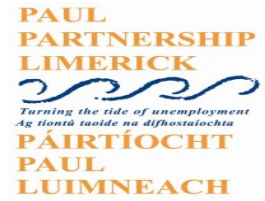




**UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK**  
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH



## National Symposium

### Challenging Times: Professional resilience for career guidance practitioners working in Ireland's Public Employment Services (PES)

Venue: Strand Hotel, Limerick City

Friday 10<sup>th</sup> October, 2014

## Symposium Proceedings

Hosted by:

Dr. Lucy Hearne, University of Limerick

Geraldine Lambert, Limerick Local Employment Service, Paul Partnership



## **Symposium Agenda**

- 8.15 am: Registration of Delegates**
- 9.15 am: Opening and Welcome by Dr. Lucy Hearne, University of Limerick**
- 9.30 am: Address by Professor Marie Parker-Jenkins, Professor of Education, Department of Education and Professional Studies, University of Limerick**
- 9.45 am: Official Opening of Symposium by Kevin Humphreys TD, Minister of State at Department of Social Protection with Special Responsibility for Activation**
- 10.15 am: Keynote Address by Professor Jenny Bimrose, Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick**
- 11.00 am: Tea/coffee Break**
- 11.30 am: Current Research on Resilience in the Irish Public Employment Service**  
**Presenters: Dr. Lucy Hearne (UL) and Siobhan Keogh (Limerick Local Employment Service)**
- 12.15 pm: Open Forum and Panel Discussion**
- 12.45 pm: Lunch Break**
- 2.00 pm: The View from the Ground: Geraldine Lambert, Co-Ordinator of Limerick Local Employment Service**
- 2.20 pm: Breakout Facilitated Group Sessions**
- 3.15 pm: Tea/coffee Break**
- 3.30 pm: Full Group Convening for Feedback and Discussion**
- 4.15 pm: Closing of Symposium**

## Biographical Details

**Professor Jenny Bimrose** is Professor and Deputy Director of the Warwick Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick. Jenny is a Fellow of the Institute for Career Guidance and the Higher Education Academy, and a Research Associate at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa. Many of Jenny's research projects have focused on the area of the theory and practice of career counselling and guidance and on gender inequality. Ongoing research interests include supporting guidance practitioners in their use of labour market information in practice; the theory and practice of careers guidance; the decision-making styles and career trajectories of individuals across Europe; the implications for career guidance of women's career development; and supporting Public Employment Service practitioners working in volatile labour markets across Europe.

**Dr. Lucy Hearne** is Course Director and Lecturer of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development, University of Limerick. Lucy is a recipient of an Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) scholarship for her doctoral research (2006 to 2009). She has been awarded funding from IRCHSS (2012), the Irish Research Council (IRC) in 2013 for the current national symposium, and the IRC (2014) and Faculty Seed Funding for research projects on whole school guidance provision. Her research interest areas include lifelong guidance, adult and continuing education, practitioner CPD and reflective practice.

**Kevin Humphreys TD** is Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection with special responsibility for Employment, Community and Social Support. Kevin is a Labour TD for the constituency of Dublin South East. He became active in politics through his community, campaigning on issues related to health, community facilities, planning and the environment. He has been a member of the Labour Party for over 25 years working on local, general and presidential elections, and referendum campaigns. In 2002 Kevin became Leader of the Labour group on Dublin City Council and was re-elected in 2004 and 2009. During that time he worked on delivering balanced budgets, two development plans for Dublin City, and the Dublin Bikes scheme. He has also served as Deputy Lord Mayor of Dublin City in 2009.

**Siobhan Keogh** has worked as a Mediator with the Limerick Local Employment Service for the last ten years. Siobhan qualified as a Humanistic and Integrative Counsellor in 2003 and gained an MA in Guidance Counselling from the University of Limerick in 2013. She has also worked as a member of the Student Health Services team in Limerick Institute of Technology for the last two years. Prior to this, Siobhan worked in the food and pharmaceutical industries for ten years having qualified from Dublin City University with a BSc in Biotechnology in 1992 and an MSc in Food Science and Technology from University College Cork in 1994.

