

Careers Guidance Study Tour to Iceland 10-16 May 2004

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Introduction: This report is presented by topic area, rather than daily activity. I have decided to use this approach because it will give the opportunity to use extracts for articles that may have specific sectoral slants.

This was the first study tour to Iceland for careers guidance professionals from the UK. The three participants represented various forms of delivery. Angela Jones, from Careers Wales, is a school based adviser and Penni Barker, from Connexions Cornwall and Devon, works with young people outside schools. With my work with adults, there was a challenge for our host to see that we all were able to look at our particular areas but also were given an understanding of the educational system in Iceland and exposed to broad range of services that are available to support individuals in their decisions on learning and work.

Guidance workers are broadly referred to as 'counsellors' in Iceland. They are based in specific areas and there is a well-developed – and funded – professional training programme.

One of the things that surprised me was the level of involvement with European projects. Iceland is not actually a member of the European Union, but along with Norway, is a member of the European Economic Area and therefore can participate in many of the Community Programmes.

A final general comment is the fact that everyone over the age of 15 in Iceland seems to be completely fluent in English. Since few people outside Iceland speak Icelandic, this is understandable, but still very impressive.

Unemployed Adults. The Reykjavik Area Employment Office is a very pleasant environment located in an office complex on the outskirts of the city centre. It has a casual but still professional feel about it. Here, I met with Hurgun Johannesdottir, the Director. There are a staff of 29 with 3 located in a sub-office some distance and 8 other staff around the country. The majority of the 2-3% unemployed are in the Reykjavik area. The highest number of unemployed adults are between the ages of 24 and 36. The retirement age for both men and women is 67, but people can choose to work until 70 and therefore there are registered unemployed up to that age. The office handles the initial signing on for benefits, as well as counselling. There is an area of resources that includes the local papers, terminals to use the internet etc. The lower floor is for counselling. This is what would be called 'guidance' in the UK

and includes psychometric testing. This support is now available from day one of unemployment and can be accessed by anyone. Along with job-search courses, assertiveness training is also available. Once someone is unemployed over three months, free training on IT and job related courses are available. After six months, individuals can qualify for 'special projects'.

There is the European Employment Service (EURES) available, as many Icelanders want to work abroad for a period of time.

I also met Soffia Agustsdottir, who is one of the counsellors. The counsellors receive the same training at the University of Iceland as those counsellors working in education. She discussed with me some of the particular difficulties their clients encounter. One of these is support to those over 50 (interestingly, a subject we are now giving greater attention to in the England). She said this was partly due to the 'Scandinavian work ethic', which defines a person by what they do. She told me about one man who does not go to parties anymore because he does not want to have to say he has no work..

Another area that surprised me was the support they give to 'foreign workers' who now make up 4% of the male working population and 8% of females. This general help includes the usual employment services and counselling, but also language courses (Icelandic) and interpretation services.

In Iceland, if you 'leave' a job voluntarily you have to wait 8 weeks before you qualify for benefits. This compares to the 26 weeks in the UK. Another difference is that the Employment Services takes the claims, but the actual payment is made via the unions, so the staff in the employment services are completely separated from payments. This is, of course, the situation we had many years ago in England.

In all cases of unemployment, you have to come in every week to sign on until you have developed an 'employment' plan. Once you have done that, it is then fortnightly signing on.

A final point discussed was women returning to the labour market. 'Labour market returners are not an issue in Iceland, as most return to employment 6 to 12 months after the birth of a child. The interesting thing is on the whole women have more children in Iceland than in the UK, but 85% continue to work.

Special Needs. While at the Employment Office, I asked about people with disabilities. There is an 'Employment Service for the Handicapped' that is part of their provision. This deals with people who have physical disabilities. I asked about provision for adults with learning difficulties and Hurgun mentioned 'Asgarour'. Bjarni had heard of it but did not know anything about it. Hurgun said I should really visit. As an example of how effort went into our visit, it was arranged for me to visit Asgarour at the end of the week. I have a personal interest in 'social firms' and that is what Asgarour turned out to be. When I arrived, the first person at the door clearly had learning difficulties, but said, "Are you the lady from England? I've been to Malvern." I was amazed to find that most of the adults at the centre spoke and/or understood English!

Like many of the social firms in England, Asgarour is a charity. It was formed in 1993 with just two clients. By 1999, it had 15 clients and had developed a modern workshop. This workshop, with 17 clients then attending, burnt down in December 2001. Plans were to build a new centre to cater for 25 clients. However, the Commune (local authority) would not give permission. They gave no reason, but it seems similar to the situation of some social firms here where the NIMBY factor comes into play! Finally in May 2003 they moved into an old pub/factory and some

barracks from WWII. Renovation has transformed these into a series of small workshops and a centre.

