

## **CAREERS EUROPE GUIDANCE EXCHANGE PROGRAMME**

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**Placement : Azienda Regionale per il Diritto allo Studio Universitario (ARDSU), at Ferrara University, Italy**

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Careers Europe is an organization based within Careers Bradford, which specializes in co-ordinating information and guidance within the European Community. Each year a number of week-long work placements are offered to guidance professionals within the member countries. These placements are funded by the European Commission under the auspices of the Leonardo da Vinci programme, to enable guidance professionals to gain an understanding of guidance practices in other member countries and to foster the spread of good practice.

I was fortunate enough to secure a placement at ARDSU (Azienda Regionale per il Diritto allo Studio Universitario) at Ferrara University in Italy, mainly thanks to my rather shaky knowledge of the Italian language. This organization is roughly equivalent to a University Careers/Student Services organization at a British University. ARDSU are responsible for co-ordinating student grants and accommodation, providing guidance and job-search facilities to students and recent graduates, and for administering the "Tirocinio" or work experience which help graduates get onto the first rung of the jobs ladder.

I spent most of the week finding out about the work of this organization, through meetings with individual members of staff, work shadowing and attendance at seminars and presentations from visiting specialists. I also found out a lot about the structure of the Italian education system generally, which provides a useful background to understanding the system of higher education in Italy.

### **Ferrara**

Ferrara is a beautiful, ancient city, with a well-preserved historical centre, with its medieval walls intact. It is situated in Emilia-Romagna, a very prosperous region which cuts across the central northern part of Italy. Ferrara became a powerful city state in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, under the rule of the mighty Este family, and rivaled Rome, Florence and Venice in wealth and power. The huge castello, built by Nicolo II of Este, dominates the centre of the city, and the many fine Renaissance palaces and churches bear witness to the wealth and patronage of the Este dukes. The original city was designed on a grid plan, and the old centre is completely flat, with most streets laid out at right angles. It is therefore very easy to find your way around and has become the "bicycle capital" of Italy.

### **The University**

The University is one of the oldest in Italy and was founded in 1391 by the Marquis Alberto V of Este, with the blessing of Pope Bonifacio IX. The buildings are mostly situated within the old centre, many faculties being located in beautiful palaces or ex-convents or monasteries. There are eight faculties – Architecture (reputed to be the best

in Italy), Economics, Pharmacy, Law, Engineering, Arts/ Humanities/ Languages, Medicine and Science/Mathematics. There are around 15,500 undergraduates and 2,000 postgraduates.

## **The Education & Training System in Italy**

**Nursery schools** are widely available in Italy for children aged 3-6 years, and are mainly state-run, but there are also locally-funded and private nursery schools.

Compulsory education starts at the age of 6 at state-run **primary schools**, although there are some private schools. There is a National Curriculum, which is very similar to ours in terms of subjects taught, except that the Italian curriculum also includes a foreign language (usually English or French) and Social Studies.

From the ages of 11 - 14, children go to **Middle School**, where the National Curriculum continues. Most middle schools now also offer a second foreign language and ICT. There is also a focus on personal development and guidance to enable pupils to make the important choice of school for the remainder of their school career. This guidance is mainly provided within schools, although local Jobcentres do sometimes send advisers into local schools to offer some guidance tools. There is no national network of guidance advisers outside the school itself to provide a service to local schools.

### **Upper Secondary School.**

This covers the 14-19 age group. Pupils must have a Middle School Leaving Certificate for entry to Upper Secondary School.

At the age of 14, students choose one of four different types of school :

1. Classic - focusing on language, literature, maths, sciences and social sciences. These schools may have a specific specialism in either science, languages or humanities.
2. Artistic – focusing on art, music, dance and the performing arts. These may also be specialist art or music academies.
3. Technical – focusing on business studies, commerce, industry, ICT and technical subjects. Students may be prepared for direct entry into technical professions such as accountancy, surveying, engineering etc.
4. Vocational – this focuses on preparing students to gain entry into vocational jobs in a variety of sectors including, agriculture, industry, skilled crafts, auxiliary medical jobs, and service industries, and includes work-based learning. These schools operate on a basic 3 year programme, preparing students to roughly the equivalent of our NVQ2 level. There is an optional extra 2 year programme which can qualify students to gain entry to University.

### **Assessment**

Students are assessed each term through a mixture of tests and coursework. They must normally attain 60% in all subjects in order to move up to the next class.

