Career guidance and public policy: Bridging the gap

A summary of the key messages from an international conference
Toronto, Canada

6-8 October 2003
1. Introduction

On 6-8 October 2003 109 people came together in Toronto, Canada to discuss career guidance and public policy. The participants, from 26 countries and 5 international organisations, combined senior policy makers from national education and labour portfolios and respected national representatives of career guidance practitioners. Sponsored jointly by the OECD and the government of Canada, it was held in association with the European Commission, the World Bank and the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance. The background for the conference was a set of three recently completed major reports on career guidance and public policy by the OECD, the European Commission and the World Bank1. Spanning 36 countries, the three studies used a common analytical framework based upon the questionnaire developed for the OECD study. Against the background provided by these reports, the overall goal of the conference was to consider how career guidance services can be used by policy makers to promote lifelong learning, economic development, labour market efficiency, and social cohesion. The specific conference objectives were:

- **To develop and exchange knowledge** by releasing the results of the three major international reviews done by the OECD, the European Union and the World Bank regarding career guidance services and the experiences of both developed and developing countries;

- **To improve evidence-based policy making** by using these results to position information and career development as policy steering tools that support and promote lifelong learning, economic development, labour market efficiency, and social cohesion;

- **To strengthen the policy and practice nexus** by identifying ways — based on knowledge of what works — that policy makers and practitioners can use these services better to inform, influence, and advance public policy goals; and

- **To situate Canadian experiences globally** – by linking Canadian researchers, policy advisors, program developers, and practitioners to international networks so as to build on Canada’s capacity to contribute to international comparisons and analyses.

In her opening remarks to the conference, the Hon. Jane Stewart, Minister for Human Resource Development Canada, highlighted the key role that career guidance can play in motivating people to make full use of their potential, in addressing social exclusion, and in improving the match between labour market supply and demand. She also highlighted some of the key issues that policy makers need to address if the gap between career guidance and public policy is to be reduced: in particular by improving the knowledge base through collecting better evidence, and by a stronger focus upon issues of quality and outcomes.

A distinctive feature of the conference was its active and participative nature. Over half of the participants played an active role as presenters, panel members, theme moderators or rapporteurs. After presentation of the results of the three studies on the first day, the substantive discussions at the conference took place on the second day. They were organised around six themes: Connecting policy and practice; Connecting research and knowledge development; Career information; Access to services; Measuring outcomes; and Innovation. The specific issues and questions around which discussion was organised for each of these themes are given in the Appendix to this report.

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1. The three individual reports, as well as a synthesis of the three prepared by Professor Tony Watts and Professor Ronald Sultana, can be found on the conference web site: [http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/guidance2003/](http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/guidance2003/)
2. Conclusions from discussions of the six themes

Theme 1: Connecting policy and practice

In addition to making recommendations, the groups discussing this theme focused upon three broad areas: mechanisms to connect policy and practice; ways to connect career guidance services to consumer needs; and ways to help career guidance services to meet policy objectives.

Connecting policy and practice
Models to connect policy and practice were discussed, and it was argued that the connection would be facilitated by a focus upon common ground, or upon the intersection between education, the labour market and social cohesion. It was agreed that common languages, between policy makers and practitioners, were needed to facilitate the connection, that needs vary across countries and that the same mechanisms might not be applicable in all countries, and that developing countries may have advantages in being able to make “policy leap frogs”.

A model that can be used to connect the two domains provided by one of the participants is shown below.

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Connecting career guidance services to consumer needs
The need for a comprehensive policy was emphasised, with a broad scope, involving all stakeholders and social partners. For policy to be translated into practice, legislation needs to be accompanied by sustainable resources, and training needs to be included.

Helping career guidance services meet policy objectives
In order to keep career guidance on the policy radar screen, better evaluation data is needed, there needs to be consensus on what counts as acceptable indicators of success, and there is a need for national policies on career guidance. In addition, a clear profile of career guidance is needed, and career guidance needs to be integrated into other policy areas – for example education, employment, immigrant settlement, social security.

