

## ***An Italian Journey: The IAEVG Conference General Assembly 2007***

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*Guidance and Diversity* was the theme of the 2007 International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) Conference General Assembly which was held from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> September in the beautiful city of Padova, Italy. The venue for the conference was the University of Padova, one of the most ancient universities in Europe, founded in 1222, and a famous site of learning for such luminaries as Galileo Galilei and Niccolò Copernico. The university also has a long tradition of scientific production in guidance, as was evidenced during the four day event.

This annual event provides a forum for the discussion of issues in policy and practice and the sharing of up to date research in the field of guidance at an international level. Underpinned by the common thread of *diversity* in practice, a vast range of topics were covered that catered for all sectors of guidance provision including secondary, further education and training, third level, and adult guidance. . These were delivered in a variety of professional formats including symposiums, workshops, and paper and poster presentations .The conference was attended by guidance practitioners, researchers, academics and associated professionals including some delegates from Ireland. On the final day of the event I had the opportunity to present a paper on my current postgraduate research topic (adult guidance) in a shared presentation session on ‘career guidance interventions’.

On Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> September, an IAEVG-SVP-NCDA Symposium was held on *Vocational psychology and career guidance practice: An international partnership*. This included 8 working groups presenting on themes related to; new challenges for vocational psychology, models of practice, assessment procedures, the efficacy of vocational guidance and professional training for career guidance practitioners and researchers.

The theme of the conference was introduced at the official launch the following morning by the President of the IAEVG, Bernhard Jenschke, who spoke of the current challenges experienced by career practitioners and the need to understand career as a special kind of ‘culture’. The IAEVG has approved international competencies for career guidance counseling. One of these competencies is ‘careness and awareness of clients’ culture’. He also stressed that research, benchmarking, scientific contribution and ongoing testing requires continuous co-operation with many other stakeholders.

The opening session also had contributions from three prominent speakers. Mika Launikari (CEDEFOP) set the political context of the scientific and methodological development of the lifelong guidance agenda. In particular, he noted, issues related to demographic aging, youth unemployment, range of quality and openings for older workers, gender issues, information and training needs, are a major priority in guidance. Lifelong guidance policies now need to be shaped by concrete evidence in order to reach the goals of the Lisbon Agenda. This requires increased dialogue among all stakeholders, co-operation models, clear definition and evaluation of provision, as well as bottom-up and top-down approaches in order to strengthen lines between policy and practice. Currently, measures are being taken to achieve this through the establishment of the European lifelong guidance policy network by the end of the year.

Raoul Van Esbroeck (IAEVG) spoke of the 'personal power' of individual clients. Many supports to socio-economic groups are based on a social model of guidance counseling which is biased and informed by middle class values embedded in our national and social cultures. The development of cross-cultural psychology has helped to challenge these perceptions.

This session ended with an inspirational keynote address from Salvatore Soresi, University of Padova, who continued this theme stating that differences raise important questions for researchers and practitioners. Specifically, differences exist between our countries reflecting our diverse labour markets and economies, and our social and cultural contexts which need analysis and practical applications through differing methodologies in empirical research. He believes focus now needs to be given to 'preventive' vocational guidance which must be;

- Started early with curriculum views that respect continuity and graduality.
- Be capable of decreasing the inhibitory power of obstacles by removing both

personal and social barriers.

Vocational guidance should be interested in fostering new skills and interests in a continually changing labour market. It has the capacity to change the endings of specially written stories, i.e. the socially excluded, and plays a key role in people's self-determination, self-efficacy, social participation and quality of life. Soresi stressed the role of research in guidance which must not confine itself to the examination of basic phenomenon. It must also test and propose 'action modalities', i.e. actions to be implemented, which include;

- Motivate the demotivated
- How to influence juvenile policies and improve everybody's working

conditions.

