

Angela Jones – Careers Wales Powys.

Study Visit to Iceland 10th – 14th May 2004

Introduction

I was originally offered a place on the Careers Europe visit to Iceland as part of the Academia project. This was to be a meeting of careers staff from a number of different European countries, discussing and sharing ideas on their own country's education and careers guidance systems. I had prepared a presentation to introduce how Careers Wales operated, and the education systems in Britain, which is the area of careers work in which I am based.

Unfortunately the original programme fell through, but nevertheless I still hoped to visit the country and learn about its own approach to careers education and guidance.

Thanks to Lee and Phil from Careers Europe in Bradford, and our host, Bjarni Kristjansson, from the Euroguidance centre at the University of Iceland, and through the Leonardo Da Vinci programme, a schedule was drawn up and myself and two colleagues working in other areas of careers work from different parts of the UK, and we were finally on our way to Iceland.

My colleagues were Sue Claydon, a Manager of an Information Advice and Guidance partnership in Cambridge and Peterborough, and Penni Barker, a Connexions personal adviser from Cornwall and Devon, who worked with difficult to place 16 – 19 year olds with other issues such as homelessness and drug and alcohol problems.

I myself am based in a small secondary school in Mid Wales, giving careers education, advice and guidance to clients between the ages of 12 – 18, both in English and through the medium of Welsh.

The programme arranged by Bjarni was very varied and geared to the interests and areas of work covered by my colleagues and myself. He was also a perfect tour guide and if there was ever any spare time between visits we were treated to a tour of parts of Reykjavik, and fascinating information on its history. My colleagues and I also found time in the evenings to wander around and do a bit of sight seeing or visit some of the well-known attractions around Reykjavik.

Everyone we met on our visit was incredibly welcoming, very helpful and offered some interesting information on their individual roles. They were also keen to know a little about ourselves, what our own work entailed, as well as wanting to know about the areas we lived.

Day 1. Monday, 10th May

a.m.

Hitt Husid

Our first visit was to 'Hitt Husid', which means 'The other house'.

It is a young people's centre for culture and information, aimed at those between the ages of 16 – 25.

Our host at Hitt Husid was Bjorn Viljalmsson, and his dog, Rolex, who seemed to play an active role in welcoming guests and giving the centre a relaxed, homely feel!

The centre runs a wide range of different projects, and we were introduced to the people in charge of them, all who were friendly and enthusiastic about their particular role.

It seemed that Hitt Husid was a centre for many innovative and inspiring projects, each aimed at certain groups of the youth population. Such projects consisted of:-

'Young Art', a young people's art festival, which has been running annually since 1992. The festival lasts one week and consists of art, theatre, music and costume. The scheme collaborates experts in the arts with young people to create productions, stage pop concerts and art and creative events.

'Thursday Foreplay', which takes place in 'The Loft', which is a large room at the top of the centre housing a kitchen, coffee lounge, stage and seating area. This project encourages young people to 'express' themselves through music, art or theatre. The artists produce and perform their own work with the help of professional sound technicians and apparatus.

'The Street Theatre' is arranged with the help of professional directors, but the young people involved are responsible for creating costumes, writing scripts and handling all preparations. It is open to young people aged 17 or above. There is always a performance on 17th June (Youth and Sports Council Day), and other performances operate throughout the summer.

Another scheme provided summer jobs for young people, through liaison with local employers. According to Icelandic rules, young people in Iceland can gain work experience from the age of 13. The legal length of time is Age 13/14 – 4 weeks, age 15 – 6 weeks and age 16 – 10 weeks.

We also visited the Special Unit, which is a project for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities. The members of the group are encouraged to explore their own artistic ideas and act upon them. A committee of members is formed who are ultimately responsible for budget and the production of art schemes. They work alongside other parties and professionals. The workers of Hitt Husid support them.

In recent years 'Twinkling Stars', a musical group from the special unit, have been successful in being placed among the top 5 in a European award, and members of the unit have also been involved in European exchanges.

Immigrants are also supported by a scheme run in conjunction with the social service of Reykjavik and the Immigrants Centre.

After meeting with those responsible for the other projects, we then sat down to discuss Bjorn's own involvement in the centre. He was responsible for a number of activities run through Hitt Husid, one of which being the Peer Education Project, which was a scheme whereby clients are educated to counsel similar aged clients.

