

## **Interview with Lester Oakes<sup>1</sup>**

Lester Oakes is the President of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance and the Chief Executive of New Zealand Career Services. He has been a leader in the career development field, contributing particularly to matters of public policy and creating a world class career service in New Zealand.

Lester is driven by the belief that the careers industry is a credible contributor to governments' broader economic and social development agendas and is central to achieving governments' education, employment, economic and social policy objectives. He is also a strong advocate for, and practitioner of work-life balance.

### **Lester, how did you come into the field of career development?**

I returned from three years of overseas experience early in 1982 and realised that it was time to "get a real job". Through a process of elimination (some may even say career planning) I came upon the role of Vocational Guidance Counsellor. I applied for vacancies all over the country and was appointed to my first position in Dunedin.

### **What have been the highlights of your career in recent years?**

In New Zealand, seeing Career Services increasingly becoming a household name in our country, matched by a phenomenal increase in the number of people using our services and our increasing ability to be part of wider government policy making.

Internationally, seeing the progress made in getting the careers voice heard in wider circles through the international symposia and the OECD review, along with the emergence of a careers industry in developing countries.

### **If you were to identify a particular theory of career development that best explains your career development, which would it be?**

Tough question; as it's a long time since I operated as a practitioner. Having said that, I think that John Krumboltz's happenstance theory resonates pretty strongly with my own career. It also takes some of the heat off thinking that you have to have it all planned in a structured step-like manner.

### **You have been active in the advancement of career development through public policy. Why do you believe it is vital that practitioners in the field of career development take an interest in government policy formulations and initiatives?**

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How long have you got? Our work does not exist in a vacuum. Government is the primary funder of career services and they fund our work in the belief that it supports a range of other macro policies. Good policy needs input from practitioners, so if practitioners ignore policy formulation and do not look for opportunities to input, the result will be inferior policy or policy that does not include a careers component. With the former, practitioners are left to implement poorly devised policy and with the latter, funding may cease. Neither is a good look.

**What would you envisage to be the best balance between publicly and privately funded career development services?**

I think the ideal model is not too far from what we have here in New Zealand. Now you could say “of course he’d say that”, but a range of international opinion also supports that view. So, I’m clear that there is a place for both public and privately funded services. Ideally the state should provide the “spine” of a national information and advice service that is available to all citizens and deals with the bulk of inquiries as well as funding more intensive services for schools and their students those who are not in a position to fund these themselves. Truly privately funded career guidance provision, that is not provision offered by private organisations through state funding, is most likely to succeed at the higher end of the market.

**What do you see as the emerging threats to career development as a field and how might the profession prepare for those threats?**

Most of what I might see as threats is in our own hands to pre-empt. We have a service that is needed in good times and in bad, and that over recent years has had more and more people accessing it. The threats centre around our need to increase our policy influence, a failure to use technology to maximum effect, an inability to evolve and offer services more cost efficiently and our lack of a compelling evidence base around the impact of the work that we do.

**As a New Zealander, and given your national and international expertise, you are in an ideal vantage point to comment on the field in the southern hemisphere, particularly the Asia-Pacific region. Would you care to comment on how the field might evolve within this region of the world?**

There is a great deal happening in our part of the world. The most developed national infrastructures are probably in Australia and New Zealand (not necessarily in that order of course!). In the last few weeks I have been to both South Africa and Korea; both are significant southern hemisphere countries that are looking to make real strides on the career guidance front. In addition, we had strong pacific island representation at the recent international symposium in Wellington and following on from this a pacific island network has developed.

**Australia and New Zealand have a long tradition of cooperating with one another. Given that other professions have amalgamated their professional associations (e.g., Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists) would you care to offer an opinion on the potential for a “trans-Tasman” profession in career development practice?**

I think there is a compelling argument for closer trans-Tasman liaison. I'm not sure that we're at the point of forming a single Australasian professional association just yet; but at a very practical level, discussions took place at the CDAA conference in Adelaide between the presidents of the Australian and New Zealand associations (along with IAEVG and NCDA) about working more collaboratively.

I think there is real potential as a next step along this path to get agreement on running a joint Australasian conference or research forum in the next year or two. I think this is something that the university careers advisers are doing already. The debate about an amalgamated profession association should be advanced, so that the pros and cons can be laid out and weighed up.

**Finally, Lester, what would you say about yourself outside of the formal context of work?**

Well, I like to think that the Lester you see outside of the normal context of work is pretty much the same as the one you see inside the normal work context. I don't buy into putting on a workplace persona that is any different from the person I am. Without congruence, workplace credibility (and lifeplace credibility) is a distant dream.

That's not to say that I don't do different things outside of work or have no other life. I enjoy a TV diet of *Coro Street* and sport, I like to sing and act in musical theatre, I enjoy the company of a small group of friends, try to keep myself in good physical shape, have a regular massage, love going to movies in the afternoon on weekends, and enjoy living in a city where I am surrounded by immediate and wider family. In fact, I'd say I'm pretty contented.

**Lester Oakes, on behalf of the readership of the AJCD, I thank you for your contribution to the field career development, and for graciously providing the opportunity to allow us learn more about you.**

A pleasure Peter. I trust it will be as enlightening to your readers as it has been therapeutic for me.

Dr Peter McIlveen, Editor