advance knowledge and innovation through employability initiatives, scholarship and research activities. The rapid expansion of higher education, within and across nation states, has had a considerable effect on the nature and diversity of student populations set alongside wider and more flexible and

volatile labour markets. Watts & Van Esbroeck (1998) argue that guidance and counselling services are central to the higher education transformation process 'given their role in helping both their students and their institutions in adapting to a very different world' (p.89). In addition, work-based learning and growth in distance learning has resulted in closer working partnerships between employers and higher education institutions.

So far, different traditions of higher education within Europe have resulted in differing approaches to the use of research and development activities linked to providing evidence on the impact of career service work. Within this context, government policy drives for increased efficiency and accountability, in terms of providing value for money and the achievement of meaningful outcomes, particularly with priority target groups, are now a feature across the whole of Europe. This political imperative provides new opportunities for the careers profession to strengthen its evidence base and to create a common agenda for co-operation between European countries in the development of research that informs both policy and practice.

### **Policy context**

In Europe, higher education is considered to be at the heart of each country's productive capacity and its continued prosperity. The UK government set a target for England that, by 2010, 50% of young people should be participating in higher education. Currently, the proportion of young people in higher education is 42.5% with the figure expected to rise to 43.5% in 2007. In Finland the target is to increase the proportion of those who have achieved a higher-education degree in the age group 30-34 years old from 40% to 50% by the year 2015.

In funding widening participation agendas, the UK government has allocated resources specifically to attract students into higher education from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. The changing nature of the student population, resulting from government initiatives designed to increase access and participation, has presented new challenges to institutions supporting 'non-traditional' students. In many cases, new demands are being made on

information, advice and guidance services for more in-depth support for students at every stage of their higher education experience. At the same time, some fear that the introduction of increased tuition fees in September 2006 will discourage applications from those with poorer socio-economic backgrounds. Recent figures from the UK Universities & Colleges Admissions Service, (UCAS), revealed that the number of individuals applying to university had fallen by 3.4 % - the first drop in applications in the last six years – with critics warning that thousands of potential applicants have been put off participating in higher education by the prospect of paying higher tuition fees. This issue is likely to be more serious in the near future as the current average debt of new graduates is set to rise further with increased tuition fees. In contrast, the socio-economic status of individuals in Finland has a different emphasis in policy terms given that tuition fees are not currently charged.

In Finland, education for individuals, at all educational levels, is a fundamental right and its main aim is to prevent social exclusion through early intervention (Koulutuksen ja tutkimuksen kehittämissuunnitelma 2004). At all educational levels, the focus is on the efficiency of the educational system and on support and guidance of pupils and students. At the higher education level, a key challenge is to ensure smooth and timely progression from secondary education. To achieve this, student selection processes have been developed and the aim is that, by the year 2008, 55 % of new higher education students will have graduated from their secondary education in the same year as they start their studies at university or polytechnic. Progression through higher education is supported by individual study plans, guidance and counselling services and measures to reduce interruption of studies. According to the Bologna-agreement, universities have adopted the two-step system of degrees and curricula, and, for the first time, the right to study has been defined (Law 566/2005). Guidance and counselling services have been seen as a means of supporting students to successfully complete their studies. An aim is to ensure that at least 75% of the students who have started their studies get their Master's degree in the target time of five years. Accreditation procedures need to be developed to support progression, for example,

ensuring that comparable degrees from polytechnics and universities confer the same level of eligibility for further studies.

The demand for Finnish higher education places from overseas students, although increasing, is low compared to other EU and OECD countries (Valtioneuvoston koulutuspoliittinen selonteko eduskunnalle 2006).

### **Higher education careers work**

The provision of careers guidance for students in HEIs is well-established in universities and degree-awarding colleges in the UK with, typically, specialised careers advisory 'units' staffed by qualified professional careers advisers. Reflecting its status and importance in higher education, the service has its own professional association: the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS). Howieson & Semple (2006, p.40) report career guidance in higher education 'has a cohesive professional identity with more commonality across the UK than does careers guidance in other sectors'. The service is also supported by the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU) which was established in 1972 to provide news and information about research and development in career-related learning and career guidance in Higher Education.