At the end of the Upper Secondary School, a single state exam is taken, reflecting the programme of study followed by the student. It consists of 3 written papers, including general essay writing and more specialist questions and 1 oral relating to the students own analysis of their learning. The final mark for the Leaving Certificate is a combination of these tests and the school assessments over the last 3 years of secondary school.

### **Higher Education**

There are 77 Higher Education Institutions in Italy, the majority of which are state-funded universities. After gaining the Upper Secondary School Leaving Certificate, any student can enroll at University. There are exams for subjects that have a state-controlled entry number, such as Medicine, Dentistry, Physiotherapy, Veterinary Science and Architecture. Most students enroll at their local university, although many from the south of Italy, where there are not so many universities, tend to gravitate towards the more prestigious universities in the wealthier northern part of the country.

All students pay up-front fees, which vary according to the prestige of the university and the degree course followed. At Ferrara University fees range across 3 bands – @900 euros p.a. for Humanities/Languages, 1,000 for Science, Medicine and Engineering, and 1,500 for Dentistry.

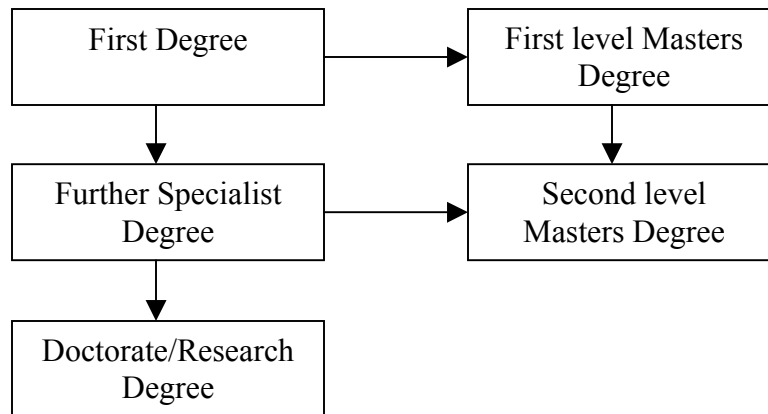
Some grants are available, to cover fees and/or living expenses, which are administered locally, by the regional authorities and local ARDSU, and are available to eligible students at the university they attend rather than the region they come from. Grants are dependent on level of parental income, degree course chosen and distance the student must travel/live away from home.

As University studies are available to large numbers of students, they experience a high drop-out rate, which a few years ago had risen to 50% at some universities. Students take exam modules when they feel ready to rather than at the end of prescribed years.

Consequently many students take many years to complete their degrees, 10 years not being uncommon for medical students. The average age for graduation at Ferrara University in 2002 was 26.

In 1999 the Bologna Declaration set out recommendations for European Higher Education Reform which, it was hoped would help to tackle the high drop-out rate.

These reforms were implemented in Italy in 2001. (see Diagram 1)

**Diagram 1. Degree sequence under new reformed structure**

### Services offered by ARDSU

L'ufficio orientamento al lavoro dell'Ardsu (Guidance office) offers a range of activities and resources to help graduates into employment. The services are available to students and graduates of Ferrara University, and graduates from other universities living in Ferrara or the surrounding areas. At the beginning of each week there is a seminar for new clients, explaining the services offered and outlining the essentials for success in entering the labour market. ARDSU's mission statement says that they can help clients become employable, but they cannot find employment for them. Clients can sign up to have information emailed to them about future ARDSU events and also about work experience placements.

At this initial seminar ARDSU present 3 essentials groups of competences that they consider are essential for clients to be successful in the labour market. These are:

#### 1. Basic competences.

ARDSU has identified 4 essential skills that will help graduates become more employable:

- IT skills
- Knowledge of the English Language
- Jobs awareness
- Job search skills

#### 2. Professional or technical competences

This is the specialized knowledge which will be needed in many jobs such as Marketing, Journalism, Publishing etc. This may be gained in a first vocational degree or a further specialized degree.

### **3. Transferable skills**

ARDSU group these under 3 main headings :

- Analytical skills
- Inter-personal skills, including communication, negotiation and team work skills
- Problem solving skills

The range of activities offered by ARDSU to help clients gain some of these competences, and gain a greater understanding of their importance are as follows :

#### **Occupational /labour market presentations**

These are presented at intervals throughout the year, and focus on individual or groups of similar occupations. A visiting specialist analyses the job market in the relevant sector, gives information about a “typical day in the life of” and covers the skills and interests, personal qualities etc that employers would be looking for.