He has also been involved in the 'Highland' scheme, where young people with problems are taken on 'hiking' trips in the Westfjords of Iceland, this encourages them to become involved in discipline, team working skills, and co-operation.

At the moment Bjorn is involved in a new project, 'Total Counselling'. This project was being supported through the Leonardo programme.

It was aimed at young people from 18 – 25 years old. It is a scheme whereby representatives from social services, health organisations, psychologists, drugs counsellor, legal adviser and Bjorn himself all collaborate on individual cases.

Clients are encouraged to attend by being offered a 'drop in service', and then are encouraged to return to use the help provided by the different professional parties.

In addition to all the above schemes and projects, general advice is offered to all young people by way of an information centre.

One disadvantage Bjorn pointed out to us was that he had problems accessing information on those particular clients he felt needed the most help, those who might have dropped out of school, and those who might be unemployed as the information from both organisations is protected under personal protection rules, and therefore is not shared amongst other parties who might be in a position to help (e.g Hitt Husid).

This visit was fascinating and I was amazed at the amount of activities going on under one roof. The workers all seemed to be passionate about their own projects, and proud of their achievements.

p.m.

Icelandic Association of Career Counsellors

Our afternoon was spent at the home of Jonina Kardal, and her baby daughter Helgur. Jonina is the current president of the Icelandic Association of Career Counsellors. She is currently on maternity leave, but invited us to join her for pancakes and coffee and an informal chat.

Jonina is based at the counselling centre at the University of Iceland, and gave us a brief background of the association.

Although the association was originally formed in 1981, its main goal is to be recognised as a professional body. This is happening slowly, but changes need to be made. They are currently working towards accreditation through the Ministry of Education.

Whereas previously, there was more emphasis on educational counselling, the profession is changing and there is now a move to develop a more holistic approach, that is to develop career counselling for those choosing either an education route, or a less academic or trade route through education and training. The aim of the association is to provide specialised information, they are able to utilise for the people they serve. Currently the codes of practise guidelines are being produced. At present there are no ethical guidelines, and that is something the association feel needs to be developed. There is also a need for standards in counselling.

Presently in Iceland, counsellors are employed by specific institutions, which in effect, make it difficult to give impartial advice to clients, therefore there is also a need for independence from schools and other institutions. Counsellors have been employed by secondary schools in Iceland for around 20 years, whilst counsellors in Reykjavik have been employed by elementary schools for around 5 years. Much of the time goes on personal counselling for students, however lessons are also delivered to specific age groups, and work in evaluating life skills programmes, and now career counselling is regarded as an asset in schools.

University students also have access to Career counsellors, who are based in the various universities around Iceland.

Jonina also mentioned a new Masters programme in Guidance and Counselling being offered through the University of Iceland, but this was something we were to learn more about during the course of the week.

We all enjoyed the hospitality Jonina had shown us (as well as meeting her lovely baby daughter), and were looking forward to finding out more about the university and it's counselling courses later on in the week.

Day 2. Tuesday 11th May

a.m.

Fjolsmidjan

We were taken to meet Mr. Thorbjorn Jensson, the director of the Fjolsmidjan, which is a Production School for Young People. He was to give us a guided tour of the centre and give us an interesting talk on its history.

The centre has been running for 3 years, and was the brainchild of Thorbjorn, who himself is a very driven and enthusiastic person. He treats the students maturely and in return gains respect from them.

He was originally the national coach for the Icelandic Handball team (their national sport). This in itself gave Thorbjorn the opportunity to utilise his contacts, and gain backing from a number of areas: industry, finance and so on. Money for the centre is obtained from the Red Cross, Ministry of Education, community funding. Money is also created through the various projects carried out at the centre. The centre makes about 60,000,000 kronur annually.

The building that houses Fjolsmidjan was originally a hospital owned by the Red Cross and who backed the idea, which was originally taken from similar schools set up in Denmark. Fjolsmidjan was the first of its kind in Iceland. Thorbjorn is hoping to open another 2 centres in different areas of Iceland.

This centre is a vocational access school, aimed at young people who are disaffected or those not achieving national qualification level at 16 years of age. There are currently 49 students at the centre, about 13 of who are girls. The students normally stay between 6 – 8 months, and can decide when they are ready to leave. They are trained in a number of vocational areas, as well as being taught about handling money, personal and social education. The students are paid an allowance of 80,000 Kronur every week but are not paid if they are absent without notifying the centre. They have access to psychologist and counsellors if they need it. There is always a waiting list of students wishing to use the programme.