In Finland, much research shows that higher education guidance and advisory services are fragmented and less well developed compared to the UK (Moitus *et al.*, 2001, Vuorinen *et al.*, 2005; Lairio & Penttinen 2006, Saukkonen 2006). The Finnish Student-Counsellor Association mainly represents student and study-counsellors in the primary and secondary school sector (83%), with a minority (8%) of the association members working in the field of higher education (SOPO, 2006).

Throughout the UK higher education sector, the term 'career guidance' is normally reserved to describe the more intensive support element of a broader range of services collectively referred to as 'careers education, information, advice and guidance' (CEIAG). As part of evidencing the impact

of their work, many universities' careers advisory services are actively participating actively in Higher Education Funding Council initiatives designed to improve graduates' levels of employability. In this context, it is important that higher education builds upon evidence that shows what employers are looking for in graduates. A Council for Industry and Higher Education study (2006) on employers' perceptions of skills developed through undergraduate study shows that 80% of the 36 employer respondents highlighted the ability to manage flexibility and change as a priority in assessing graduate employability. Employers also prioritised professional and business skills, information handling, interpersonal and self-application skills. These results are similar to research findings published by the Employment and Economic Development Centre of Central-Finland. Here it is reported that 57% of employers view as a high priority students' participation in work-based learning (Meriläinen, 2006).

Higher education careers professionals must now rise to the challenge of articulating clearly the critical importance of their work in helping to support individuals' employability and how this contributes to the achievement of government social and economic goals. For example, they must also be able to make explicit the added-value of careers interventions for *all* individuals, and in particular for employers, where high quality careers work can:

- help to raise the workforce development aspirations of employees;
- improve quality of job applications;
- reduce inappropriately targeted applications;
- minimise 'job hopping'; and
- optimise the use of human resource time as individuals act on self-help measures.

Herr (2004) argues that policy-makers expect at least two things of career guidance services. First, for career guidance services to be instrumental in achieving selected national or sub-national goals; and secondly, these services must also be cost-effective. The combination of both these factors has resulted in practitioners and managers of higher education careers

services seeking to identify outcomes that can be used to explain to policy-makers what they can realistically expect from high quality careers work. Strategies include goal statements specified in descriptions of particular models of careers work, content development of career assessment instruments and testimonies on what clients say they need and want from higher education career services. However, it has become evident that politicians and their advisers are divided in their assessment of the efficacy of careers work, both in terms of its impact and its social and economic value. As a result, there is a growing need to collaborate with, or educate, policy-makers about what they should expect as outcomes of career services. By reflecting on key developments in the higher education careers sector, major issues are identified that need to be addressed so that a credible, cogent and connected evidence-based can emerge to inform the design and implementation of highly innovative services.

### **Key developments**

Dearing (1997) recommended that UK institutions of higher education should 'over the medium term, integrate their services more fully into academic affairs' and that 'the Government, in the medium and long term, should integrate careers advice for lifelong learning, to complement services based inside higher education institutions' (recommendation 11). The Government's response stated that it will be addressing, with interested parties, the scope for closer working links between careers services within and outside higher education.

In Finland, the mission of higher education has been defined as teaching, research and development, including making a contribution to the development of the regions. The contribution of higher education to regional development involves the application of research to help achieve social and economic objectives, and the strengthening of career development and recruitment services in support of workforce development objectives. The strengthening of international activities has also been a major objective in HEIs in Finland.

Overall, the dynamic and rapidly changing context of higher education has ensured that a wide range of factors influence the career-related behaviour of prospective students, students and graduates. Implications for the need to deliver efficient, effective and economic careers education, information and guidance services within higher education are profound, with a modernising agenda identified and quality assurance of services prioritised.