**Geraldine Lambert** is Employment Services Co-ordinator with PAUL Partnership. Geraldine has responsibility for the Limerick Local Employment Service (LES), delivering information, career guidance and job mediation, placement and aftercare services on behalf of the Department of Social Protection. Having previously worked as a Job Mediator in the LES, Geraldine has first-hand knowledge and experience of frontline delivery in the public employment service. Responsibilities during 13 years of experience at senior management level include staff management, facilitation and change management. She has a Masters in Partnership Studies (UL), a Diploma in Adult Guidance & Counselling (NUIM) and a Diploma in Human Resource Management (ICM).

**Professor Marie Parker-Jenkins** is Professor of Education in the Department of Education and Professional Studies, University of Limerick. Marie is author of over 100 publications including books, reports, and conference and journal articles. Her research interests are issues of social justice with particular reference to "race" ethnicity and gender. Her research has included study of the expansion of religious schools, particularly those based on an Islamic ethos. The implications for policy and practice, and especially the legal context of leadership in multicultural communities form part of this research.

**Mary Shanahan** is an experienced Trainer, Researcher and Facilitator of many years standing. She has worked with many organisations across the public, private sector and not-for-profit sector. Mary's work in Individual, Group and Organisation Development allows her to apply a sociological perspective to the development of greater agency of the individual, leading to successful organisational change and personal transitions. Her professional expertise areas are Evaluation and Social Research; Training Design and Delivery; Change Management; and Human Resource Management. Mary has a Masters in Sociology (UL) and a Diploma in Training and Development (IITD)

## Introduction and Context of Symposium

This Irish Research Council (New Foundations Scheme) Funded Symposium was organised by Dr. Lucy Hearne, Department of Education and Professional Studies, UL, in association with Geraldine Lambert, Limerick Employment Service, PAUL Partnership. Its aim was to support Limerick's regeneration initiatives' for unemployed citizens through partnership building and collaboration. The focus of the Symposium was to provide a forum for career practitioners working in the Irish public employment services (i.e. Intreo, LES, Community based support services), as well as other relevant stakeholders (i.e. DSP Managers, LESN Co-ordinators, AEGI services, University Course Providers, Support Organisations for the Unemployed) to discuss current professional issues and research in relation to supporting unemployed people in our community during a difficult economic period.

Currently, career guidance practitioners working in PES face many professional challenges due to the economic downturn and consequent high levels of unemployment, as well as the need to address the demands for integration and activation of job seekers in rapidly changing labour markets. Due to the complex needs of clients and local employment constraints, the development of new skills and competencies in their professional practice is a priority for today's practitioners. There is also a need to reflect upon present working environments' in PES that ought to be conducive to providing quality interventions for supporting unemployed clients.

Recent public policy strategies such as the *National Employment Activation Plan* (DETE, 2010) and *Pathways to Work* (DSP, 2013) which have been initiated to address the high unemployment rate have involved major structural reforms across the education, training and employment sector. There has been a prolific rise in unemployed clients accessing PES since the new activation policies came into effect. In Limerick alone, unemployment has increased from approximately 4,000 in 2007 to almost 18,000 at its height two years ago (2012). Nationally, unemployment went from 4% at its lowest, to 15.1% in February 2012, with over 400,000 unemployed. The rate now stands at 11.1% (CSO). This sudden and dramatic rise in unemployment has resulted in a significant increase in the workload of PES staff. One of the effects of the economic downturn has been the thousands of people who suddenly found themselves on the Live Register, many of whom had worked all their lives and never expected to be out of work. In turn, there was a shift in the expectations of such people from some of the previous cohort of unemployed clients accessing PES.