Asgarour has a Management Board of seven and a staff of 3 plus volunteers. Each year overseas volunteers serve for a number of months.

The workshops produce toys and other articles made from Icelandic wood. Since Iceland is not known for forests, I was informed that when they have to cut back the small woods they do have and the wood is free to those who collect it! They are also developing a jewellery section to allow 'quiet work'.

There is a cultural programme as part of the centre and this has involved drama and music.

All the costs are paid by the Government, but supplemented by the sale of products to individuals and companies.

As with most enterprises of this sort, the clear drive of one individual supported by very committed staff has made it all possible.

While not exactly 'special needs' in the traditional sense of the word, we did visit another centre that caters for those who have not made the adjustment to adult life. The Fjolsmidjan Centre is for young people who have not found employment or stayed in school. The main purpose is to offer work experience, but this is supplemented by studies, especially in basic/key skills to get them to return to studies or move to full time employment. This again is a group lead by the dynamism of one man – Thorbjorn Jensson. He has the great advantage of being the former National coach of the handball team (which is Iceland's national sport!). The project's main funder is the Red Cross, but also receives funds from the Ministry of Education and local authorities. It is based on similar projects in Denmark and although it currently has 51 participants, there is a waiting list of 130!

Each of the participants receives a weekly salary and must work fixed hours. There are opportunities to experience woodworking, catering, printing, electrical repair, computing and even car valeting! There are links with various firms as well as sales to individuals, so the income of the centre is considerable. Although this centre caters mainly for young people, that includes those up to the age of 25, so adults are able to access this, but are in a minority. In the UK this would be considered a social firm.

School Education. The general school educational system in Iceland was changed in 1974 to reflect that of the Scandinavian model. There are nursery facilities and formal schooling starts at the age of 6. The primary school is for children aged 6 to 15. This is followed by the secondary schools catering for those aged 16 to 20. At the upper levels, there is a split between those that follow a vocational curriculum and those following an academic one. In recent years a few schools that might be labelled 'comprehensive' have been established and they are proving very popular. A number of people we met had reservations about the fact that 16 year olds are working with 20 year olds and many do not have the social skills to cope with this. There are very strict regulations on what must be achieved in order to receive your upper certificates. The rural nature of Iceland and their demography mean that there are over 100 schools catering for less than 100 pupils.

Higher Education. The University of Iceland is the major provider of HE, but there are also 7 other specialist universities (e.g. teaching) around the country. As the national university, there are no fees. This includes graduate as well as undergraduate

study. As in England and Wales, fees are being raised as an issue within the University community at the MA level. The campus is large and well designed with study space and a relaxed atmosphere. It includes a new building for geological studies and houses the UN centre for these. Considering the population, there are a large number of disciplines offered and this includes a complete medical centre. A new university – Reykjavik University – was established in 1998. This is a private university specialising in business studies, computing, business law and soon engineering. It works closely with business and industry and has major support from them. The students do pay fees here, but they would be the equivalent of about £500 per annum.

There are no ‘fixed’ ages for entry to either of these universities, although mature students are in the minority.

Of special interest to me was the Institute of Continuing Education. This has run for the past 20 years on a self-financing, non-profit basis. Kristin Jonsdottir is the Director and explained that a major role of this section of the University of Iceland is for the continuing professional development for lawyers, accountants, HR, engineers, public sector and librarians. This is offered via a series of short courses. They also run cultural courses, which account for about 15% of their programme. These are run in the evenings and have between 1500 – 2000 participants each year. One perennial offering is on the Icelandic Sagas, which attracts 500!

They do offer courses in German, Danish, Spanish and English.

The MBA is offered in conjunction with the Business School. Another programme that surprised me as being oversubscribed is Theology. These are courses that attract nurses, carers, teachers and prison staff. They deal with bereavement and the ethical issues of terminal illness, family issues, the 12 steps approach from AA etc. The Theology Department designs and manages the content and the Institute does everything else.

They do not offer counselling to students as part of the Institute, but use the main University service.

A new area is Training Needs Analysis with companies. This includes meeting with the employer, then all managers and employees. The resultant report includes a ‘coding’ as to the importance of the training identified. With the growing importance of workforce development in the UK, this is an interesting aspect to consider for continuing education.