Key recommendations
- The development of clear national profiles of career guidance and the integration of these into other (i.e. not just career guidance) policy areas, with national forums being an important mechanism for achieving this.
The development of comprehensive national career guidance policies, having a broad scope.

The development of a common language to connect the two domains.

Making greater use of the OECD’s PISA study to provide policy-relevant data.

Conducting more policy/practice dialogues on evaluation.

The working groups’ final conclusion was that collaboration takes time and patience; to explore the common ground and to establish trust.

**Theme 2: Connecting research and knowledge development**

The working groups made only one, and important, recommendation. This was that, within any future International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy, a strong and distinctive research branch be created, with a realistic vision of what is doable and useful. To support this, there needs, within the Centre, to be a clear organising framework, relationships need to be established with relevant national research centres, all research formats need to be drawn upon and connected to, a dissemination strategy needs to be developed, and a range of different research disciplines needs to be drawn upon.

The groups also commented that research needs to be policy driven as well as theory and practice driven; that there is a reciprocal responsibility for research to address policy concerns and for policy makers to fund research that is broader than immediate policy concerns; and that both policy makers and practitioners need to be brave enough to act upon the results of research, and to make changes based upon current, as well as future, research findings.

**Theme 3: Career information**

*Some broad conclusions*

- Better career information is needed because of inadequacies and gaps: both in the information that is available and in its delivery.

- Information is a key building block for career guidance, but is insufficient by itself.

*Some broad policy messages*

- Career information needs to be situated within a (rethought) lifelong guidance system.

- The education system needs to develop students’ skills to self-manage their learning and their careers, and these skills need to include information acquisition, management and use skills.

*Consumers’ information needs*

- A key assumption is that it is important to tailor career information to consumers’ needs.

- Insufficient knowledge exists about what these needs are and on who the consumers of career information are.

- There needs to be easy access to the right information at the right time in forms that are appropriate to needs.

- People need the skills to locate, identify, evaluate and use career information.
• Policy makers need to be aware of the number and diversity of target groups to be served.

• Research is needed to better identify and understand consumers’ career information needs.

• There needs to be support for changing roles, in relation to career information, within education systems and career guidance practitioners.

Career information delivery models
The working groups concluded that:

• There is no single model of an effective delivery system.

• ICT has potential, but is not a cure-all.

• Self-service systems are a key model, but must also include a personal service option.

• Integrated systems, using diverse models, provide added value.

Its key policy messages were that to develop effective delivery models: there is a need to work in partnership; there must be co-ordination across portfolios, education sectors and administrative levels; and there is a need for systematic evaluation to find out what works best.

Making career information useful
The working groups concluded that: much career information is unused; many people are unaware of the information that exists; and that information in isolation is insufficient.

Key policy messages to emerge from the discussion were that:

• Career information needs to be marketed and disseminated, not just produced.

• There needs to be strong co-operation with the private sector, drawing upon its strengths in marketing and dissemination to complement governments’ capacity to collect and synthesise large volumes of impartial information.

• There is a need to activate key career information ‘influencers’ such as family members and to support capacity building programmes for them.

• Career information needs to be linked to key decision-making points such as transitions.

• Effective career information includes an experiential dimension.

Ensuring the quality of career information
The working groups concluded that: there is a great diversity of career information; much of it lacks transparency; much of it is fragmented; much is not up-to-date; often it is not culturally sensitive; and too often it is producer- rather than consumer-driven.

Key policy messages to emerge from the discussion were that:

• There is a need for better mechanisms to co-ordinate career information.

• Evaluation is needed of how career information assists progression in learning outcomes.
• Standards for career information need to be set and monitored.

Financing career information
The working groups concluded that: the public sector predominates funding of career information; there can be a problem in sustaining government funding of career information; and that there is a poor return on investments if information is not used, does not reach target groups, and is duplicated.