Many of the 'new' unemployed are professionals in their fields who expected to be able to find work that utilised their skills and matched their previous income levels. When jobs were not available there was an

expectation of upskilling/reskilling opportunities which might not have been met in particular regions. Quite often unemployed clients display feelings of despair and despondency, manifesting itself in anger or aggression towards the PES staff member. There is also prevalence amongst the many unemployed people of mental health issues such as depression, poor coping skills and hopelessness about their future prospects.

It is widely recognised that unemployed people need appropriate, professional support and interventions to help them build their self-esteem and confidence, develop resilience, career adaptability and source paid employment. Career practitioners have a central role to play in this process. They are professionally trained in person-centred skills and attitudes that aim to encourage and empower clients to progress in their lives, thus enhancing their own well-being, and contributing to their families, the community and wider society. The conditions for this type of professional work need to afford a climate of acceptance and safety, empathy and congruence, not easily achieved at times when services are over-stretched, undervalued and overly focused on the matching of supply and demand model of intervention.

However, allied with the intensification of accountability measures by the Government and the Department of Social Protection and the moratorium on public service recruitment, career practitioners and service managers are now experiencing difficult conditions in their work leading to stress, low morale and ill-health. Therefore, this Symposium was extremely important and timely. In addition to the need for better support for staff at a structural level, there is now a necessity for the development of new skills and competencies by PES staff, including resilience and adaptability, to support unemployed people in the long-term.

The presentations and photographs from today's event are available from: <http://www.ul.ie/eps/node/621>

## **Opening Address by Dr. Lucy Hearne, University of Limerick**

I want to welcome you to what we feel is a very significant and timely event today. I would also like to acknowledge the funding support received by the IRC to host the Symposium. This event has been organised by UL in collaboration with Geraldine Lambert, Limerick Local Employment Services, Paul Partnership.

Today's Symposium will focus on three areas over the course of the day; policy, research and practice. With regard to the gestation of the event, it has emerged through a combination of research I have been engaged in over the last couple of years and professional discussions with Geraldine in the last few months about the field of practice including the experiences of PES career practitioners on the ground. From my own perspective I see a need for events like this to take place for a number of reasons. They can provide a forum for practitioners' to reflect upon, affirm and possibly challenge current practice. They also complement academic research endeavours, especially as empirical research on the Irish PES sector is under-resourced and quite limited at the moment. And hopefully the outcomes can feed into policy decision-making which can often feel very far removed from our everyday work with clients.

Unemployment is not just a theoretical construct – it is a 'lived reality' for 11.1 % of our population at the moment. It is also a 'lived reality' for the hundreds of career guidance practitioners' currently working with unemployed clients in our public employment services. The work is being quietly carried out in the context of the demonization of the 'unemployed' person and the 'public service' worker in certain quarters, and without proper consideration being given to the complexity of the work involved.

The career guidance work that PES practitioners engage in with unemployed clients is extremely important; it is altruistic, based on a value system that encourages empathy and understanding for another person's world view. It is high-touch requiring "highly skilled professional attachment, involvement and separation over and over again with one person after another" (Skovolt and Trotter-Mathison, 2011, p.106). It aims to support client's resilience. It is highly responsible work, and it is extremely complex as practitioners deal with issues such as generational unemployment, poor employment opportunities, mental health problems, marginalised groups, old models of guidance that advocate 'fitting' clients into jobs quickly to satisfy economic targets without considering the career/employment goals of clients themselves. Added to this has been the recent reforms in public services that has come to involve harsher regulatory measures with quite often poor clarity on areas of responsibility for employees.

In economic terms, the concentration has been primarily on the promotion of resiliency amongst clients who are trying to manage their lives in difficult circumstances. However, there is also a question to be answered in relation to the resiliency of career practitioners'. How do they develop and maintain their own professional and personal resilience in the context of challenging work environments where they may not always feel supported in the work that they do?