The centre is made up of a number of departments, all with qualified tutors. We first visited an area of the school where students could work on their school subjects, choosing English, Maths, Danish and Icelandic. This gives them an opportunity to achieve the exams they were not able to take at school, for any number of reasons. This unit is run by a qualified teacher. It had a relaxed atmosphere, where students could work at their own pace, alone or in the company of their peers.

We were then shown around an IT centre, where labels were designed and produced booklets, security cards, labels, etc. for a number of local companies at very competitive prices.

We next visited the carpentry area, where students, under the supervision of their tutor create a number of quality products by special request or for sale to the public. We were shown an example of decorative finials, turned by the students, to adorn the flagpoles outside the University of Iceland in Reykjavik, produced at a fraction of the price quoted by a specialist company. We also saw examples of small summer houses, produced at the centre sold for around 150,000 Icelandic Kronur. Some larger ones had even been taken out of Reykjavik and raised in rural areas as summer houses (popular with residents of the city).

We were a little concerned however, at the levels of health and safety in the centre, as they didn't seem to reach the standards of workshops in the UK!

The centre also runs a car valeting department, where local residents can book to have their cars cleaned inside and out for a very reasonable fee. Local car dealers have agreements with the centre, whereby cars are sent there to be prepared for sale. The centre also has a contract with the local health department. The tutor is keen to point out that although there is plenty of work available, it is the quality of the work and not the quantity of vehicles tended that is important. The wall of the garage area sported a bright mural, painted by students with the help of a local artist.

Amongst other departments visited, we looked at a weighing and packing centre, who have contracts with local industry, a computer and electrical repair and resale centre, which collects old appliances and computers, repairs them, checks them for safety and passes them on to recycling centres and charity organisations in the Reykjavik area; and a catering department and cafe, catering for 60 – 80 local workers every day.

I asked Thorbjorn about what he would what new projects he like to see in the future. He has plans to gain possession of a nearby house and run it as a guesthouse, students would renovate it under supervision of the tutors, and then run it in shifts. He would also like to run a small fishing boat from a nearby harbour, and would also like to incorporate a sports programme, teaching students about health and nutrition.

Thorbjorn is currently working on a plan with the ministry of education, to get the skills learned at the centre accredited in some way to act as points to take back into schools if students were to return, or into work. The centre has a good success rate, about 73% of students go into work or school; some with ongoing problems (e.g. drug and alcohol) might return.

I found this visit to be inspirational, in that so much had been achieved in very little time. I believe that most of its success was down to Thorbjorn and his drive and enthusiasm (and contacts!), which was reflected in the students, as well as the tutors who offered education and guidance.

When talking to one of the electrical students, we asked him what he thought of the centre. He replied that it was the best thing he'd ever done in his life.

p.m.

Nemacode

We were invited to meet up with Asta Ragnarsdottir and her husband Valgeir Gudjonsson at the office of Nemacode in the centre of Reykjavik. We were greeted and shown around the offices, which were very homely and relaxed. We also met with other members of the working team, all of whom were friendly and enthusiastic.

Asta is a guidance counsellor, experienced in the field of vocational and school counselling.

Valgeir, a talented and well-known musician in Iceland, is chief of development. We were also introduced to a good friend of the couple, Carol Pazendak, originally a Professor and the Dean of students at the University of Minnesota, who had worked with Asta for a number of years, and who was responsible for designing the first counselor training programme in Iceland.

Asta has been working on a new interest inventory, based on the RIASEC Hexacon model developed by Dr John Holland. The project is being supported by the Leonardo Da Vinci programme.

Valgeir and Asta talked us through a brief presentation of the Nema code, using resources normally used in the training course for Nema practitioners. The presentation was very interesting and Asta was very enthusiastic about her project. They were keen to promote the project and hoped to gain more interest throughout several countries in Europe.

Nema code is internet based and designed to allow the client to work through the interest inventory.

They are required to list positive and negative aspects of their past, present and future jobs and tasks.

They then need a vision of what they hope to be doing 5-10 years from now.

There is a workbook provided for the client to work through, which is private unless the client requires the help of a counsellor.

They are also given an educational package based on the RIASEC model.

The basis of the model is to divide interest areas into 6 categories, Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. Clients are placed within a certain category, which is then divided into right or left. The Nema code is designed for use on clients from age 15 years upwards, helping them to identify their character, as well as their interests and types of suitable careers.