Key policy messages to emerge from the discussion were that:

• Governments should set systems up and ensure standards.
• Cost-sharing needs to be explored for maintaining, development and monitoring career information.
• More targeted approaches are needed (for example combinations of self-service, help lines and face-to-face) to gain greater efficiency and restrain costs.

Theme 4: Access to services
Lifelong access
• Widening access requires decisions to be made about priorities: for whom, for what, and when. It also requires widening delivery through multiple delivery points, and through a wider range of persons: for example other agencies or practitioners in other area.
• For people to invest in their careers vouchers, set at a meaningful level, could be considered.
• Access by itself is not enough. Legislation and comprehensive quality standards or guidelines are needed. Active steps need to be taken to promote career guidance for example by using vouchers for career guidance or advertising campaigns.

Overcoming barriers to access
• Proactive outreach strategies are needed.
• New and more innovative methods such as involving parents and families are needed.
• There needs to be co-ordination across portfolios to reduce waste of scarce career guidance resources.

Ways forward to ensure access
• The concept of an inclusive mainstream career guidance system needs to be developed: providing an entitlement to access for all; with types of services tailored to users’ needs; and with services provided when and where they are needed.
• Results can be obtained by working through others: other agencies; stakeholders; community groups.
• Existing structures should be built upon.
• The group of those who deliver services needs to be widened, but they need to be trained.
• Clear ‘brand names’ and a new mind-set are needed.
• Then old reactive models need to be replaced by more proactive methods.

**Theme 5: Measuring outcomes**

The working groups concluded that: to develop measurable outcomes from career guidance services a joint approach is needed between policy makers and practitioners to clarify expectations, to identify realistic outcomes, and to reach agreement through negotiation. The types of outcomes (for example individual learning, economic and labour market) need to be balanced, and priorities set between them. They also need to be balanced across the lifespan within national and internationally developed evaluation frameworks.

In addressing evidence gaps, it needs to be appreciated that career guidance is a complex process and does not stand alone. Nevertheless there are major gaps in information on expenditure on and levels of investment in career guidance. There is often a gap between what evidence is available and what evidence is useful for and used by policy. Improved practitioner research networks may be a solution in addressing evidence gaps.

**Theme 6: Innovation**

*What is needed to support innovation*

• Collaboration between policy makers and practitioners that recognises each others’ expertise.

• An acceptance that innovation takes time and occurs in small steps.

• A strategic approach.

• Cross-fertilisation between different specialisations and a multi-disciplinary approach.

• An awareness that innovation can occur in different areas: policy; practice; delivery systems.

• Development at the grassroots level.

• A capacity to tolerate uncertainty and take risks.

• A commitment to sustain and transfer innovations that work.

• The engagement of a range of stakeholders

*Some models of policy incentives to encourage innovation*

• Policy makers setting the criteria for innovative practice: for example requiring projects to involve beneficiaries and stakeholders from the beginning.

• The adoption of an enabling approach that specifies the outputs and outcomes to be achieved and leaves it to service providers to decide how to do it.

• Mobilising innovative research around certain issues.

*The major recommendation of the working groups* was for the creation of an international clearinghouse centre:

• To develop a network of innovative practices.
• With a marketing and dissemination mechanism.
• Able to be used by participating countries and international organisations.
• With a mechanism for transfer of innovation to other contexts – for example by case studies.
• That recognises that countries are at different stages in the development of their career guidance systems.

Some innovations that are needed
• Models of the delivery of career information.
• A competency-based model for learning in career management.
• Comprehensive school guidance models.
• Career guidance for those in the informal economy or who are seeking lifestyle alternatives.

