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***The Network for Innovation in Career-Counselling/  
Career-Guidance in Europe: Bratislava Conference,  
May 28-30, 2015***

The 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the project ERASMUS Academic Network NICE, held on May 28-30, 2015, in Bratislava, was attended by 140 participants from universities and professional institutions of 30 countries. The conference took place under the auspices of the Rector of the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, Professor Dr Robert Redhammer. The Project coordinator was Christiane Schiersmann of Ruprecht Karls Universität in Heidelberg. The project started in 2012 and finished in September 2015 and was supported by the European Union as part of The Lifelong Learning Programme. Supporting the European effort to foster lifelong learning, as well as developing quality and professionalism in career guidance and counselling, the University of Heidelberg – in strong cooperation with the national employment agency's University of Applied Sciences Mannheim (HdBA)<sup>1</sup> and 39 other higher education institutions from almost all European countries – has established a European network of universities that offer Bachelor and Master Degree programmes in vocational and career guidance/counselling. This effort is coordinated with other important European developments and international activities in the field of counselling, especially with ELGPN.<sup>2</sup>

Through the NICE network, we want to sustain and strengthen the collaborative efforts in research and education that have developed over the past decade. In order to foster cooperation between the European universities which specialise in this field, both an organisational framework and a solid financial basis are necessary. We obtained funding from the EU Commission for the period 11/2009-10/2012 and held the first conference in Czestochowa (Poland).

As a result, there was strong collaboration on several important projects was developed, which will provide a basis for sustained networking in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> HdBA – Der Hochschule der Bundesagentur für Arbeit – University of the Federal Employment Agency

<sup>2</sup> ELGPN – The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network

The NICE goals include the following:

- Mutual learning, e.g. regarding curricula, competence development, the combination of theory and practice and related research.
- Achieving common interests, e.g. European developments and changes in standards, quality and accreditation, or access to the European employment market.
- Encouraging higher European mobility among staff and students.
- Discussing worldwide and European issues, e.g. mobility, brain drain, employability, integration, lifelong counselling and learning and demographic changes.
- Exchanging teaching and e-learning modules.
- Developing a common competence framework for Bachelor and Master Programmes in counselling/guidance in Europe.

In order to set up the network and ensure its sustainability, three thematic work groups were established which cooperate on reaching goals of common interest.

**GROUP 1 (WP1) – Transparency, quality and comparability of study programmes** – works on a systematic overview of all existing study courses and programmes in Europe and identifies the core elements delivered by all the programmes. It recognises the local differences with regard to the requirements of lifelong career guidance, lifelong learning, employment and mobility. The Group also compares the existing quality assurance systems of study courses in order to identify best practices and gives input for further development.

**Group 2 (WP2) – Innovation in career counselling and guidance** – aims at generating research-based knowledge, identifying state-of-the-art counselling skills, appropriate training programmes and rapidly transferring “life-design” expertise to public and private practitioners in all the participating countries. “Life-design” refers to a new paradigm in the theory and practice of career guidance and counselling which respects the need for lifelong learning as well as social and cultural realities. The actual challenge exceeds the resources of isolated researchers or teams at one university or even one country, which is why a coordinated academic network is necessary in order to collect and share innovative research and theory at the individual and organisational level.

**GROUP 3 (WP3) – Tools of impact for teaching and training in academic career counselling/guidance study programmes** – aims at identifying tools that will be highly effective in teaching and training and shares valuable practices and experiences with innovative learning/teaching techniques.

The academic network NICE assembles 41 universities and other higher educational institutions from 27 EU countries. All partner universities offer either a Bachelor or a Master programme in vocational/career guidance and are involved in research.

The NICE network is managed through a steering committee that consists of seven partners: the Coordinating Partner (Heidelberg University), the Lead Partners from WP1 (University of Czestochowa & HdBA Mannheim), the Lead

Partners from WP2 (CNAM/ INETOP,<sup>3</sup> Paris; University of Lausanne & University of Padua) and the Lead Partner from WP3 (University of East London). Through its many partners and its coordinating team, the Network interacts extensively with important institutions and other relevant European and international networks (CEDEFOP, ETF, IEAVG, ICCDPP, ELGPN).<sup>4</sup>

In the first stage of the project (NICE I), three conferences were held: in Czechochowa (2010), Padua (2011) and Heidelberg (2012). The outcome of this stage was *NICE Handbook for the Academic Training of Career Guidance and Counselling Professionals* edited by Ch. Schiersmann, B.J. Ertelt, J. Katsarov, R. Mulvey, H. Reid and P. Weber (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University, 2012; ISBN 978-3-944230-01-6, ISBN 978-3-944230-03-0).

