

## GUIDANCE IN AN AGE OF LESS

(slide 1) (slide 2) In June last year at the International IAEVG conference in Jyväskylä in Finland, the executive committee of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance published a press release entitled (slide 3) ‘Light and Dark Times’ on the value of career guidance in times of economic crisis. Although I agree with the release’s claim that *“the impact of the ongoing crisis on people’s lives, their personal, educational and vocational career development, ... is very serious and will affect the social and political stability in many countries for years to come”*, I strongly disagree with the statement that the situation we are currently in is completely *“unexpected”*. On the contrary, I believe the writing had been on the wall for a number of years and that the political decision-makers in our countries chose not to see it, and so did the IAEVG, and to be perfectly honest, so did most of us. We should not forget that the motto of the IAEVG is (slide 4) *“Maximising the world’s potential through guidance”*. It is therefore hardly surprising to read in the release that (slide 5) *“careers guidance has a vital role to play in maintaining a highly qualified and economically viable society, as well as playing an important part in supporting economic growth and social stability”*. This is very interesting as it betrays that for some IAEVG officials at least, the prime value of guidance lies in its contribution to maintaining the current status quo at both political and economic levels – never mind that the argument for evermore growth is crumbling by the day.

The statement then continues with the admission that the IAEVG is (slide 6) *“not in a position to create new jobs or training opportunities and are powerless to alter the overall economic and financial situation”* (slide 7) followed by a plea to the political paymasters not to cut funding for guidance. Finally, there is call for help from policymakers to sustain (slide 8) *“a service that helps people overcome the impact of the current crisis, adapt to the rapid changes in the labour market and to contribute to the long-term societal and economic outcomes of economically focussed guidance”*. Unfortunately it is becoming clearer by the day that even when or if growth returns, there will not necessarily be any more or any new jobs created. The current crisis may very well be with us for good and so could its consequences.

This then raises the question of what impact guidance can have in times of economic downturn. Here I cannot quite rid myself of the nagging feeling that for a very long time guidance has been a fair weather friend that could, during the economic boom years frequently afford the luxury of even encouraging many people’s unrealistic professional aspirations. During those happier times, the main priority was the optimal allocation of people to occupations. Guidance was based primarily on those so-called (slide 9) ‘matching models’ that still largely prevail in both vocational guidance and, to an even greater extent, in the placement of employment seekers today. Such a type of guidance could however only function ‘well’ because there were plentiful employment opportunities for people to take up. Although we didn’t necessarily see it during those sunnier times, it was nevertheless (slide 10) *“the moral imperative of the market”* which provided the frame in which guidance took place; and it still does today.

In the second half of the last century, people in many European countries enjoyed a hitherto unknown degree of upward social mobility. This has led to a substantial increase in the so-

called ‘middle class’. Ironically, it is above all these relatively ‘new’ members of the middle class who are now feeling the full brunt of the economic crisis. In a not too distant past, young people who did not do all that well academically could rightly still aspire to reasonably comfortable adult lives through employment in industry. These employment opportunities have now however largely vanished and with the jobs have gone the opportunities for social promotion. **(slide 11)** Many people in this “new” middle class realise that they would find it difficult, if not impossible, to get into their current careers if they had to start over again today. On top of that, as parents they are also increasingly becoming aware that their children might not be as fortunate as they themselves have been.

In the Western world people have been so privileged during the second half of the last century, that they have lulled themselves into believing that things would go on forever that way. They forgot that in a democracy and above all in a free market economy, a society without losers of some kind is an illusion and they are only now beginning to realise that while they run the risk of becoming today’s losers, their children are in even greater danger of losing out tomorrow.

Even before the current the economic crisis, the surge in the level of qualifications in the last 25 years in most European countries has resulted in a previously unknown situation: young people with good qualifications are finding it increasingly difficult to find employment. In the past, good educational performance led more or less automatically to a wide choice of job opportunities and secure professional prospects. This has changed dramatically with higher numbers of better qualified young people and increased economic volatility. **(slide 12)** Now, even well-qualified young people fail to find employment and the lucky few who do find work are frequently hired only for limited periods, and/or are less well paid than in the past. This has resulted in the “estrangement” of a whole generation not to mention a disillusionment of this generation’s younger siblings with the educational and vocational training systems and, in fine, with guidance itself.

*So, given our present circumstances, what is to be done ?*

Guidance, above all in an economic crisis, can only be viewed in the long-term.

**Policy-makers** should start by questioning the advice of their ministerial advisors, who are all too often failed teachers and career counsellors. Then they should for once really listen to what both researchers and practitioners have to say and not just pretend to do so.

**Scholars** should continue to develop new concepts in guidance such as ‘life designing’. The authors of such new approaches must however also investigate the ideal societal and economic conditions their constructs could effectively work in, otherwise their ideas are never going to get off the ground.

**Institutions providing guidance** should urgently implement a new approach to information management and move away from traditional supply-oriented to demand-oriented information systems. **(slide 13)** Lack of information is indeed no longer an issue today, however information overload can be and so information needs to be distributed more intelligently.

**Counsellors** should be ready to question their own practices and theoretical models. This requires a ‘new’, different kind of counselling mind-set as practitioners must accept that they have, beyond their obvious responsibility towards an individual counselee, a certain accountability towards society as a whole. Unfortunately, it is not yet obvious to those giving

and to those receiving counselling that they are engaged not only in a personal activity but also in a societal one.

**Counselees** still all too frequently have the same approach to guidance as they had to education, i.e. they consume it without giving it much thought. They have forgotten that the possibility to choose your own career is even today a “modern” luxury for ‘the happy few’, and so is guidance. Like a lot of counsellors, many counselees do not want to acknowledge that their lives are influenced not to say dominated by the prevailing economic conditions. However, for others, mainly young people, the increased insecurity caused by the gloomy economic outlook and the highly unpromising employment market is leading to a different approach, not only in the choices they are making, but also in the very nature of the decision-making processes involved. These new types of behaviour are based on a heuristic approach to “education”, “training” and “career choices” and they are evolving into a wider long-term view of personal development as a whole.

Then, **all of us** should ponder how our societies function or should I say dysfunction. I doubt that we will ever again just muddle through as we have always done before and therefore we cannot avoid a complete rethink of our economic model, especially as regards the distribution of work.

Finally, though **I** am hardly best qualified to give advice and do not think that guidance counsellors should be giving advice, I cannot help doing so today. **(slide 14)** Please warn counselees against those experts who pretend to know where we are all heading and who make all kinds of promises they will not be able to keep. You might just as well send them straight away to a fortune-teller.

Do tell your counselees though to avoid the ‘easy’, the ‘middle-of-the-road’ option. For it is precisely the middle-class of middle-skilled and middle-income office clerks and machine operators, that is disappearing fast, never to return - their occupations falling victim to IT and automation.

On the other hand, there is still plenty of work **(slide 15)** that cannot be mechanised because it would be either too complicated or too expensive to do so, work we truly can believe in e.g. manual labour, skills and crafts. And before you ridicule my words, please ask yourselves what kind of activities so many so-called brain-workers undertake in their leisure, or indeed how many of us hope and plan to fill our time once we reach retirement ?

**(slide 16)** Thank you for your attention.