

Better practice

Anthony Barnes, Editor

When NICEC launched *Career Research and Development* in 2000, the avowed intention was to make practice thoughtful and theory practical for the reader. As readers will know, the impetus for improvement in career education and career guidance practice comes from many directions: policy, theory, research and practice; but wherever the trigger for change comes from, the starting point is the same. Someone asked a challenging question such as:

- What could we do differently or better here?
- Have we got it right or are we missing something?
- What don't we know about this?

Restless minds are the spur to better practice. The contributors to this issue would probably all agree that we have more to fear from 'unquestioned answers' than 'unanswered questions'! For those of us working in career guidance organisations and organisations which provide career guidance for their people, the problem is how to respond to the challenging questions that are posed to us. Mathieu Weggeman's ideas about R-professionals and I-professionals have something to offer us here. 'Knowledge-intensive organisations' need a mix of Routine professionals and Innovative/improving professionals. R-professionals strive for efficiency – they are good at doing the same, predictable things better. I-professionals strive for effectiveness – they are good at developing new activities and doing things differently. They organise creative ideas and concepts in an understandable and practical way.

This analysis inevitably leads professionals to ask questions such as 'What sort of professional am I?' and 'Is one sort of professional better than the other?' The extremes rarely exist so it is quite possible to conclude that you are a mix of the two types. It is also quite likely that you will realise that both extreme orientations have their pitfalls and, as both types of professional are needed in successful organisations, the challenge is to maximise the advantages of your style and minimise its disadvantages. One of the problems for R-professionals to avoid, for example, is that as their careers develop they continue to get better at doing things that are no longer as relevant and appropriate as they once were. This can be tackled by making a conscious commitment to investing in lifelong learning.

In one way or another, all of the contributors to this issue are asking us to break old patterns, to avoid simplifying the situation and to question standardised solutions. Our previous skills and

experience are no longer a sure guide as to what needs doing in the future. It is only by functioning as reflective practitioners that we can avoid developing the skilled incompetence of the unchanged R-professional!

The first article by Jim Hillage of the Institute for Employment Studies explores the difficult process of designing evaluation research into IAG (information, advice and guidance). It is based on the lecture he gave last October in memory of John Killeen, a senior fellow of NICEC, who died at the end of 2003. Jim commented that he never met John but nevertheless knew of and admired his work. His article is in part a dialogue with John's methodologies from his previous studies.

Many readers will remember the first 'Cutting Edge' conference held in Leicester in April 2000 and reported in the first issue of this journal in October of the same year. The aim of the Cutting Edge conferences is to stimulate debate about guidance-related issues and especially to focus on the role of research. In April 2003, 'Cutting Edge II: learning from research' was held in Coventry. As we prepare for 'Cutting Edge III' in December 2006, it seemed highly appropriate to recall the key achievements of that second conference. Published for the first time is the presentation by Wendy Hirsh and Jenny Bimrose who gave their personal view of 'What are we taking away?' followed by Ruth Hawthorn's notes on the discussion from the final panel session.

In this issue we also have two articles by Helen Colley who is Senior Research Fellow at the Education and Social Research Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, and a Fellow of NICEC. The first is about formality and informality in mentoring for career development, both in business and for disadvantaged young people. The second is called 'Do we choose careers or do they choose us?', and it reflects on some of the lessons for CEG practice from the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme.

Finally, Grace Maduka and Ivan Robertson report the findings of their research into the occupational aspirations, choices and developments of three groups of adolescents: Asians, Afro-Caribbean and White Britons in Liverpool and Manchester during their immediate periods of transition from school to work.

References

Weggeman, M. (2001). *Kennismanagement, inrichting en besturing van kennisintensieve organisaties*. Schiedam: Scriptum.