In the UK, AGCAS has identified a succession of public policy imperatives, statutory obligations and guidelines for HE institutions on 'employability' that have emerged recently, which include:

- Performance indicators for the employment outcomes of graduates; also institutional audits analyse how each university measures up to the benchmarks for employability, and whether procedures to address this are integrated into the curriculum as required by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).
- The new fees environment and widening participation agenda which require that HEIs should demonstrably provide value for money that will often be judged by enhanced skills and employability outcomes.
- Personal Development Planning (PDP) requirements, which oblige HEIs to offer opportunities to all undergraduates for holistic development and recording of achievement that will be of value to the individual, to employers and to society. Many HEIs have now begun to see careers education as a vehicle for PDP, and to acknowledge that students will best engage with this if it is an accredited and assessed part of the curriculum.
- The Centres of Excellence initiative, which has led to the creation of several national centres remitted to promote employability through teaching and learning (AGCAS, 2005).

## ***Career interventions that support students and graduates***

A recent literature review of evidence regarding curricular and extra-curricular interventions which assist students and graduates to make career-related decisions and progress towards entry into the labour market found that this area has been well researched (Bimrose *et al.*, 2006). Six themes were identified, relating both to pre-course and on-course guidance. Specifically, these were: pre-entry interventions; career-related interventions; curricular interventions to support vocational trajectories; curricular-related interventions; extra-curricular interventions; and multicultural interventions. For specialist career interventions, evaluations were generally positive (i.e. for courses, modules, computer programs, one-to-one interviews and e-guidance), though the evidence relating to the efficacy of these interventions is limited.

### ***Pre-entry guidance***

A range of career-related initiatives have been used to promote higher education for under-represented groups in the UK. For example, a pilot study, demonstrated how support from local undergraduate medical and dental students, as part of a structured school/college based programme, resulted in an increase of academically able students from (socio-economically) underprivileged educational backgrounds progressing to study medicine and dentistry (Kamali *et al.*, 2000). Cooter *et al.* (2004) found that students who were provided with financial assistance as part of a structured careers programme to pursue a medical education successfully completed their courses. They also noted differences in learning and career progression between students from high and low socio-economic groups (classified by parental income) and their study concluded that financial concerns influenced students' career choice. Finally, a pre-entry intervention led participants through a discussion of their vocational interests which supported subject choice and occupational choices. This was found to be successful in helping career undecided women identify the barriers to their career decision-making (Tinsley *et al.*, 2002). In addition to these types of targeted pre-entry guidance

interventions, some HEIs (for example, University of Derby, England) have extended their general service offer to include further education students.

Research findings from Finland (for example, Moitus *et al.*, 2001; Vuorinen *et al.*, 2005; Karjalainen & Kasurinen 2006) emphasise the early and crucial role that 'study counselling' plays in the application phase. One means of increasing student commitment and retention is to ensure that offers of study options accurately and realistically match the talents and interests of applicants. This requires detailed and accurate information about study options and close co-operation between those in the HEIs responsible for student recruitment and those responsible for the content and delivery of study options.

In Finland the use of personal study plans is being introduced as a new guidance 'tool' across all higher education institutions with the Ministry of Education and the higher education sector making a commitment to their use from August 2006. At the pre-entry guidance stage the personal study plans are likely to be significant in helping to improve student retention. Detailed descriptions of curriculum content and study schedules provide a basis upon which students can form their individual study plans supported by discussion with study counsellors.

### **On-course guidance**

Careers services for students in higher education are well-established across universities and degree-awarding colleges in the UK. Typically, they comprise specialist units staffed by qualified professional careers advisers, with differing levels of involvement from academic departments. They often operate alongside student service 'units', offering a wide range of ancillary and support services covering, for example, health, welfare and housing. Higher education careers services offer a range of services. For example, one university careers service website publishes 'a comprehensive range of services to undergraduates and post-graduates, including face-to-face interviews; access to on-line resources and a vacancy database; a

programme of events (e.g. careers fairs); practice selection and assessment tests and information about graduate first destinations’.