Asta is also in the process of developing a web – based educational study tool, designed to aid clients of all ages to organise and arrange their work into manageable chapters, by inputting data to be stored to aid revision. This is useful for anyone entering education either in a school setting or adult learners. It is currently being piloted by a number of clients of various ages.

I was interested in the concept of this tool as it seemed to be a simple but effective way of storing the necessary information, making revision easier.

Day 3. Wednesday 12th May

a.m.

University of Iceland

We were taken to the University of Iceland, to meet Dr. Gudbjorg Vilhjalmsdottir, who is a lecturer at the Faculty of Social Sciences.

We were there to learn more about counselling in Iceland, and to find out more about the new Masters studies in Career Counselling at the university. This is something Jonina Kardal, or host on Monday afternoon, had told us a little about already, as when not on Maternity leave, this is the office where Jonina works.

Gudbjorg first explained the school system to us, which we had a little knowledge of due to prior

research and talking to our other acquaintances on previous visits.

Elementary school in Iceland is for ages 6 – 16 and this of course is compulsory education. They can then enter an optional education system for ages 16 – 20, after which they can choose to enter university.

Before 1974, the school education system was similar to that of Britain, but was then changed to the Scandinavian system.

Gudbjorg explained a little about the background of the Counsellors association, as Jonina had previously. She then went on to tell us a little about the courses.

The guidance and counselling courses began in 1990, with 10 courses, and now there are 160 counsellors on the programme.

There are no fees charged at the University of Iceland, even for masters programmes.

Graduates on the programme must have a degree in Teaching, Psychology or Sociology. There was a diploma course before the masters was put into place, which required 9 months of postgraduate training. That is now being replaced by the Masters, which is available as a distance-learning course in the near future, which is necessary for counsellors working in any of the 8 districts of Iceland.

Education careers counsellors and employment counsellors on the distance-learning programme follow separate units.

In recent times, there has been a need for specialised training for counsellors, for example in 1992, there was a crisis as there was no formal counselling system. 4 years later a system was in place. Now there is training provided for special areas of counselling, for example in firms, for multicultural clients, and it is now possible to study homosexual studies/ issues as a final project.

I was interested to know the ratio of female to male students on the course, as in Britain there seem to be many more female counsellors. It seemed the case also in Iceland, as only 4 out of 17 students were male.

I found this visit both interesting and inspiring, but also a little intimidating as I realised the huge emphasis that was placed on academic qualifications in this field of work. Gudbjorg asked us at the beginning of the visit about our own backgrounds, to which both of my colleagues explained their degrees and qualifications. I felt slightly inadequate, as I have recently completed the Guidance and Counselling NVQ4 route with very little background of similar work, I found it quite difficult to justify my own experience or explain my qualification. However, this study visit has now prompted me to explore the possibility of following a similar programme to that offered by Gudbjorg's faculty, in Britain.

p.m.

We were to visit 2 organisations, both of which were located in the same office.

Mennt

Our first visit was to meet Adalheidur Jonsdottir, the director of Mennt (which is 'Educate' in Icelandic).

Mennt was founded in 1998 by the collaboration of a number of organisations: Vocational schools, secondary schools, Universities, local authorities and the federation of Icelandic Employers, which are similar organisations to CITB, EMTA etc in Britain.

It is not a government-funded organisation, partners to the organisation pay an annual fee, and they receive short term funding for specific projects.

Adalheidur explained that they had had some difficulties with one project, which was developing a database of opportunities in Iceland, as many organisations weren't prepared to have their details added to it. This is an ongoing problem.

Mennt were involved in different types of project.

National projects:- including event organising (they were in the process of arranging the Lifelong Learning Week), the aforementioned database, National Training Awards, Policy development.

European projects:- Mennt is the national co-ordinator for CEDOFOP, arranging study visits, and also supporting the Leonardo Da Vinci project by assisting promoters, promotion and dissemination of information. Mennt also has participation with European networks, and organises and manages projects.

As the current project involved organising and promoting National Lifelong Learning week, Adalheidur explained a little about how they were promoting it, through newspaper coverage, using local radio, giving away free courses.

Mennt are also involved in Nordic Adult Learners Week.

The Education & Training Service Centre.

Ingibjorg Gudmundsdottir is the director of the organisation.

It is a very new organisation, having originally been established at the end of 2002 by the Icelandic Federation of Labour and the Confederation of Icelandic Employers.