This event is an opportunity to reflect, discuss and problematise on current practice within the public employment sector. But we would also like to see a tangible outcome from the event today. Therefore, we will be taking a record of the day's dialogue during the Plenary Sessions, and we aim to synthesise the overall proceedings into a document that can be shared amongst different stakeholders including practitioners and policymakers.

## Keynote Address by Professor Jenny Bimrose, IER, University of Warwick

The focus of this presentation is on the dynamic interaction between the current labour market context and policy responses at the European level, together with the impact upon, and potential implications for career and employment practice in Ireland. The EU 2020 strategy has become highly influential, with the importance of ageing populations, the criticality of protecting the environment, the implications for advances in technology (both in private and public spaces), the skills mis-matches that exist in the labour markets of most European countries and the disastrous consequences of the marginalisation of vulnerable groups within societies, especially young people, provide the macro-policy back-drop to understanding the pressures being exerted upon Public Employment Services (PES).

Transitional labour market theory (Gazier & Gautie, 2011) has had significant influence on European policy making, with the integration of many key concepts in policy documents, of particular relevance to PES. Amongst these are the interconnection and compatibility of three core domains: life and citizenship activities; non-market useful social activities; and traditional, full-time jobs. With a previous tendency to regard these separately in policy terms, these are now acknowledged to be intertwined in the lives of individuals who are in employment or seeking employment. The volatility of labour markets across the world have precipitated high levels of social risk and uncertainty, with a key task for career counselling to support individuals to cope with the demands that accompany this new social order. For example, deciding on the occupational area best suited to an individual can no longer be regarded as a decision in isolation. This will inevitably impact upon and affect the search for a job, the search for somewhere to live, the search for a partner and raising a family – especially for women. A holistic approach to career and employment support is required.

The heads of PES across Europe have emphasised how more people need to work longer and differently. Because of this, PES face a number of immediate tasks (related to the execution of the European Employment Guidelines) including: lifting the employment rate; reducing the number of bottle neck vacancies; and investing in a strong and sustainable active mediation.

*‘For European Public Employment Services business will never be ‘business as usual’ anymore.....The social function of PES is transforming. Today, they have to transform into ‘work focused gateways to welfare systems’....Confronted with various uncertainties and opportunities, as well as with explicit responsibilities and expectations, PES are in need of a clear and stable view on the necessary developments they have to succeed in to stay relevant and effective.’*

(Ref: EU (2013) Public Employment Services’ Contribution to EU 2020. PES 2020 Strategy Output Paper. Available at: [file:///C:/Users/Jenny/Downloads/PES%20strategy%20EU%202020\\_EN.pdf](file:///C:/Users/Jenny/Downloads/PES%20strategy%20EU%202020_EN.pdf))



Employer engagement and the smarter, more efficient use of labour market information are indicated for PES practitioners. Building bridges is encouraged, bringing together agencies and professionals to deliver the enhanced service to clients: 'A more holistic approach to work...entails a shift from functioning (only) as service providers towards functioning (also) as service seekers, that compose scenarios for the most qualitative, effective and efficient constellation of services to meet the needs of the citizens and companies more flexibly and accurately.....cooperation of public, private, commercial and non-commercial agents is facilitated...'. A customer-orientated view of the ways services to employers could also be optimised by 'conducting', to ensure collaboration with other actors or providing the necessary service in-house. Overall, a shift is required from reactive to proactive modus operandi.

With these, and many other, demands placed on PES practitioners in Ireland, adequate support needs to be provided that will encourage and facilitate different ways of working. In essence, PES practitioners all over Europe are undergoing professional identity transformation, finding and developing new ways of coping with new demands and requirements. This could be available through a research and development project funded by the EU (FP7), entitled EmployId, the focus of which is to support for PES practitioners across Europe. The project runs for four years (2014 – 2018), with user engagement (that is, PES practitioners) as a key feature. The title of the project is: 'Scalable and cost-effective facilitation of professional identity transformation in Public Employment Services'. There are two objectives: first, to deliver comprehensive, sustainable, and cost-effective support for the facilitation of professional identity transformation; and second to use a holistic tool suite that combines and links eCoaching, reflection, MOOCs, networking, analytical and learning support tools. In addition to PES organisations getting involved in this research project, new concepts need to be embraced.