NICE II, (2013 to 2015), the second phase of the project, was a continuation of the principles and objectives of the first phase and, again, focused on creating sustainable structures for future cooperation between institutions of higher education and research involved in counselling and vocational guidance. As part of the NICE II project, three other conferences held: in Jyväskylä (2013), Canterbury (2014) and Bratislava (2015). The latter was supposed to the project and its outcomes.

The significance of the conference in Bratislava was underlined by the attendance of Professor Dr Peter Plavcan, Director General of the Higher Education Section of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic. He personally delivered an opening address, welcoming the participants of the conference.

Several interesting papers were read in the conference sessions.

Dr Susanne Kraatz, Member of the European Parliament and Director General for Economic and Scientific Policies, gave a lecture entitled *Professionalisation of Lifelong Career Guidance for Employment and Social Inclusion in Europe: Perspectives of European Policies*. She discussed trends in economic and social development in the EU and pointed out the increased demand for certain skills and employment prospects in the future. She stressed the role of vocational training and education and the importance of higher and adult education. Dr Susanne Kraatz expressed great appreciation to the organisers of the NICE II project and for the successful achievement of its goals.

Professor Dr Christiane Schiersmann (University of Heidelberg, Germany) in a speech titled *European Competence Standards for the Academic Training of Career*

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<sup>3</sup> CNAM – Le Conservatoire national des arts et métiers; INETOP – L’Institut national d’étude du travail et d’orientation professionnelle.

<sup>4</sup> CEDEFOP – Centre Européen pour le Développement de la Formation Professionnelle; ETF – The European Training Foundation (the European Union’s Centre of expertise supporting vocational education and training reform in third countries in the context of the EU external relations programmes); IEAVG – The International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance; ICCDPP – The International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy; ELGPN – The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network.

*Professionals* discussed the importance of qualifications for lifelong education and career guidance counsellors. She highlighted the contribution of the Slovak Technical University in Bratislava on this issue, particularly given the results of the multi-lateral project DICBDPEC – Development and Implementation of Common Bachelor’s Degree Programme in the European Context.

Professor Dr Tristan Hooley (University of Derby, England) in his paper *The Evidence Base of Lifelong Guidance* pointed out how current European policy issues are related to economic development and the performance and flexibility of the labour market, especially among the youth and their transition from education to the labour market. He addressed such issues as the acquisition of necessary skills and efficient investment in education and training. He also talked about the emotional involvement of employees, social justice and social inclusion. He pointed to the necessity of creating an international, multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral platform (politics-research-training), which may effectively support the development of lifelong guidance in the European area.

The conference also included thematic workshops, which offered a perfect setting for presentations by representatives of universities and institutions and for lively discussions. The first session, *Innovative Training Projects & Programmes for Career Professionals*, was chaired by Josef Detko from Slovakia. In the second session, *Resources for Youth and Adult Career Transitions*, support for young people and adults in transition to vocational career was discussed.

The participants of the conference signed a **Memorandum on cooperation in education and research in agreement with the European priorities of lifelong education and lifelong career guidance**. The Memorandum is in fact a kind of road map for higher education, training and research, which can help mobilise the potential of counselling and guidance services in Europe. It calls upon all scholars, practitioners and policy-makers to actively contribute to the future development of this important field.

The specific goals are:

- ◆ high quality competence-based academic training;
- ◆ innovative research and excellent doctoral training;
- ◆ joint ventures of research, policy and practice.<sup>5</sup>

The conference also offered a cultural programme. The participants listened to the STU *Techniques Chamber Orchestra* and watched performances of Slovak Folk Music and Dance. They could also go on a sightseeing tour of the historical centre of Bratislava and visit the DANUBIA Museum of Modern Art.

In a highlight of the second day of the conference, an award granted by the European Society for Vocational Career Counselling and Guidance to deserving researchers and young scientists was conferred on Professor Maria Eduarda Duarte

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<sup>5</sup> For more information about the project, visit the NICE website [www.nice-network.eu](http://www.nice-network.eu)

(University of Lisbon). The presentation was performed by Professor Laura Nota in recognition of Professor Duarte's seminal research and dedication to teaching.

In summary, the conference contributed to the further development of international collaboration of universities and professional institutions in research, education and exchange of knowledge, innovative practices and experiences. It stressed the importance of interdisciplinary cooperation between universities and vocational training institutions, and it was also an opportunity to establish new contacts and deepen the existing professional relationships.

Academic teachers from the Universities of Czestochowa, Cracow, Lodz and Wroclaw participated in the conference.

*Translated from Polish by Andrew Piers*