

GUIDANCE EXCHANGE PROGRAMME MAY 2004

I had the privilege of going to Estonia on a project funded through the Leonardo programme of the European Union, and organised by Careers Europe. We were a group of 11 guidance workers from a number of countries and one of the best parts of the week was finding out about systems in other countries. We really enjoyed meeting each other and all of us agreed that we now have a network of contacts across Europe, which we can use professionally.

For me the best part was learning about the way that all the countries are trying to tackle similar issues. It helped me to put my own work into a wider context, and helped me to understand the key role that guidance can play in economic development.

The week was very well arranged, with a variety of visits in different towns. All the people we met were helpful and enthusiastic.

General introduction

Estonia is a very young country. It gained independence from Russia in 1992 in a peaceful ‘Singing Revolution’ and on May 1st this year – the day before our trip began – it joined the EU.

The pace of change is very rapid, and you can feel this in the main city, Tallinn, which has the buzz of an international centre; it means that institutions and systems are changing and new ideas coming in rapidly. The country is very technological, everyone communicates by mobile phone and the internet is widely used in private and public life.

We spent 5 days touring different educational and vocational training centres to gain an overview of the Estonian guidance system. The group had representatives from Finland, Norway, Spain, France, the Czech Republic and England, and throughout the week it was fascinating to learn how many similarities there are between our countries, both in the range of issues faced by counsellors and in the methods being used to address them.

All of us recognised similar issues to do with young people – asylum seekers are a concern in England and Norway, and ethnic tensions seem to be universal. In Estonia for instance there is a sizeable Russian population, about a third of the total population of the country, which is concentrated in the Eastern counties and in Tallinn itself. There are big cultural differences; Russians are reluctant to learn Estonian, and so are excluded from many opportunities and feel marginalized. There are problems in the Czech Republic, not between the Czechs and the Slovaks, but with a large Gypsy population. In Norway and in Spain there are large concentrations of immigrants eg from Morocco and Pakistan, and language teaching has become a priority. Bullying seems to be a major problem everywhere; teenage pregnancy is on the rise in all countries; many young people drop out of education without qualifications; low self-esteem is widely recognised as a problem for young people. I

gained a sense of rapid social change throughout Europe, with education and vocational training struggling to keep up.

The arrangements made in different countries to deal with these issues are different in detail, but the general trend seems to be that schools have counsellors or psychologists attached to them. Vocational guidance is seen as a separate issue, and is usually offered as a voluntary option, usually by a psychologist trained in vocational counselling. In Estonia there is a recent move to develop careers education, because they have recognised that young people cannot understand or take advantage of their guidance without a platform of education. Legislation has just come in to make careers education compulsory and taught across the syllabus from age 11.

In all countries, guidance is offered in the education system around transition, and also to help young people with personal problems. Guidance is also part of the benefit offices, and guidance officers work to advise and support the unemployed and adult job changers. Everywhere is suffering the same changes in the labour market; structural unemployment, the drift to cities, increasing numbers of people with higher qualifications but not necessarily the range of opportunities at the right level. In Estonia, because of the revolution 12 years ago, a lot of young people gained highly paid and responsible positions in their early 20s, but there are not the same opportunities for young graduates now.

Daily programme

Monday May 3rd

Overview of the Estonian Education system

- Compulsory education from age 7- completion of basic education or age 17
- 90% attend nurseries (we visited a kindergarten where children from age 2 can stay from 7am to 7pm)
- Basic education ends at 15. after that student move to a vocational option (26%) or to general secondary education
- At age 18 can continue to University. There are some problems for those who do not go on, as they have no vocational training
- National exams are new, have only been going for 5-6 years, which makes it more difficult for older people hoping to return to study
- Language teaching – English is widely taught. Older people speak Russian. Native Russian speakers reluctant to learn Estonian.
- New model for an apprenticeship programme is being developed, starting May 04

- Careers Guidance in the Education system
- Long tradition of vocational guidance, but a gap between 1993-1999; guidance now being revived but there is a lack of trained staff.
- Many practitioners have a background in psychology, but not all; some are educated in education theory.

- Under the old Russian system, the state directed people where to work (eg young graduates) but now people have a free choice. One consequence is that remote and rural areas find it difficult to recruit.
- In schools, Guidance counsellors are based in an office, usually one per county. From there they visit schools, support careers co-ordinators, see individuals, set up conferences, provide information.
- Careers education is now compulsory from age 11, all teachers are expected to take part, with support from professional guidance counsellors.
- New development of youth information and counselling centres which vary in size; some only provide information, and not all have qualified staff
- Plans for future – there is a hope that ESF money will come in to help train teachers, provide information and improve facilities

The Estonian labour market system

- High unemployment rate (20.6% of all young people aged 16 –24 are unemployed)
- Proportion of long term unemployed is rising, and more legislation coming in to provide support including subsidies to business, and new training programmes
- Unemployment benefit is paid but at a very low rate
- Big regional differences with the Russian areas suffering the most
- Structural changes eg decline in manufacturing (26% in 1989, 23% in 2003) but most startling is the decline in agriculture (18% in 1989, 6% in 2003)
- Retail, education, tourism related, housing all rising

