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# INTERVIEW WITH COL McCOWAN

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Col McCowan is Head of the Careers and Employment Service at the Queensland University of Technology. He has made a longstanding contribution to career development through many government and professional roles, and is widely known internationally for his efforts. He is the author of *A Guide to Career Education* and *Working the Web: Career planning via the Internet* (both with Malcolm McKenzie) and was the chairperson of this year's annual conference of the Australian Association of Career Counsellors.

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## **Col, how did you come into career work?**

During my teacher training, my marble was drawn to participate in two years of national service. I studied part-time towards a degree during my time at college and first year teaching and during my national service time in the jungles of far north Queensland. I finished my degree and went to return to primary school teaching duties after completing my national service, but the then Queensland Department of Education decided it would be too embarrassing to have a person with a degree and minimal teaching experience in a primary school. So I was asked to attend a panel of the four directors—secondary; primary; research and curriculum; and guidance and special—for a determination of where I was to be allocated. In front of me, they decided among themselves that I could start the three-week training program for guidance officers (secondary), on the condition that I was mentored by experienced officers for a year and that I would obtain further relevant qualifications. I completed my post-graduate degree in psychology over the next two years, and two years



later was the first person to complete a Masters in Guidance and Counselling at the University of Queensland.

Guidance officers working in secondary schools then were required to do vocational assessments on all Year 8, 10 and 11 students and deliver vocational guidance to all Year 10 and 12 students throughout Queensland. At one stage I could boast that I had worked in every state high school in every remote corner of Queensland.

The role substantially expanded into personal counselling but 'careers work' was always a primary focus.

## **You currently work in a university setting. Can you tell our readers something about the careers service at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT)?**

I was appointed to QUT as the first head of the newly created Careers and Employment Service in 1993 with seven staff and 25,000 students, on the promise that the number of staff would double in the next five years. Ten years later I am still waiting for the staff increase as universities grapple with decreasing real budgets and other pressures. In that time, we have lost

one career counsellor position and gained one which we specified as an 'international career counsellor'. We now service over 40,000 students over four campuses, including 5000 international students.

I manage the service along 'business' lines rather than along 'bean bag' lines, and have a clearly articulated service delivery model that includes both careers-related work and employment-related work. Our 640 page website gets over 2000 hits every day of the week, and over 90 per cent of our final year students are aware of and use some aspect of the service with high levels of satisfaction. Unique for Australian universities, I am part of the senior management structure of the university.

#### **What pressures are careers services facing nowadays?**

The major pressure in the careers field is that it will never subside or go away. In modern life, with its numerous choices and a high need for life satisfaction, it is always there. People always want help, despite the lack of attention to this in the 20 plus national reports that say so.

However, it is a resource intensive field. Some of these demands can be met by resource developments such as programs and websites, but it still comes down to enabling people to have good access to highly skilled practitioners. Unfortunately for governments and private companies, skilled practitioners are very rare and very expensive commodities.

The major external pressures include low funding, low quality of easily accessible information and a lack of respect. Because everyone can be a 'careers' expert of some sort and people get lots of advice from many sources, why would we need to resource intensive career specialists and services? But we in the field know that they just keep coming, looking for genuine assistance and expecting a quality service. Can we meet these demands?

The major internal pressure is the sheer complexity of the task. People are in motion themselves, while simultaneously the world of work is in motion and the globe is in motion. Yet, career practitioners are trying to provide assistance in any given snapshot of time. The amount of available career and course information, and the number of career and course options are enormous, but our clients are becoming more complex. People want us to help them feel in control of their career development. However, there

are no prescriptive measures in the careers field. For each individual, it is a highly tailored function to help them to understand themselves, their options and what the hell is going on around them.

Are we up to it or are we kidding ourselves?

#### **Do you have a particular philosophy or orientation that characterises your work as a career practitioner?**

The major principles that characterise my work are those of engendering self-reliance in others and ensuring we meet client needs.

In terms of service delivery, the major focus is on access, accountability and quality standards. This means looking for systemic ways of delivering services and having continuous improvement measures in place. Are the available resources, including personnel and Internet for example, the best they can possibly be?