A contract was drawn up with the Ministry of Education in April 2003.

It is a non-profit making organisation.

Ingibjorg explained a little about the background of herself and co-workers. There were 5 staff in all, She herself had a BA in psychology and experience of adult education, one member of the staff had a background in trade and industry, Fijola, whom we met, was a careers counsellor, another had a MA in education, and there was also psychologist with experience of work with educational providers. Between them they offered a diverse range of expertise and experience.

The objectives of the organisation include promoting education to people who have limited formal education, and to analyse the educational needs of those already in the workforce, to work with educational bodies such as lifelong learning centres to supply relevant education packages, to identify and promote skills and knowledge acquired on courses and through experience and self study.

There is also a need to build up self-esteem in individuals, enabling them to access the opportunities available to them in the future.

She described the upper secondary schools (those offering more vocational education) system whereby students work at their own pace, collecting modules of work. She said that some people leave the education system at 16 and go into work, but it isn't uncommon for people to return to complete their education up to the age of 30 years. However in so-called Gymnasium schools (i.e. those preparing pupils for higher education), everyone studies at the same rate.

The organisation also aims to increase the quality of adult education and vocational training in the workforce, to train teachers at adult learning centres and to develop career-counselling services in the labour market. They feel it is necessary to draw up a policy whereby learners are able to study within working hours.

Ingibjorg explained that there were restrictions in accrediting vocational knowledge that needed to be addressed and that she was keen to work with the ministry of education to have courses

evaluated for accreditation, so that they can be taken by learners into education or into the workforce. She also said that it would be a big challenge to re-educate institutes over abilities, skills and accreditations. She mentioned that the University of Iceland would not accept applicants who had chosen a vocational route of study, but other universities (e.g. those teaching agriculture, business, teacher training) might be prepared to look at vocational qualifications for entry.

She had been looking at the format of NVQ's used in the UK.

The organisation was also aiming to educate the labour market in preparing to employ immigrants, helping them to teach about language and culture and society.

I found both of the afternoon's visits very interesting.

Day 4. Thursday 13th May.

a.m.

Spiderweb

We would be visiting The University of Reykjavic, to meet with Ms. Bjorg Birgisdottir and Ms. Karen Bjornsdottir, to discuss counselling activities and the Spiderweb project, which was being supported by the Leonardo Da Vinci programme.

The university is very young, only being established 6 years ago.

We were given a brief talk on the background of both of our acquaintances, Bjorg has a background in teaching, having studied her degree in the States, and has been working as a counsellor there from the beginning, first only part time but now full time. She now works as a counsellor and director of distance learning, and has also developed an international office. As the university is relatively new, Bjorg enjoys the freedom to do things in a different way.

Karen was educated at the University of Iceland, and also has a background in teaching, then became a careers counsellor. She hopes to study the new Masters programme we learned about earlier in the week, commencing in the Autumn.

She told us that she would also be participating in a Euroguidance Acadamia exchange to Naples the following week.

Bjorg told us about the Spiderweb project that was currently running through support by Leonardo. It was a 3-year pilot project aimed at targeting the dropout population in Europe. The project was originally given a Leonardo Da Vinci grant in 2001, and is due to end this year. They hope to receive another grant from Leonardo to continue the project.

Spiderweb is an acronym of Support Programme In Development Represented on the Web. The objectives of Spiderweb are to identify dropout groups in educational and vocational settings, detect those at risk by a screening process, provide support programmes for those individuals and training materials for facilitators, and to develop a website with information, research and articles concerning the dropout population.

Bjorg was working in partnership with other members in Iceland as well as a number of

European partners in Ireland, Finland, Greece, Scotland and Slovakia. A final conference will be held in October of this year at Reykjavik, with all partners present to evaluate the effectiveness of the project.

Bjorg showed us examples of the support programmes available on Spiderweb. The WATCH (What Alternatives? Thinking, Coping, Hoping) programme was devised by Bjorg, originally based on a thesis from her MA. It was a comprehensive resource aimed at those already or at risk of dropping out. It consisted of two programmes: 'small wins', an approach which suggests small ways in which counsellors may help students complete high school, and REACH – Rendering Educational Assistance through Caring Hands, which provided students with a support system to help them develop a positive attitude and improve their academic achievement through peer support and one- to –one relationship with a mentor. The programme is divided into 15 group sessions, all starting with introduction and rules (e.g. confidentiality, respect) of the group sessions, and setting small goals for the following session. Sessions could be delivered in a full programme, or picked to suit the client groups. I found this resource interesting and useful and hope to obtain a copy to demonstrate to my company when it is produced in the near future. The AT (Assertiveness Training) programme was another programme used in Spiderweb. We didn't talk about this, but was developed by the University of Iceland.