In addition, Universities are increasingly developing career management skills as part of the curriculum. Approaches to embedding career education and management skills throughout the higher education curriculum can be identified along a continuum between those that are discrete and those that are integrated. An example of a discrete curriculum location might be a stand-alone, compulsory, generic careers module. An example of a wholly integrated location might be where careers learning outcomes are achieved through a discipline’s subject matter, perhaps occurring in several places throughout a programme. Few programmes are wholly discrete or wholly integrated and both types are embedded, by virtue of being part of the curriculum.

Currently there are significant variations in aspects of curricula such as:

- Size (careers modules typically range from five to twenty credits)
- Location (often in the second year, but the first and final years are also used)
- Name (e.g. career management skills, professional skills, placement preparation)
- Choice (some are university wide electives, many, however, are compulsory).

In Finland, on-course guidance in higher education concentrates mainly on the choice of practical training places and the choice of the thesis perspective, though it can also involve guidance related to remedial study. Students consider on-course guidance as the least significant element of the guidance available throughout their higher education experience (Moitus *et al.*, 2001; Vuorinen *et al.*, 2005). Specific student needs have been identified in relation to on-course guidance including, for example, students who have been absent from study for some time and students returning from military service. Specific

methods have been developed, for example, the use of ICT and group-counselling, and particular professional roles and responsibilities have been identified, for example, study counsellors, teacher-tutors, student-tutors, mentors, counsellors and teachers within departments and faculties. Generally, Finnish higher education staff consider student-centred factors to be the most significant in affecting student progress. These factors include the part-time jobs students have, the problems students have with their relationships, learning and health problems, and student 'burn-out'. Students consider institutional factors to be most significant in affecting their progress, including the study arrangements and resource shortages.

### **Post-course guidance**

Employability is increasingly seen as a key performance indicator by higher education institutes. The UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) has undertaken a fundamental review of the collection of information about the 'destinations of leavers from higher education' (DeLHE). New arrangements were introduced in December 2003 which require all universities to provide a six-month early destination survey of all graduates (used to produce institutional performance indicators), supplemented by a follow-up survey of a sample of leavers after a further two years. HESA indicates that research findings show that information about graduate employment six months after graduation is a good predictor of future employment patterns and consequently can be used as a measure of institutional performance. Services designed to support transition into the labour market are consequently well developed and include careers fairs, preparation for selection, access to a range of vacancy sources and computer aided guidance designed for various purposes.

Once students have completed their courses, guidance provision varies according to the awarding institution and the region of the country where the student is resident. As students are increasingly delaying career decision-making and taking longer to establish themselves in their careers, a gap in provision is evident at this stage of graduate careers. A mutual aid scheme once existed, where students were entitled to visit careers services at

institutions nearest to their residence. However, more recently, significant variations in practice have developed, with students not uncommonly being left without any HE careers service support at this crucial stage in their career development.

In Finland, guidance and counselling during the final stage of study concentrates on the student's thesis and on career guidance, and such services are considered by most to be sufficiently developed (Vuorinen *et al.*, 2005). The departments are responsible for the thesis guidance and the staff in specialist career service units are responsible for career guidance. Some universities, for example, the universities of Jyväskylä and Joensuu, have completed research on the job placement of the students after graduation (Puhakka & Tuominen, 2006; Tauriainen, 2004).

### ***Existing tensions***

A review of guidance and counselling for higher education, commissioned by the Council of Europe (Bimrose, 1996) highlighted a number of tensions in provision in the three phases of service provision in the UK, specifically: pre-entry, on-course and post-course. These comprised: existing variation across the University sector because of different levels of resources; guidance which is delivered by those with no power to admit students compared to that offered by those who have the power to admit but have less interest in guidance; guidance being more easily accessible by those who need it less; and a lack of integration of available services. In Finland, it has been noted that whilst career guidance services are readily available for those successfully enrolled on higher education courses (Vuorinen *et al.*, 2005), there is a need for greater attention to be given to those outside of the formal higher education system.

### ***Variations in provision***

The resource bases of different University careers services will reflect not only the financial health of the institution, but also the priority attached by senior

management to information, advice and guidance. One indicator is the staffing levels available in different services. Variations identified in recent UK research across just ten universities, revealed differences in staffing levels that ranged from one service that employed over seventy careers staff to another with less than six. The staff: student ratio will, therefore, be one important determinant of services available. Another will be the level of demand for services from students. For example, careers services that market themselves successfully may find that demand for services exceeds their ability to deliver efficiently.