#### **Who has been influential in your thinking about careers?**

Over my 30 plus years in the field, there are just so many that it is difficult to know who to leave out. Initially in the early '70s, it was Sam Beavers at the University of Queensland who opened up the American field of careers to me with its books, journals, programs and research. Norman Gysbers was a key player for me then. In the early '80s I worked for six months as an overseas fellow at the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC) in the UK, with the very strong team led by Tony Watts, which included John Miller, Bill Law, John Killeen and Katherine Evans. In the early '90s Stu Conger opened up the Canadian scene to me, which included Millie Cahill, Vance Peavy, Sharon Crozier, Lynne Bezanson and Norm Amundson. Paul Stevens introduced me to the west coast of America, which included Richard Bolles and the Californian group. More recently, I have strong connections to the Florida-based group, including Jim Sampson and Janet Lenz and other US players such as Garry Walz, Edwin Herr and Mark Savickas. In New Zealand, Lester Oakes and Liz Medford are very valuable resources.

In Australia, there were many key players for me along the way. Anna Lichtenberg, Rob Ware, Margaret Gambley, Robert Pryor and Lesley Armstrong to name a few. The most influential

people recently during my shared work on books, resources and programs are Ken Hyndman, Malcolm McKenzie and Susan Ryan.

**I know that over the years you have represented Australia at some international policy meetings on careers and that you are widely known for your contributions —would you be able to say something about this aspect of your work?**

In 1999, the Canadian Career Development Foundation hosted the first world symposium on career guidance. Over 20 countries were invited to send a career practitioner and a career policy maker to represent that country at the symposium. Elizabeth Mountain from the Department of Education, Science and Training and I represented Australia. All countries presented a country paper, there were some lead sessions and there was hot debate over the divide between policy and practice. The resultant symposium publication, *Making Waves*, is probably one of the best representations of careers work across the world. Judith Leeson represented us at the 2001 symposium in Vancouver, and Peter Tatham and Tony Greer at the one in Toronto in 2003. It is one of the few events where policy makers across the world can get together, benchmark themselves against each other and learn from the experiences of other countries. For me, the opportunity to network and share with my international friends was invaluable.

Because of my substantial writing and research; involvement in running over 16 conferences; extensive work in relevant professional associations; and roles in national working parties and with government, I have been involved at all three levels of policy, profession and practice for a long period of time. In the lean times, it was particularly difficult when dealing with government, but things have improved dramatically in recent times.

The most satisfying outcomes for me have been running the successful first major national career conference since 1977 at Bond University in 1992; helping produce the National Career Education Framework; authoring and co-authoring three books; assisting with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) national review; helping set up this journal; producing a large number of effective programs and resources; and managing a national best-practice service.

More recently, working at an international level in Bhutan and Oman has given me great satisfaction to see my experience being applied in another setting. It has also provided me with much needed perspective and appreciation.

**You also represented the IAEVG—I am not sure that all our readers know enough about this; maybe you could expand on the role of the IAEVG.**

IAEVG stands for the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance. It is a strong group, which originated in Europe in an attempt to provide international networking and benchmarking activities. It has now extended worldwide, and includes a journal, a schedule of country conferences and a regular newsletter. Anna Lichtenberg was the first Australian contact. I took over from her for a few years, and in the past two years Ellen Fleming from Victoria has been the Australian contact point. Anyone keen to join the IAEVG could contact Ellen or I for further details. For any practitioners travelling overseas, it would be a good point of contact. Practitioners interested in the standards issue should take a look at the IAEVG-initiated worldwide research.

**From your vantage point, what do you see as the future needs of our profession? Where do you see careers work heading in the future?**

Careers work in Australia has a sound footing in 2004. The federal minister for Education, Science and Training is raising career issues, and if you put together the work on activities such as the national website, the Blueprint, Career Industry Consortium Australia, AACC, the *AJCD*, Standards and the OECD, there is quite a groundswell. My hope would be for a more strategic approach where all the elements are recognised, and the way forward is guided by a plan rather than spasmodically as it appears now. Unfortunately, politicians and key players prefer high profile activities and short-term gains, rather than focusing on infrastructure and long-term fundamental issues. But it can't be all left to the government. All of us in our day-to-day practice need to take responsibility to read, research, attend, share and set our own standards, if we are to progress the careers field. As social, economic, institutional and individual outcomes become even more important for