After our discussion on Spiderweb, we were taken on a tour of the university. As a young institution, I noticed that a lot of effort had been put into the aesthetics of the building and its interior. The walls were adorned with interesting pieces of art, much of the workspace was 'open plan', the furniture was attractive and there were attractive flower displays everywhere, it was well equipped with points for laptops in all rooms, even the cafeteria. I mentioned this to Karen, and she said it made for a very relaxed and pleasant working atmosphere both for students and staff.

Currently the university specialise in Business, Law and Computing, offering a number of Bachelor and Masters courses. We were told that there was soon to be a new department at the university, offering educational studies and engineering. Courses are offered on a full time basis, as well as through distance learning and study whilst working.

The university currently has around 35 foreign students, the number increasing every year. Bjorg told us that although the university have associations with other universities in Europe and the States, they have found difficulty in establishing ties with British universities, currently only working with The European Business School in London.

As the university is a private university, fees are higher than those of the University of Iceland (around 1,000 Isk per semester), but there is a loan institution available for those not able to pay fees.

Bjarni had only arranged one visit for us on this day, which was welcome as we were all suffering a little from 'information overload', and needed time to gather our thoughts and reflect on our previous visits.

Day 5. Friday, 14th May

a.m.

Gotusmidjan

In a change from our original programme, where we were to be visiting a comprehensive school, Bjarni arranged for us to visit Gotusmidjan (The Street Workshop).

This centre was set in Arvellir, a rural area facing the sea a short drive out of Reykjavik, the countryside was very impressive (and the wind was very strong!!).

It is a therapeutic centre for young people with addiction problems, between the ages of 14 – 20 years. The centre was quite isolated, and consisted of a number of buildings, one housing bedrooms and living quarters, another housing a kitchen, an eating area and work/ treatment rooms. There were also other buildings with activities, hot tubs and so on.

Our host was Elisabet Gísladóttir, who I believe was the director. She sat us down with coffee and told us about the project in some detail.

The centre had been running since 1998, and offered places to around 18 students. It was set up by a former drug abuser, who after working with young people with similar problems, identified a need for such a centre. He received funding from individuals and firms. He is now a popular visitor to the centre and a great inspiration to the students.

The centre had 15 rooms, 13 of which were funded by the state mainly for students under 18 years, and 2 rooms for older students which were funded by individual organisations. The programme can last from 2 to 12 months, depending on the student.

Elisabet explained that students at the centre must have completed a period of de-tox before joining the programme. There is no resident doctor at the centre.

The centre has a number of professional workers such as a cook, a psychologist/ counsellor (Margaret, who showed us around the centre), a supervisor and a teacher as students are encouraged to continue with their education. It is a flexible programme to fit the needs of each individual. Activities included on the programme include Lesson therapy, Art therapy and students are encouraged to reflect on their feelings regularly through Group therapy meetings. There is also a regular house meeting between the staff and the student.

Students must stick to a schedule (we were shown a timetable of a week's activities at the centre which was very precise), bed time is at 11.00pm sharp.

In addition to their schedule, students are taught personal and domestic skills, such as washing their own clothes and cleaning. Weekends are also planned, with activities such as horse riding, sports, swimming, cinema visits and climbing available. Students having completed the programme are monitored by supervisors and are encouraged to return every month for group therapy sessions.

The doors of the centre are not locked, giving the students the sense that they are there of their own free will. If they do leave, their room will be kept available for them for a week.

Most of the students are from Reykjavik, although places are available for students from all over Iceland. Margaret explained that the youngest users are those from the rural communities of Iceland.

Although there is always a waiting list for the centre, the busiest time is autumn, spring and around Christmas.

Students are referred to the centre through the social services; the child agency and those under 18 years need the consent of the government and the parents. The parents are encouraged to

take an active role in their child's therapy by meeting regularly with the workers at the centre. Margaret, the psychologist deals with parents and students alike.

The centre is soon to move to a bigger building in the south some 1½ hours' travel out of Reykjavik, where there will be room for more students and Music can be used as part of the therapy programme. When the centre moves, 7 families will be moving with it, to keep in contact with the programme.