Career adaptability is one such concept. Defined as: 'the capability of an individual to make a series of successful transitions where the labour market, organisation of work and underlying occupational and organisational knowledge bases may be subject to considerable change' (Bimrose et al., 2011). Initial research undertaken by an international research group has found that using the career adaptabilities inventory can: raise aspiration; encourages autonomy; has relevance across the life-course; and offers potential for greater integration of ICT. EmployId will provide resources needed to provide a version of the inventory online for free access.

These are challenging times for PES practitioners, who need to need to develop resilience and flexibility in difficult circumstances. There are, however, potential sources of support available within the European and Irish context that can broker networks of PES practitioners across Europe to encourage the exchange of

best practices and provide new approaches to working. For more information about the EmployId project, go to: <http://employid.eu/>

## References

Bimrose, J., Barnes, S-A., Brown, A. and Hughes, D. (2011) 'The role of career adaptability in skills supply', Wath-upon-Deane: UK Commission for Employment & Skills.

European Union (2013). Public Employment Services' Contribution to EU 2020. PES 2020 Strategy Output Paper. Available at:

[file:///C:/Users/Jenny/Downloads/PES%20strategy%20EU%202020\\_EN.pdf](file:///C:/Users/Jenny/Downloads/PES%20strategy%20EU%202020_EN.pdf)

Gazier, B. & Gautie, J. (2011). The "Transitional Labour Markets" Approach: Theory, History and Future Research Agenda. Journal of Economic & Social Policy. 14. 1. Available online:

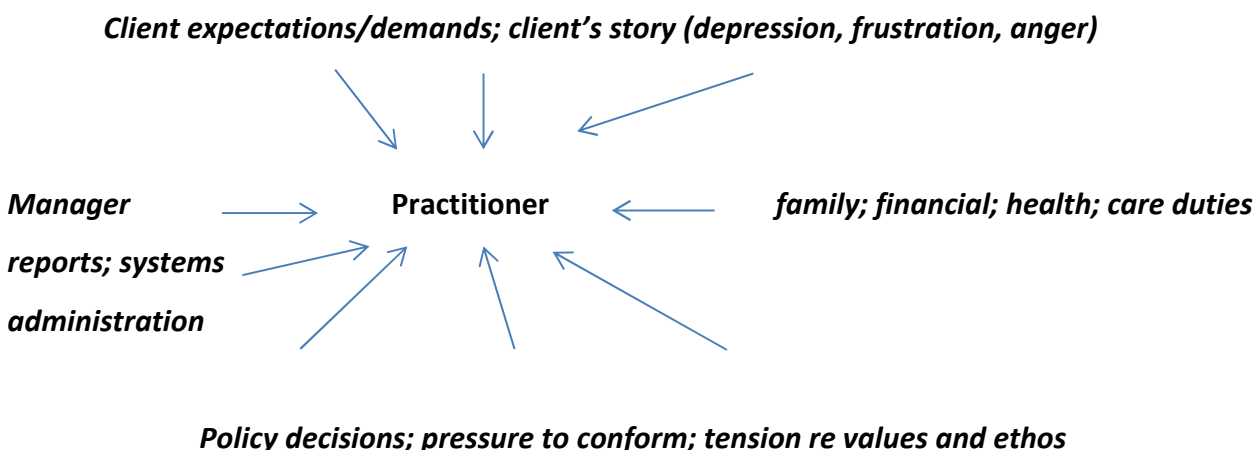
<http://epubs.scu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1136&context=jesp>

## **The View from the Ground: Professional Practice in LES by Geraldine Lambert, Employment Services Co-ordinator, PAUL Partnership**

It might not be fashionable or topical to talk about resilience in practitioners in the PES, or in the public sector generally. However, to deliver such services effectively we need to understand the context of changing times and conditions and the impact of that on practitioners.