### ***Admissions or guidance?***

Originally, careers services within higher education institutions were intended to help graduates secure employment at the point of exit, rather than secure entry to courses. One consequence is that higher education careers specialists tend not to be involved in admissions to courses, nor do they have the authority to offer study programmes to students. The power of admissions remains with admissions tutors, who are unlikely to have had career guidance training and in many cases their role is primarily grounded in 'marketing' and/or 'student admissions'. In Universities and/or for courses where active recruitment is necessary to attract students (rather than a process of selection of the 'best candidates') there may well be an expectation placed on careers staff to assist with recruitment (for example, in the UK, one University careers adviser recently reported that her institution expected careers advisers to attend careers fairs for school pupils for the purpose of recruiting students to under-subscribed courses).

### ***Gaps in service provision***

There is a problem for students who change courses or drop out of education. Whilst University careers staff may be able to offer guidance support to individuals as they are coming to their decisions to discontinue, once they have left the institution, the ability to continue to support these clients will vary. Data from a survey of higher education careers advisory services in the UK

found that while all offered free services to their current students, many restricted their services to their own graduates (Watts *et al.*, 2005, p.6). The 'drop-out' is, therefore, in danger of falling into the gap between services provided free by higher education careers advisers and services outside HEIs which often operate eligibility criteria for services which may exclude individuals qualified beyond a certain level.

Similarly, there are gaps in provision for the students who successfully complete their higher education courses. In the UK, some HEIs continue to offer support to their graduates for up to two years after completion and some support students from other Universities who have relocated to an area nearby. However, this provision is not consistent and some services are charged. For example, the University of London Careers Group has recently implemented a fee structure for certain aspects of its services, within a market led approach (Watts *et al.*, 2005).

In Finland, after graduation it is possible to use the careers information, guidance and counselling services provided by the public labour administration. However, it has been noted that these services are mainly planned for younger users, and that the career information, guidance and counselling services for adults are fragmented. Different providers, both locally and nationally, deliver these services and service provider networks do not operate yet. It has been suggested that HEIs must develop their information services to introduce adults to the different degree and educational possibilities HEIs provide. (Aikuisopiskelun tietopalvelujen, neuvonnan ja ohjauksen kehittäminen, 2006.)

### ***Lack of integration of provision***

There is a lack of integration of provision with a policy demarcation between young people leaving compulsory education and further, higher education, employment and training. In the UK, Watts *et al.* (2001) investigated the working links between careers services within and outside higher education and noted differences in political accountability, professional organisation,

professional qualifications, location and functions, as well as culture and status. They highlight how salaries and conditions of service tend to be superior in HEIs compared with other parts of the sector.

Throughout the UK, the integration of careers education with other employability related higher education initiatives is currently being reviewed (for example, Personal Development Planning (PDP); Progress Files; work experience; entrepreneurship and enterprise). The Higher Education Academy is currently developing benchmarks for incorporating transferable skills into programme specifications to help improve consistency and coherence across all subject areas.

In Finland, the use of individual study plans (ISP) is seen as one means of supporting continuity, progression and quality assurance. As students structure their study paths in advance, they can avoid redundant choices provided that HEIs make sufficiently different and appropriate kinds of study and counselling opportunities available. To support the individual study plan process, different kinds of electronic soft-ware tools and digital portfolios have been developed (eISP) separately, and from the students` perspective it would be useful to try to develop one tool. With such a tool, students should be able to plan and follow their studies and integrate their own personal aims and self-evaluation as part of career planning. The process should be integrated with web-based career and recruitment services and should be developed according to portfolio-thinking taking into account both study and personal career planning. (Vuorinen *et al.*, 2005.)