Elisabet explained that many students, when first joining the programme are quiet or angry with very little confidence and low self esteem. The students we met at the centre were friendly and inquisitive, and full of character.

As with many of the other projects we visited throughout the week I found this centre inspirational and worthwhile. It was clear, after meeting some of the students that the programme was effective and that some of its success was due to the level of mutual respect between students and staff.

p.m.

Borgarholtsskoli

For our final visit, we were taken to Borgarholtsskoli, which is a new comprehensive secondary school on the outskirts of Reykjavik.

The school is now 6 years old, and is a very impressive building, built on two floors, with large corridors, modern and attractive classrooms and well-equipped work areas.

Our host was Ottar Olafsson, who is the study counsellor at the school.

Although I have enjoyed every visit throughout the week, I thought that this would be most relevant to my own work as I myself deal with school pupils. However, after visiting Borgarholtsskoli, I now realise that the comprehensive schools in Iceland bear a greater resemblance to Further Education colleges in the UK. The age group of students at the school is normally between 16 and 20 years of age, although it is not uncommon to find older students on courses there as well (yet again, as we would find in the UK).

Olaf told us a little about the secondary school system in Iceland. Students can choose to attend academic schools, leading to completion of the Matriculation exam, or a number of vocational type schools, or a comprehensive school combining vocational training with academic study. He explained that many young people after completing compulsory schooling at the age of 16, join the job market rather than going immediately into secondary education. So as to discourage potential 'drop out', there has been a move to create more vocational courses within the secondary school system, whereby allowing those students to be educated in a 'trade' (e.g. automotive work) whilst still working within the school system. Olaf believes that educational counselling also plays a large part in this change of attitude.

The school offers a variety of courses: Three academic courses: Social Science, Natural Science and Modern Languages; Multimedia Design, Media and Information Processing, a variety of vocational programmes (e.g. Automotive Industrial Arts, Industrial Metal Works), preparatory courses and a special education programme.

The length of the courses ranged from 2 – 4 years, depending on the course. Most of the courses are offered on a unit- credit basis. The core subjects available in Iceland are Icelandic, Maths, English and Danish. The school currently has around 900 students.

The school also offers workshops in a number of areas, fine arts, fashion design, drama and music, offers good computer facilities, and a well-stocked library for students.

Olaf showed us around the school, which was very quiet as most students were currently taking exams, and the many of staff were watching the Danish Royal Wedding!
We were shown the automotive department, which was equipped with a modern range of tools, and the media department, equally as impressive.

As I had noticed in Reykjavik university and other places we had visited during the week, not only were the buildings and rooms of a high standard, but the working environment was also attractive: lots of art work, use of colour, light and airy surroundings, making the school a place that students would like to spend time. In the institutions I have visited in Wales and other parts of the UK this is not often the case, and I personally believe that this kind of attention to detail could have an effect on the working attitude of students.

Saturday 15th May

After a busy but informative and very worthwhile week, Bjarni had arranged to show us a bit more of the country, and spent the day taking us to see some of the beautiful scenery. We visited Thingvellir, the site of the original parliament, Geysir and the Gullfoss waterfall. It was nice to have time to spend walking and looking around these places, being told about their history, as opposed to hopping on and off a tour bus, which only seemed to spend around ten minutes at every location! Although this wasn't really an official part of our study visit, it was educational, and a perfect way to end an enjoyable week.

I am glad that we were given the opportunity to learn a little more about the country and its heritage, in addition to its guidance systems!

I feel very lucky to have been able to take part in an exchange to Iceland. It is a country that I have wanted to visit for some time and this was a perfect opportunity, as, not only was it educational from a professional point of view, but also personally. I was impressed by the hospitality of the people we met during the course of our visit, their enthusiasm and their interest in us as fellow guidance professionals.

The exchange gave me the opportunity to learn about other aspects of guidance beyond my own area of work, and see the effectiveness of some of the projects on their specific target group.

Other visits during the week have given me a new enthusiasm about areas of my own work and encouraged me to consider pursuing new challenges in my own professional development.

Not only did I gain a knowledge from our Icelandic counterparts but also from my two travelling partners from other areas of the UK, as we had the opportunity to compare and discuss our own work.

I feel confident that the information I have gathered on my visit will be of value to my colleagues within my company, and I would encourage any one of them to consider an exchange of this kind in the future.