Limerick Local Employment Service (LES) was established in 1996, as part of an area based response to chronic long term unemployment. Limerick was one of 12 such bodies established as a result of the Report of the Task Force on Unemployment 1995. In addition to the long term unemployed (LTU), target groups also included others who were deemed to be 'distant from the labour market', i.e. facing barriers or multiple barriers which impacted on their capacity to gain employment. The ethos then was intensive, personalised supports tailored to individual needs; this meant small caseloads coupled with time and resources to enable client progression.

Fast track to 2008 and to the present day and we find ourselves in a significantly changed environment. Practitioners now have much larger caseloads, less time to work intensively with people and pressure to progress clients off the caseload system. The result of this has been described by Professor Evelyn Brodtkin as 'speed over need' (Activation Policy Seminar, Maynooth University 22/9/2014) and it is a situation which causes considerable conflict within PES practitioners who know that more could be achieved with more time resources for the client. Add to this the reduced number of jobs, particularly at entry and lower levels, insufficient training places, or clients who have already completed training to their level of ability and do not wish to undertake any further training, and we arrive at a situation where the resilience of the practitioner is severely tested. A further factor is the change in client profile and enhanced expectations from those who are qualified and experienced in various disciplines and have a long history of work. In many ways we might describe the practitioner as 'Piggy in the Middle':



We can see from this that the various demands on staff can have a negative impact on the individual practitioner and there is a need to address this to ensure each person has the resilience to enable him/her to carry out their job effectively. I note also that some of the factors which help develop this trait may be missing in a flat structure such as the LES where there is little opportunity for progression to higher grades or to add versatility to the job. Previously staff had the opportunity to input to relevant working groups with other agencies or in local communities, this broadened their scope in the day to day job and had a positive mental effect. However, time constraints due to increased caseloads have reduced such opportunities.

As an LES Manager, I give you the following analogy to demonstrate the importance of developing and increasing resilience and well-being amongst staff:

Consider a football – kicked around the field by different team members. It works well and bounces as it should. From time to time the football gets deflated. There are 2 choices: continue to keep it in use and continue to kick it around until it becomes useless, or take it off the field and reflate it so that it can continue to do its job well. We have the same choices with people. If we do not give time, space and resources to ensure they are supported when they hit a rough patch, help to ‘re-inflate’, they will not be able to do the job effectively. In that scenario, everyone is at a loss: client, practitioner and the PES.

How can PES staff be supported to deliver an effective service to clients? We understand the need for increased caseloads and for more effective interventions. However, we must not confuse effectiveness with efficiency. It might be efficient to throughput a large amount of clients per day by giving each person shorter time slots with added pressure to choose an activation option, but if the effect is to pressure the client into choosing an intervention which turns out not to be appropriate to that person’s capacity or skill, that does not deliver an effective, cost efficient service. So ‘speed over need’ will not necessarily deliver value for money in PES, which must **recognise the different profiles of clients and consequent need for more targeted, personalised and intensive supports, sometimes delivered over a longer period.**

As PES Staff have to cope with heavier and more varied demands it is imperative that there is investment in ensuring they have the capabilities and personal resources to deal with these. Therefore, **they must be given the necessary supports in the form of on-going appropriate training together with peer and/or external supervision,** to enable them to continue to deliver an effective and efficient employment service to all jobseekers.