Some common messages

There are a number of common messages that emerged from the discussion of the six themes, and these are worth highlighting:

• The importance of collaboration between policy makers and practitioners, and of mechanisms to allow this occur.
• The need for co-ordinated approaches: across portfolios; within different sectors; and between the various stakeholders. Again, there is a common set of messages about mechanisms to make this happen.
• The importance of basing policy upon an improved evidence base.
• The value of international collaboration

3. Concluding the conference: Next steps and future directions

The conference was closed by Mr John Dennehy, Secretary-General of the Department of Education and Science, Ireland and Chairman of the OECD Education Committee. In his remarks Mr Dennehy reflected upon the lessons that had been learned at the conference. Among the lessons that he highlighted were: the value of better collaboration, both national and international, in improving career guidance; the importance of improved evidence and data, including on costs, as a basis for improved policy; and the importance of quality standards. He outlined Ireland’s proposals to set up a permanent national forum to inform and develop guidance policy, building upon the impetus of the OECD review.

In looking to the future, Mr Dennehy stressed the need for a vehicle to be created at international level to adopt a comparative approach to the link between career guidance and public policy. He outlined the proposal, which emerged from the second international forum on career development and public policy held in Vancouver in 2001, for the creation of an International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy. The goal of the centre would be to foster a comparative approach to evidence-based policy in the field of career development. Mr Dennehy paid tribute to the leadership that Canada has shown in developing the concept, and referred to support for the notion that has already been shown by a number of
countries, including Finland, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia. In support of the initiative, and in order to carry it forward in a very tangible way, he announced that Ireland would, subject to the detail being worked out, make an expert available for a three-year period to contribute to the initial co-ordination that will ensure that the centre becomes a reality. He invited all of the countries present to follow Ireland in supporting the centre.

An additional important initiative that Ireland will take in 2004, to continue an international focus upon career guidance and public policy, will be the convening of a special meeting of European Union Education Ministers in late April to discuss the implications for public policy of promoting proactive guidance policies, especially in the context of lifelong learning and the promotion of access to further education, training and work. He announced that the meeting, which will take place in late April 2004, will build upon the outcomes of the groundbreaking Toronto conference. In addition, Ireland is in discussion with other European colleagues about the possibility of putting forward a formal Resolution of the EU council of Education Ministers on the subject of guidance. This would be the first such resolution in the EU’s history.
APPENDIX

THE THEMES DISCUSSED AT THE CONFERENCE AND THE KEY ISSUES IN EACH
THEME 1. Connecting policy and practice: Informing and influencing policy development

This theme examined the mechanisms that policy makers can use to steer career guidance services so that they can better contribute to lifelong learning, economic development, labour market efficiency and social cohesion. It will also examine ways in which career guidance practitioners can influence public policies so that they better reflect the needs of clients. Specific questions examined included:

- How can policy makers ensure that career guidance services are of high quality? What role do standards (for services, and for practitioner skills and qualifications) have in quality assurance?

- How can the training and qualifications of career guidance practitioners better reflect public policy goals? From a public policy perspective, what gaps currently exist in the training and qualifications of career guidance practitioners? What are the implications of training and qualification models for service delivery and for the costs and affordability of services?

- Who are the key stakeholders for career guidance services, and how should they be involved?

- What role do financing mechanisms play in influencing the nature of career guidance practice? What role can they play in accountability and quality assurance?

- What role can evaluation play in connecting policy and practice?

- What options are available to policy makers for the strategic co-ordination of career guidance services – including both co-ordination across government sectors and co-ordination between governments and other stakeholders?
THEME 2. Connecting research and knowledge development

The focus of this theme was the knowledge and information needed to shape career guidance policies; what is needed; how it can be collected; how it can be disseminated and used. Specific issues examined included:

- What major types of evidence and data need to be provided in order to evaluate career guidance policies and their impact, and to bring about changes to practice? What are the major gaps? What barriers exist to the collection of policy-related data and evidence?

- What strategies exist for getting better data on the relative costs of different types of career guidance services (including ICT-based services)?

- What strategies exist for improving data on career guidance clients and the types of services that different types of clients use?

- What models exist for financing policy-relevant research and evaluation in career guidance?

- What role do governments have in stimulating research about and evaluation of career guidance? How can they ensure that research that is funded by them is useful for policy development and the improvement of practice? How should policy makers and practitioners interact in setting priorities for policy-relevant research?