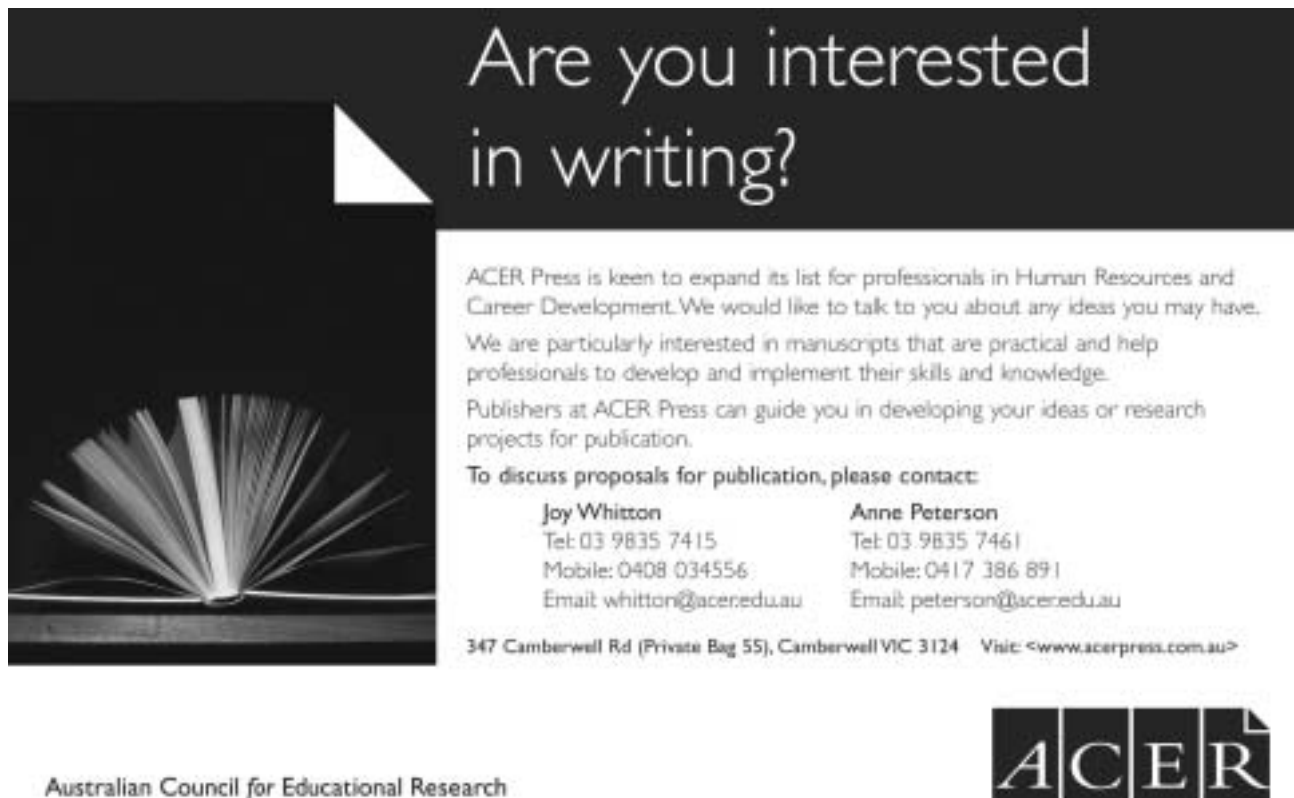
all of us, careers work will continue to grow and come to the fore. As I said earlier, careers work will never go away. It is how we respond to its inevitable demands that will determine our future.

**And finally, can we say something about Col McCowan outside his formal careers role?**

In my youth I was a very keen sportsman involved in many sports. I played cricket to a high level as a tearaway fast bowler and captained a winning team to five premierships in a row. Looking back, I am sure that is where I strengthened many of my client and team management skills.

Now it is much more subdued activities such as art collector, landscape gardener, family supporter and sports spectator. I used to teach pottery and I have a desire to return to that, but in the meantime I really enjoy the challenge of doing part-time career research as a private hobby, working and travelling overseas, and being invited to do things outside my current work role boundary.

**Col McCowan, on behalf of the *Australian Journal of Career Development* may I thank you for this interview and taking the time from a busy schedule to respond to these questions.**



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