

Bil Stanton Euro Exchange to Prague

To all concerned this is a report from my recent trip to Prague as part of a European Guidance Exchange Programme. The programme was from March 29 to April 02 2004. I will herby outline & explain briefly what I was doing over there & divulge anything I learnt.

Monday 29th March

Today was the first day & the morning started off with introductions. Our hosts were from the Czech National Training Fund. We had 3 hosts looking after us in particular, Zuzana, Ondrej & Jana. As for the group, there were 15 of us which for an exchange programme I was told was quite a lot. Apart from myself there was another English participant (Olivia from Lifetime careers in London). The rest came from a wide range of countries including France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Finland, Norway, Estonia & Greece. Our hosts then gave us a talk on the guidance practices in the Czech Republic.

The National Training Fund was established in 1994 in the Czech Republic by the Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs. Its mission was to contribute to social & economic transformation in the Czech Republic by developing human resources in the private sector & industry. It was introduced to support the development of further education & training. What I learned was institutions like this were quite new in the Czech Republic. Up until the collapse of Communism in early nineties there was not much unemployment due to the Communist ideal of full employment even if it did mean going to a restaurant & being waited on by 15 waiters who were all probably earning as much as a doctor. Now unemployment is quite high at over 10%. Also on the first day we were introduced to Czech National Resource Centre for Vocational Guidance (NRCVG). This was set up in 1998 which shows that guidance is only relatively new in the country. As the Czech Republic are joining the EU in May 04 a Euroguidance Network exists which promotes mobility between member states.

In the afternoon each country did a presentation about their own guidance practices. I flew the flag for igen & explained about my role & Connexions as a whole. One interesting point I did learn was that a lot of the other careers advisers from the other European countries were qualified psychologists. A bit different from over here. In other countries like Greece & Spain the careers advisers there were teachers who along with teaching academic subjects allocated some of their time to careers guidance.

Tuesday 30th March

Onto Tuesday & we were up with the larks to get the very efficient underground across town to an Upper Secondary school. There are different types of Secondary schools in the Czech Republic. Prior to 15 a pupil will attend a primary school. Once a pupil reaches the age of 15 there are different types of secondary schools available for them. A Gymnasium is general upper secondary school. There are also 2 other main types of school. Technical upper secondary & vocational upper secondary. These are more geared towards certain trades or vocations. The school we went to on this day was a vocational upper secondary. Basically this school is a specialist school for those young people who are interested in doing an MA. There are about 130 of these schools in the Czech Republic in total. The schools co-operate with trade union & the idea is to get the young person into a trade when they complete their studies. The school we visited had a big emphasis on the motor mechanic trades. A number of companies such as Toyota & BMW even gave out sponsorships to students studying there. All secondary schools have their own exams & as part of the vocational school assessments there are practical examinations. I was very impressed with this type of school & wondered if we would ever get such establishments in this country.

Wednesday 31st March

On Wednesday we were up even earlier as we had to catch a coach to the Czech Republic's second largest city, Brno. Whereas Prague is capital of the Bohemia region, Brno is capital of Moravia. We visited the Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs. Here we were given an overview of the Czech labour market. As I have already said the labour market in the

Czech Republic has changed considerably since the collapse of Communism. The major influences on the labour market at present are Market Transformation, Deindustrialisation, Modernisation of Economy & Globalisation. Also at the moment the Service industry is the biggest area of employment in the country with 56% of the employed population working in this area. This may well be a lot higher in Prague itself due to the city being a very popular tourist destination. Services have been forecast to increase even more in future.

One problem though in the Czech Republic is that there is high unemployment. At present unemployment is 10.9%. This equates to 571,000 people of which 280,000 are female. At the moment there are 43,000 vacancies in the labour market which leaves 13 people chasing each vacancy on average. This shows that competition for vacancies is high.

One thing I noticed here is that the labour offices are universal in that they go across the age ranges. So whatever age if unemployed a person would register with their local Labour Office. There doesn't seem to be an equivalent to Connexions in the Czech Republic.

Even though there is no Czech Connexions there is a guidance & counselling service available in the labour offices. This was initiated in 1994 & was set up with the help of an Austrian firm called Mentor. Not only does each labour office have an info centre where there is counselling available but there is also a counselling service available to the different types of schools. In the last year of school the pupils can attend group counselling sessions. Here information about the labour market, employment requirements & general advice is available. This is probably the nearest we get to our own careers service.

Thursday 1st April

On this day we visited Masaryk University. Masaryk University is quite a big university with approximately 23,000 students. Here we looked at the student counselling centre. Here they give legal, psychological & general advice. This counselling centre was set up in 1994 & also has a provision

for guidance. They have 1 full time counsellor who can provide information on study possibilities & career options. They have information on the labour market. This unit also gives out employability skills such as interview techniques & application form completion. The counselling centre also runs an employment fair in the spring inviting in various companies. The students are encouraged to apply for jobs whilst in their last year at University. From Masaryk 50% of the students get their first choice job before the graduation ceremony. 2 months after the graduation ceremony this rises to 72%. Out of those on teaching degrees 75% are now working as teachers. This showed that the University & the counselling centre have a good success rate. One interesting point I learnt was that in the Czech Republic there are no student loans. A lot of the students therefore have to support themselves through university through part time work or through supportive parents.

Friday April 2nd

The original choice of visit today was cancelled at the last minute so instead we met at our host's office at the national training fund for a final de-briefing. This was more to give our views of the week & to say what we liked & what we have learnt. There was a lot of positive feedback & it seemed that everyone there enjoyed themselves. Although there were a few language problems with such a diverse mix of people everyone contributed to the exchange. From my own point of view I had a good time & have hopefully learnt a bit about how careers guidance works in other countries.

The city of Prague

Well it wasn't all work & no play. Generally we would finish our timetabled itinerary about 4 – 4.30 (although on the first day we were going until 7:00pm). This left us plenty of time to see some of the wonderful sights of Prague itself. It was good as we were there at the time when the clocks had just gone forward so we had an extra bit of light on the evening time. The weather was pleasant & was quite warm by the end of the week.

So to Prague itself. Many of you may have been & seen that architecturally it is a beautiful city. It was left intact from the second world war & a lot of these wonderful sights I managed to see on either the Saturday (as I stayed an extra night) or on an evening through the week. The King Charles Bridge is probably one of the most famous sights in Prague & that was pretty impressive. Also I seen Prague Castle, the Church of St Tyn & it's famous spire & the Astronomical Clock.

As for eating out as opposed to many people I found the Czech food was great. Wouldn't be too good for you veggies mind as I found that a lot of the traditional dishes had meat in them. That was ok for me being such a big meat eater. I had the goulash a number of times. It was quite filling as it had bread dumplings with it & had a bit of a kick.

As for nightlife. Well I didn't see too much as I had to be up early every day. I tried a couple of the local beers although I am only a moderate drinker. They were nice though & were cheap (between 45-65p per pint equivalent). The only thing with cheap beer is that it attracts loads of Brits coming for cheap weekends away or stag dos. I noticed so many more Brits on the weekend around the touristy spots than I did earlier in the week.

I would certainly recommend Prague as destination to visit. It's cheap, friendly & there is plenty to see. Maybe it has become a bit too commercialised but has still plenty to offer.

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