Tuesday May 4th

Tallinn Employment Office

- Only one job centre in Tallinn with arrangements similar to those in England eg open access vacancy display and self service points being developed with a jobs and information database
- 11,00 unemployed supported by 46 workers
- everyone registers initially at the job mediation department who assess needs and refer on.
- Main target groups which get extra help are
 - Young people
 - People with disabilities
 - Long term unemployed (over a year)
 - Young mothers with small children
 - Older people pre- retirement
- General service concentrates on job search skills and vacancy search (last month had 1000 vacancies). Mis-match as employers want skills. One employer has 200 vacancies unfilled.
- Rise in numbers of people not interested and seen as losing hope

- Guidance for younger people – questionnaires, individual discussion, action plan. Works best with those who have stayed in the education system but are facing increased numbers of people who have dropped out of education
- Training is available but people need to have basic education to be able to access it. Night school available to provide a general education.
- Greatest need is to increase the number of counsellors working with the long term unemployed.

Tallinn adult grammar school

The school supports students who have left school including drop outs and adults seeking training. Courses are run in evenings as well as daytime and some distance learning coming in.

Social support is available eg psychologists, social workers, specialist basic skills workers.

The careers centre provides support to all students in Tallinn as well as those in the school. Particular focus on the last year of compulsory education

Counsellors visit schools to provide general advice and individual guidance and help to develop courses in career planning. They develop materials for careers education.

Do some testing as well as helping with CVs and job preparation interviews.

Wednesday May 5th

We went to Tartu, a town south of Tallinn which has an ancient University.

Tartu vocational centre

This is a new centre, funded locally.

There are 7 counsellors and 2 specialists in pre-vocational training. This is seen as essential to prepare students for a working life, and is like our careers education a way of informing pupils about options, giving information and helping young people to make informed choices.

Work shadowing is a new development and is very popular with students and parents. (work experience does not seem to feature as we have it)

Tartu University

University Careers Service

This was established in 1999, and was the first in Estonia

They organise careers fairs, employers presentations, provide individual counselling, provide destination figures, and survey employers' views of recent graduates.

Some concerns are very familiar

- overproduction of degrees
- students with unrealistic expectations
- shortages in some areas (Estonia has a shortage of IT professionals)
- fewer opportunities esp in comparison with 10 years ago with independence

Thursday May 6th

We went to Polva, a small town in a rural location, a lot quieter and more laid-back than either Tallinn or Tartu

Kindergarten and Primary school

Obviously a 'showcase' school teaching the new 'Good Start' programme

We observed a lesson given by a young female forester; the purpose of the lesson was to give some understanding of what the work involves as well as stressing the importance of the environment

School well equipped, light and airy, and all the children have a sleep after lunch so there were lots of little beds

Vocational Centre

The guidance centre has developed from nothing in 5 years. There is one counsellor for the region, based in the school. She started off with no guidelines or support and has now built up a reputation in schools and in the community, and all 26 schools in the area are now actively involved.

There are 1600 pupils altogether in the last year of basic school, who have access to the usual range of events and individual counselling and information.

Adults also access the centre especially if interested in changing jobs.

When we asked the counsellor if she thought that she needed extra staff to help her, she laughed – evidently she is overworked but there is no chance of more support !

Friday May 7th Evaluation of Programme with Foundation VET Reform

I really enjoyed the week. I felt I had made friends with colleagues from other countries. I learnt a lot about Estonia, a country I had hardly heard about before. It gave me a new perspective on my work.

My main conclusion is that we in England are facing the same kinds of issues that exist elsewhere. However, we have reacted in the most extreme way with the development of Connexions, which has had the effect of reducing the amount of guidance for the majority of pupils. The way that Connexions is organised, with local responsibility, is very different from other European countries where a central system still prevails. Also, guidance is seen as being very important elsewhere, and as being key to economic development.

In most countries the profession is well regarded, with practitioners having a masters degree in Psychology as well as professional guidance training. It made me aware that in England our profession is less valued even though it is crucial to the development of the economy.

Adult guidance is a part of the work for most counsellors, though we spent more time discussing issues around young people.

The Connexions service has made huge strides particularly in developing multi agency working. We are now more effective in helping the most challenging pupils, and those who are looking for work at 16+. However, this has been at the expense of a reduction in the amount of guidance available for all pupils. In other countries the two aspects are separated and guidance professionals have a status in education and the wider community.

Part of the value of the week for me was the discussions we had as a group. I think that it would have been interesting to go as an individual but the best way to arrange this event is to have a number of different countries represented.

The programme was well organised by Careers Europe and I am grateful to the Leonardo programme which funded this opportunity.

J Riley
May 10th 2004