#### **Job-search skills seminars**

These seminars cover the following :

- Sources of jobs available :
  - 60% of graduates find jobs through contacts of friends or family.
  - Public “competitions” are often held to find employees.
  - Students are referred to internet sites and specialist recruitment agencies and professional journals.
  - A very small minority of graduates find jobs through newspaper advertisements.
- Assessment of self-awareness, personal skills and job awareness. Various tools and techniques are used, including computer packages/quizzes, some fairly similar to those used in this country.
- CV writing. ARDSU recommends the use of the standard “European” CV format, which emphasizes competences, and how they were gained and relevant work experience, as well as qualifications. It is also recommended that applicants attach a passport photo. Applicants MUST type and sign the following statement on their CV – “L’ autorizzazione ai dati personali in riferimento alla legge 675/96”. This is for data protection purposes and employers will not contact an applicant if this has not been signed.
- Interview techniques. These are discussed and practiced through videoed ‘mock’ interviews (optional). Issues such as stereotyping and discrimination are also debated.
- Selection techniques are demonstrated with clients taking part in a simulated group selection exercise, parts of which are videoed. Participants analyse their performance, both individually and within the group, and feedback is given by the consultant psychologist who leads these seminars.
- Assessment tests/psychometric tests. These methods are often used by employers. Examples of these can be studied and clients can sit a sample test and have it electronically ‘marked’.

- Basic Employment Law. Employment contracts are very varied and complicated in Italy, and it is essential for job seekers to understand the contract they are being offered. In particular, many employees use repeated temporary contracts which involve the employee paying taxes each time the contract is renewed, but which give the employer favourable tax deductions.
- If necessary clients can book a one-to-one interview with an occupational psychologist, if they have particular difficulties with career decision-making. These services are bought in by ARDSU from freelance qualified psychologists.
- Basic IT skills courses are offered, covering Windows, Excel and use of the Internet.
- Free English language lessons can be accessed.

### **Tirocinio (Work Experience Placements)**

A major service offered by ARDSU is administering tirocini. It is very difficult for graduates to enter the labour market in Italy without relevant experience, and most accept that they will have to do a period of, probably unpaid, work experience, before securing a job. Many students do a period of work experience during their degree course, and for some degrees it is mandatory to do so before graduating.

These tirocini can be anything from 3 months to a year in duration. Some companies may pay graduates a small amount, but they are not obliged to, and many students do not receive any recompence. Students and graduates are encouraged to identify companies where they would like to work, but the companies must be officially sponsored by ARDSU in order to set up work experience. In Italy companies are not insured to have work experience students, and ARDSU pay this insurance for them. Most of the placements are in the region of Emilia-Romagna, as most clients would live with their families, but placements can be arranged throughout Italy. Graduates sometimes secure permanent jobs with host companies, but it is not at all automatic. However, the experience and references they gain and the contacts they make are crucial in entering the labour market.

A fairly new development has been the organizing of tirocini abroad. Graduates interested in this possibility must have good language skills for the relevant country. England and Ireland are the most popular venues, followed by Spain, then France, and finally Germany. Placements are also possible in countries which other languages as the official 'business' language, e.g. the Scandanavian countries, or Switzerland and Austria.

Grants are offered to cover expenses for between 3 and 5 months. These grants are limited and applicants must pass a language test and enter a 'bando' or competition, presenting their reasons for wanting a placement abroad and what they think they will get out of it. Successful graduates are then helped to locate companies and the tirocini are arranged. ARDSU fund most of these grants, and a further number are funded by the Leonardo da Vinci scheme.

Some grants are also offered for graduates to take foreign language courses abroad, and the University of Ferrara has an arrangement with Kent University in Canterbury, for this facility. Graduates can subsequently apply for another grant for a tirocinio abroad once they have mastered the language.

Most Italians are very pro-Europe. They tend to be very regional in their thinking and allegiance within Italy, widely known as ‘campanilismo’,<sup>1</sup> rather than feeling a loyalty to the state, and it is perhaps for this reason that Italians actually prefer to look to a wider European jobs market rather than a wider Italian one. ARDSU are keen to foster this European outlook and are hoping to extend their foreign tirocinio programme in the years to come. They are very keen to build up contacts with British and Irish companies, especially Law firms, with a view to finding placements for Italian students. Any possible contacts can be sent to the email address below, and will be forwarded to an ever-grateful Gioacchino. In exchange, ARDSU can undertake to find tirocini for British/Irish students and graduates, and sponsor<sup>2</sup> their placement.