- How should the outcomes of research and evaluation be disseminated so that they can influence policy and practice?

- Should practitioners be involved more actively in research and knowledge development? If so, what steps might policy makers take to encourage this?
THEME 3. Career information

This theme focused upon the ways in which career information (including information about education and training, occupations, and the labour market, but also information about individuals derived from assessment tools) can be developed, delivered and used. Specific issues examined included:

- What types of policies need to be developed for career information? For example on its availability, targets, quality, impartiality and costs?
- What are the policy assumptions that underpin self-service or do-it-yourself models of career information? Are these assumptions justified?
- How can consumer needs be better reflected in the types of career information that is provided and in the ways that it is provided? What types of policies are needed to ensure that consumer needs are met?
- What is and can be the role of the private sector and markets in developing and providing career information? Do governments have a role in stimulating, supporting or quality assuring such market-based career information?
- What policy arguments exist in favour of or against psychometric testing compared to self-assessment tools?
THEME 4. Access

This theme focused upon policies that can ensure access to appropriate services throughout the lifespan. Specific issues examined included:

- How can policy influence the take-up and use of career guidance services: by different client groups; at different points in the lifespan; and in different settings (such as schools and workplaces)?

- What barriers exist to access to and take-up of career guidance services? To what extent are these barriers the result of the ways that career guidance is organised, staffed and delivered? What can policy do to reduce these barriers? How can stakeholders be involved in reducing them?

- How well suited are traditional career guidance delivery methods to the needs of a diverse range of clients, and to needs throughout the lifespan? How do such delivery methods need to be changed to suit the needs of different client groups?

- What are the major gaps in access to and take-up of career guidance services? What would be the resource implications of addressing these gaps?

- What is the role of branding and marketing in improving access to and take up of career guidance services? What strategies can governments adopt to more clearly brand and better market career guidance?

- Are priorities and target groups for access to career guidance services compatible with a goal of lifelong access to career guidance for all? How can tensions between the two approaches be reconciled?

- What role can private markets play in increasing access to career guidance? What policy steps can be taken to stimulate such markets?
THEME 5. Measuring outcomes

This theme examined ways in which the outcomes of career guidance can better be monitored and evaluated, and how the results of outcome monitoring and evaluation can be used to better inform policy and improve practice. Specific questions examined included:

- What outcomes should policy makers expect from career guidance services?

- In assessing outcomes for policy purposes, what balance should be struck between different types of outcomes (for example: individual learning outcomes; individual decision-making behaviour; economic and labour market outcomes; outcomes for education systems; and social and equity outcomes)?

- What strategies are needed to improve the collection of data that can be used to evaluate outcomes? Who should data be gathered from? What types of data should be gathered? How should it be gathered?

- Do individual practitioners, service managers and policy makers have different interests in the outcomes of career guidance? Do they need different types of data? Can all of their needs be accommodated?

- Should evidence on outcomes be linked to the allocation of resources and to priorities for service delivery? If so, how?

- How can the costs of career guidance be assessed in relation to its benefits? How should this data be used to influence policy and resource allocation?
THEME 6. Innovation: Learning from what works

Drawing upon examples of successful innovation, this theme focused upon the ways in which policy makers can encourage and stimulate innovation in career guidance, and upon how barriers to innovation can be removed. Specific issues examined included:

• What responsibility do policy makers have in stimulating innovative approaches to career guidance, and how can they do this?

• Which areas of career guidance (for example in schools, for adults, in community settings, career information) should be priorities for more innovative approaches?

• What are some of the reasons for policy makers seeking to encourage innovative approaches to career guidance? What policy goals can innovation help to address: for example wider access; better use of scarce resources?

• What are some of the principal opportunities for, and barriers to, innovation in career guidance? Do factors such as working conditions and the content of training programmes have an influence upon the capacity of systems to innovate?

• Are changed financing methods needed to encourage more innovative approaches to career guidance? What new ways of managing government funded services are needed to encourage innovative approaches?

• How can examples of innovation and good practice be disseminated more effectively?