Whilst we do need quantitative analysis; for choosing and prioritizing interventions and to evaluate the efficacy of programme interventions, Soresi stressed, it is also necessary to report through qualitative methodologies (e.g. self-evaluations, narratives, direct observation and ecological assessment). In particular, qualitative assessment; gives a role to the client, emphasises the holistic study of the person, works particularly well in small-group situations and the participants involved can come from different cultures and backgrounds.

During the three days *diversity* was promoted and discussed through symposiums, workshops, presentations and poster sessions. The Wednesday symposium addressed diversity and new paradigms in guidance theory development. These included the Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon), a Systems Approach to career (Collin), Contextual Action Theory (Young & Valach). A demonstration of the application of current research to practice was given by Laura Nota, University of Padova. She provided an example of using theory (Krumboltz) in guidance work with young students and their vocational decision-making through formalized group sessions. Some of the key findings of the research found with regard to career planning;

- The future is not discovered but constructed
- Clients neglect to think about how their professional life could develop
- Adolescents are attached to 'here and now'

To conclude, Nota argued, if young people make decisions based on 'planned happenstance', how will guidance help them with their longterm career planning?

Thursday lunchtime saw the conference draw to a close with the keynote address given by Puncky P. Heppner (USA) on the topic of the 'Role of culture in applied problem solving and coping'. Based on twenty years of research and the development of the PSI – Problem Solving Inventory, an overview was provided of its application within career counseling (which has been tested primarily on young people). Heppner and his colleagues have found that ineffective problem solvers can display: more career indecision, less rational decision making strategies, distressed patterns in undecided students (more psychopathology), more career burnout, more feelings of career stress, and less ability to develop a working alliance in career counseling. Furthermore, across populations and cultures, there is a strong link between PSI and distress such as depression, hopelessness and suicidal tendencies (Heppner, Witty & Dixon, 2004).

However, up until quite recently, the cultural context has been largely ignored in applied problem solving and coping. Their most recent research on collectivistic coping styles highlights how people from other cultures (e.g. Taiwan) deal with problems differently (P. Heppner, M. Heppner, Lee, Wang, Park, & Wang, 2006) Heppner recommends that in a guidance session with a client from another culture, it is important to ask the client 'what is causing the distress/stressor?' Our own western values may be blinding us to the significance the client places on the problem. This research is particularly significant for cross-cultural guidance intervention and helpful for those of us now working with clients from different cultures (and not just different countries).

Before the end of the session we were given the IAEVG conference schedule for the next two years:

*Sept 18-20, 2008, Buenos Aires, Argentina*

Topic: 'Guidance as a Proposal for Social Ecology'

*June 3-5, 2009, Finland*

Topic: 'Coherence, Co-operation & Quality in Guidance and Counselling'

*Autumn, 2009, New Zealand*

Topic: still to be announced

The closing speech was delivered by the new incoming IAEVG President, Brian Hebrid, Professor of Applied Psychology, Alberta, Canada. We were then free to explore the shopping and culinary delights that beautiful Padova and the surrounding areas had to offer!

From a personal point of view, the opportunity to attend the conference increased my awareness of the depth and breath of new knowledge being produced through research and practice internationally. It also confirmed the valuable work we do with a diverse range of clients in Ireland which may be under reported at present in our profession. A deficit which could be addressed through the development of a variety of dissemination structures for the sharing of good practice.

During the conference, similar issues arose among the delegates, all of which are linked to changes in contemporary work practice and increased globalization that now require new models of practice in our profession. These include; practitioner training, diversity of interventions, human resource management, multicultural clients, disability issues, at-risk youths, and the older worker. In particular, the need for evidence-based research in the development of quality assurance frameworks which address the gap

between policy and practice is now a major focus in guidance discourse. This is acknowledged in the recent publication *Guidance for Life: An Integrated Framework for Lifelong Guidance in Ireland*. Hopefully, we are moving ever closer to the development of a community of guidance practitioners/researchers in the guidance profession here in Ireland.

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*Further information and photographs available at <http://iaevgconference07.psy.unipd.it>*

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