### ***Commissioned research into careers work in higher education***

In the UK, a major research study has recently been commissioned by the HECSU in collaboration with UCAS. Two cohorts of applicants are being surveyed at four points in their careers: as they are about to embark on higher education, one year later, after three years of study and finally in 2010 and 2011 respectively. These core surveys thus comprise a six year tracking study of 2005 and 2006 UCAS applicants, a sufficient period to follow most

into employment or postgraduate training. The research will provide an unprecedented and robust account of the way students plan and prepare for their working lives beyond university. The core studies will be complemented by a range of shorter-term subsidiary studies examining emerging themes in more depth as part of a major HECSU-funded programme on career decision-making. One of these studies currently underway is mapping curriculum development and career decision-making in higher education, with the goal of disseminating good practice.

These surveys will provide an opportunity to track students through higher education and beyond, exploring at each stage how different types of students and graduates encounter opportunities and make decisions. The key objective is to map the current and emerging graduate labour markets and the impact of higher education expansion on UK employment, but the researchers will also be able to compare new data with studies of graduates as far back as the 1980s – when participation in higher education was at very different levels.

In addition, the development of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning initiative, which began in April 2005, provides funding for five-year development and research projects specifically designed to support the higher education employability agenda. This represents the largest ever single funding initiative in teaching and learning in the UK. Included within this is the development of a new 'Centre for Career Management Skills' (CCMS) which aims to create interactive on-line resources and to support academic innovation.

Allied to this, a review of the available research evidence for assessing the benefits of career guidance (Hughes *et al.*, 2002) summarised the findings of no fewer than 45 contemporary publications linked to the evaluation of guidance-related services. This review makes clear that there is no shortage of 'opinion studies', and other evidence, demonstrating the 'softer' and the more immediate outcomes of guidance, such as clients' satisfaction or utility ratings and improved CV writing skills. However, the review also makes clear

that the evidence to demonstrate the 'harder' and longer-term outcomes, such as employment and other career-related life changes, is much weaker.

### **The contribution of research to the development of HEIs' career services**

At present, the higher education landscape reflects a rich tapestry of careers education, information, advice, guidance and counselling provision; however, there are significant inconsistencies across services for both young people and adults at the point of entry to Universities, whilst undertaking HE courses and after they leave. As indicated earlier, a substantial amount of research has helped reveal the differing types of careers interventions that support students and graduates progress through higher education into the labour market. Key issues that have emerged from these findings are summarised below:

- There are significant variations in levels of service provision and resource allocation for pre-course, on-course and post-course support.
- Tensions exist in relation to the role of the university admission tutor compared with the careers adviser.
- Related to this potential role conflict, tensions also exist around recruitment for courses that are under-subscribed compared with selection for those that are highly competitive.
- There is a lack of integration of services available both at the point of entry to higher education and at the point of exit.
- There is a significant gap in service provision for students who 'drop out' from their courses prior to completion.
- Career professional associations operating within and outside of HEIs have very separate arrangements which often result in the use of differing terminology used to describe careers work, quality standards and professional qualifications.

Given the variations, tensions and gaps that exist, careers professionals and researchers across Europe are seeking new ways to share and develop

knowledge that can contribute to the transformation of services operating within a highly consumer-driven society. This has led to the development of a European website that seeks to bring guidance research and practice closer together within a transnational context.

### **Development of a shared web-based knowledge facility**

A pilot research project, funded by the European Union Leonardo Programme, is currently underway and aims to support on-line collaboration of guidance practitioners, researchers, trainers and policy makers in five partner countries, namely, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Slovenia and the UK. The objective is to establish a European network for career guidance and counselling that brings research and practice together in the area of equal opportunities, supported by the technology-enhanced development of the European Guidance and Counselling Research Forum (EGCRF) website. The processes of knowledge creation and transfer that have underpinned the development of this website have involved extensive and on-going consultation with key stakeholders in the five partner countries. This project will test out the feasibility of members of European guidance and counselling communities learning from each other for the key purpose of improving services delivered to clients. The implications of research for practice are central to this endeavour.