### **Guidance at entry level for university applicants.**

ARDSU also have the function of advising would-be students on suitable degrees. Many students only apply to their local university, and if they are not sure what to study, they can talk to advisers in the marketing department. Their function is only to inform applicants about what is available. They also direct students to suitable computerized careers questionnaires programmes.

If applicants require more in-depth guidance, a one-to-one interview with an occupational psychologist can be arranged. This service is ‘bought in’ by ARDSU.

The advisers in this section go out to local schools and those in the wider surrounding areas to promote the courses at Ferrara University, and are involved in organizing Open Days for would-be applicants. This year they produced the University’s first ever Prospectus, which is a beautiful, slim booklet outlining all that the University has to offer its students. (see Appendix 1) This is supplemented by individual brochures for each faculty, and a separate Student Handbook, with more detailed information about student services.

### **Conclusion**

This placement provided a very valuable opportunity to look at a different structure of Higher Education. At a time when our own H.E. sector is undergoing many changes, it was a timely opportunity to stop and ponder on the advantages and disadvantages of other systems, especially in the light of the 50% target for H.E. There are many similarities with our own country in the guidance services provided for students and graduates, although they are offered on a smaller scale. Guidance is offered at a pre-entry level, and is subsequently accessed mostly by graduating students. The tirocinio

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<sup>1</sup> Staying close to the local campanile or church tower

<sup>2</sup> Sponsorship = official introduction, support & payment of insurance

programme is accessed mainly by graduates and final year students, but is also used by students at varying stages of their degrees. ARDSU are always looking for new ways to promote their services to students and graduates and as they are due to move to new premises at the Registry, in the heart of the University, they are hoping that many more students will find their way through their doors.

## Appendix 1 Ferrara University Prospectus



## Appendix 2 Diary

### Monday 7th June

- Met with Gioacchino Leonardi, who introduced me to other key members of staff at ARDSU.
- Welcome by the Director of Ardsu, Alberto Andreotti.
- Gioacchino explained the structure and function of Ardsu, and in particular the ‘tirocinio’ programme, which he heads up.
- Attended a seminar for recent graduates, outlining the services offered to them by Ardsu.
- p.m. Bike tour of Ferrara, introducing the main landmarks of the city centre, and pinpointing the various offices which I would need to visit during the week.

### Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> June

- Attended a seminar explaining to recent graduates the programme of finding work placements abroad, and the ‘competition’ for securing a grant for up to 5 months, to support them whilst on placement.
- More in-depth talks with other ARDSU staff, who explained their roles and outlined the processes involved in finding work placements both in Italy and abroad.

### Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> June

- Attended presentation by Christian Elevati, who is employed by a company producing occupational information and guidance literature.
- The first part of the presentation covered labour market information, job-hunting skills, CVs and methods used by companies when selecting applicants.
- Attendees had the chance to take a selection ‘assessment’ test, which was automatically marked on a machine.
- Lunch with the Director of ARDSU and Karin, the President’s Assistant, at a typical Ferrarese restaurant.
- The afternoon concentrated on how to get into Journalism, Publishing and Advertising, including the qualities employers would be looking for and how applicants could prepare themselves.

### **Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> June**

Spent the morning in the Guidance/Marketing section of ARDSU, where staff explained their roles. They are responsible for advising would-be students on the suitability of different degree courses, and if necessary, arranging individual interviews with occupational psychologists. They also have a marketing role and visit local schools to promote the degree courses at the University. This year they produced the first ever 'prospectus' for the University.

Spent some time looking at the University website. ( [www.unife.it](http://www.unife.it) ) This was a very useful tool to cover many aspects of the H.E. system in Italy.

P.M. Visit to several University buildings and faculties, meeting with some staff in the Registry and in the Office of International Relations which co-ordinates the student foreign exchange programmes (Leonardo da Vinci) and looks after foreign students on regular University courses.

### **Friday 11<sup>th</sup> June**

Attended an all-day seminar for recent graduates, led by an Occupational Psychologist. More in-depth advice on job-search.

Looked specifically at interview techniques, including videoing 'mock' interviews.

Graduates did exercises designed to heighten awareness of stereotyping.

Attendees did a group exercise designed by the American Army, which had been used by a large employer as a selection technique. This was partly videoed and the participants later analysed how the group and they, as individuals within the group, had behaved. This was followed by a discussion of the qualities employers might be looking for.