## Summary of Breakout Session Discussions

This section provides a summary of the key points and proposed recommendations that emerged from the facilitated breakout sessions (three groups) in the afternoon. The sessions allowed delegates the opportunity to discuss in smaller groups the current issues related to professional resilience of practitioners in the public employment services through two guiding questions:

- 1. What are the central issues for career practitioners and support services working with the unemployed at the moment?***
- 2. How can the resilience of career practitioners who are supporting unemployed clients be fostered?***

With regard to the first question, the key concerns identified relate to the professional work of career practitioners in PES, the experiences of clients and organisational and operational issues. With the increase in client numbers career practitioners are experiencing time constraints' and a pressure to keep up to speed with meeting new clients resulting in a lack of time for them to engage with the labour market to source information. The time burden is also contributing to the erosion of the person-centred guidance process with more focus now on a directive type of guidance with clients to move them on quickly through the social welfare system. There is also a fear on behalf of practitioners of guiding clients into inappropriate courses to satisfy DSP targets that in the long-term will not serve the client well.

From the client's perspective, there are a myriad of factors and complex issues being presented to career practitioners including the diverse client groups, mental and physical health problems, poor motivation to change, difficulties accessing transport, variation in educational background and levels, and a lack of 'real' jobs at the moment. It was pointed out that clients are complex but the emphasis of DSP is on classification of clients into different, stratified categories. The concern here is the unequal treatment of clients by public employment services and the DSP. Furthermore, in relation to practitioner competencies there is a need for differentiated responses to individual clients as many clients have educational and mental health issues that must to be addressed first before working on his/her job-seeking strategies. Finally, when clients do apply for jobs there is a consistent lack of response from employers that feeds into the clients' sense of hopelessness.

Finally, a range of organisational issues were articulated including poor communication structures between different agencies sometimes leading to inappropriate referrals and clients getting lost in the system. There

is a real need for more clarity on the roles and responsibilities of different agencies, better referral structures and concentration on building networks, both formal and informal, to work in partnership rather than isolation. In addition, different services on the ground are experiencing rapid organisational restructuring and in spite of the rise in client numbers there is still staff shortages with services being expected to do more with less resources. Lastly, in terms of accountability, the over-emphasis by Government and the DSP on quantitative measures and outcomes of service interventions is impacting on the quality of the service to clients.

Unsurprisingly, the responses to question 2 overlap to some extent with those of question 1. The responsibility for fostering professional resilience lies at a personal and organisational level. As demand for career guidance in PES has escalated and there is now no 'down' time practitioners feel the time for reflection, researching of career related information and autonomous work practice has deteriorated for them in recent times. At a personal level it is important to have both peer, which is generally taking place, and external professional supervision, which is not happening, made available and built into professional practice. This can support practitioners' mental and physical health and their overall wellbeing. Practitioners also require ongoing CPD in the form of training courses and other activities such as conferences and external events that are seen as of value to the client, practitioner and service.

At an organisational level, certain structural and attitudinal conditions are now necessary in public employment services including clarity of roles and responsibilities as well as strong, supportive leadership. In particular, credence needs to be given to the 'voice' of the career practitioner in the form of bottom-up approaches that feed into the policy decision-making process in order to prevent isolation and resentment. The issue of staff pay, conditions and contracts and job insecurity is exacerbating the stress levels of career practitioners. Services also need to embrace ICT and new forms of interventions to make their work easier. More time is needed with clients, particularly those who need intensive one-to-one support. This should take into account practitioner discretion, appropriate profiling of client needs and utilising external services such as NEPS and AEGI.

Finally, with regard to measurement and evidence gathering PES, realistic targets for unemployed clients and an integrated approach to capture both quantitative and qualitative outcomes of interventions for clients is recommended. This type of evidence has the capacity to showcase success stories, the 'distance travelled' and the intangible outcomes for clients. It can also affirm the valuable work of PES career practitioners when resilience is needed by them.

**Contact Details:**

Dr. Lucy Hearne,  
Department of Education and Professional Studies  
University of Limerick.  
Tel: 061-202931  
Email: [lucy.hearne@ul.ie](mailto:lucy.hearne@ul.ie)

Geraldine Lambert,  
Employment Services Co-ordinator  
PAUL Partnership Local Employment Service.  
Tel: 061-412999  
Email: [glambert@les.ie](mailto:glambert@les.ie)