In each of the five partner countries, expert groups have been formed in order to support the delivery of content relevant to the target groups for the website. The expert groups meet face-to-face to discuss issues of policy and practice related specifically to equal opportunities. Discussions are continued online and summaries of discussions from each country are then translated into the languages of each partner, together with more extended commentaries in English, as part of the continuing process of knowledge creation for the network. This is designed to 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 web-based technology.

It is planned that the EGCRF will be of use to its target groups by:

- providing a means of networking with members across a broad European community of interest in guidance and counselling;
- keeping users up-dated on equal opportunities research by giving access to materials on-line;
- linking users to a library resource database and information specialist service.

The EGCRF initiative builds upon a National Guidance Research Forum (NGRF) website established for the creation and sharing of knowledge primarily for the guidance community across the UK. An interdisciplinary team of researchers from the Universities of Warwick and Derby in England, together with 'knownet' (a small specialist collaborative software development company) based in Wales, worked in partnership with professional guidance associations and government agencies to develop the NGRF, the objectives of which mirror those of the EGCRF. The objective is that the Forum, led by the Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, supports collaboration, knowledge transformation and the creation of a dynamic 'community of interest' to support guidance, policy, research and practice. This was formally launched in September 2004, aimed at those interested in guidance research and practice, including: practitioners; managers; researchers; trainers, students and policy makers.

The objectives of this initial website are to: -

- create and support an on-line community of interest for guidance;
- bring practice, research and policy closer together; and
- focus on the core problems of guidance practice.

The project extends the use of ICT to support knowledge development for a dispersed community of interest through an interactive and collaborative approach to knowledge creation (Brown & Bimrose, 2000; Brown, Attwell &

Bimrose, 2002; Brown, Bimrose & Hughes, 2005). There are three main sections on the NGRF website. First, 'Future Trends' contains information on labour market changes and skills needs in the UK. Secondly, a library and information database is provided through direct links made to the National Library Resource for Guidance (NLRG), based at the Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby. This offers the user an opportunity to engage in one-to-one support, where necessary, to acquire specific information linked to specific needs. Thirdly, materials linked to 'Making Guidance More Effective', comprise a range of synopses, links, resources and edited discussions on six inter-related themes as follows:

- (i) Equal Opportunities (where complex issues surrounding the complexity of equality of opportunity and guidance are explored, together with relevant legislation)
- (ii) Impact Analysis (where evidence-based policies and practices are explored and gaps identified in existing practice)
- (iii) Using Research in Practice (where research processes and skill acquisition are highlighted aimed at both newcomers and experienced researchers)
- (iv) Improving Practice (where both theoretical concepts and practice issues linked to ways in which changes to policy, or in technology, can lead to the need to re-examine and critically assess practice)
- (v) Lifelong learning (where the inter-relationships between teaching, learning and guidance are explored)
- (vi) International Perspectives (where participants can learn from global developments and contribute to a wider debate on contemporary issues).

## **Conclusion**

Across Europe policy-makers are increasingly making more explicit the requirement for those involved in careers work to demonstrate the added value of their interventions (that is, greater levels of accountability), and to improve their efficacy and effectiveness. This requirement is also a subject of

much debate and research in the European Union as well as further a field in Canada, Australia and the USA. A clear message from contemporary research findings is the need for larger-scale, and longer-term, studies to provide more robust evidence of the impact of careers work. The higher education careers sector must rise to this challenge and, in so doing, embrace the benefits of demonstrating accountability. Research has a vital role to play in showing impact and, in particular, in identifying those interventions that are most effective with particular groups. The diversity in careers provision throughout Europe offers new possibilities for collaboration and the dissemination of good practice. The EGCRF, building upon the development of the NGRF in the UK, is ideally placed to provide a platform for the creation and sharing of knowledge and good and interesting policies and practices. The guidance community should eagerly look forward to its continued development and its potential impact on the expansion of new European 'communities of interest' in careers research, policy and practice.

*Word count: 6145 (excluding title)*

To find out more, visit the European Guidance & Counselling Research

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

To find out more about the NGRF you can visit the site on: [www.guidance-research.org](http://www.guidance-research.org)

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