Adult Education. We had the opportunity to visit two organisations involved in the development of adult learning. The first, Mennet (or ‘Educate’ in Icelandic), is a member organisation that works with both upper secondary schools (16-20) and lifelong learning. They co-ordinate many of the projects linked with Europe and work closely with the Trade Unions and employers. They also run a number of regional lifelong learning centres. Their Director, Adalheidur Jonsdottir, and her team are all very committed not just to their jobs, but to the challenge of advancing lifelong learning.

At the national level, they organise events and host national vocational training awards. They are responsible for Adult Learners’ Week, which is held each September. In talking with them I became aware that this really has become a pan-European activity and learned that the co-ordinators from the individual countries meet annually to compare developments. In Iceland, Mennet runs activities in Reykjavik and 8 other areas. They have a website, posters and produce a special

edition of the national newspaper. They had a very interesting way of grabbing attention by offering a free course via the radio! They, too, encounter the problem of getting media attention.

Another aspect of their work was one that reflects current debate in England, is the production of an on-line course database. They had worked together with a number of European partners to see how this has been done elsewhere. The key issues were what should be on the database and how to fund it. It is not just the cost of the establishment but the ongoing maintenance. So far, no one has agreed to fund this and so it is languishing. It seems that because continuing education is mainly private, no one wants to pay. In England, a number of 'grids for learning' have developed such databases at local levels and the Government has given major support to **learnirect**, the national database. The debate on the accuracy of information and methods of collection still rumbles on in England. It will be interesting to follow the work on this database, as we may have to look for funding in England eventually.

The Education and Training Service Centre is a newly formed organisation. It was established at the end of 2002 and became operational in April 2003. It is owned by the Federation of Labour and the Confederation of Icelandic Employers and is a not-for-profit company. While the company itself receives no government funding, they have secured an agreement between the social partners and the Government to fund the education of unskilled people (is there an echo of the new Skills Strategy for England?). They are also working closely with immigrants. Their purpose is to make educational offers transparent and the curriculum responsive. They are looking at 'real competencies' via what we would call APL (accreditation of prior learning). They are looking to learn from Norway, where such activity is well developed. It is important for the Centre to find and approach potential learners. They are doing this mainly through the Trade Unions and their social partners. Guidance and counselling to develop training needs analysis is seen as crucial to this engagement of adults.

The Icelandic economy has few large employers. Seventy-five percent of all companies employ 1-5 staff. So, appealing to those with low skills is difficult (with the move by the LSC in England to limit advice to those with less than level 2 qualifications, we are now facing similar challenges!).

Another aspect of their work is to offer training to tutors to cope with unskilled adults, as this has not been a specialist area of delivery. There will be a new diploma next winter at the teacher training college to develop this expertise.

The educational system was explained. If you have not completed all the necessary modules in the upper secondary curriculum, you can return at any time with no costs. This includes doing part-time study. I wonder how that would go down in our sixth form colleges? There are evening schools where adults will pay 1/3 of the cost of courses. There is a move in adult education (and education generally) to mix occupational education into general education.

The Director of Education and Training Centre was very clear about the importance of 'learning to learn'. It was no surprise to learn that Ingiborg Gudmundsdottir came from many years of working in the Icelandic WEA!

She went on to tell us about the work with immigrants. There is a programme that allows for over 300 lessons in Icelandic, the Society and Culture of Iceland and Rights and Obligations of citizens. This again reminded me of some of the attempts

to make immigrants feel 'British'. The approach in Iceland seemed far more 'client centred' than that here. A committee makes decisions about overseas qualifications.

Professional Association. The Icelandic (Educational and Career) Counsellor Association was formed in 1981 with seven people – six working in upper secondary schools and one at the University. By 1987, there were 4 counsellors at the University and a membership of 15. A programme of training was started at the University in 1990 this has trained 160 counsellors. The membership of the Association is now 200 with a small group located in the north of Iceland and a few elsewhere outside the Reykjavik.

The Association is run by volunteers. We met the current President (Chairman), Jonina Kardal, who was keen to develop links with similar associations.

The goal for the Association is to be recognised as a 'profession'. The introduction of the MA is seen as a major step in this. One of the main activities at the moment is drawing up ethical guidelines. The role of the counsellors in Iceland is changing from that of purely educational guidance to include a broadening into careers. This is quite interesting as this is similar to what happened to adult guidance in the UK in the early 1990s.

Training. Dr. Gudbjor Vilhjalmsdottir, of the Faculty of Social Sciences, is responsible for the development of the professional training of guidance counsellors. It was interesting that while all the other professionals we met had gone to the States for their training, Gudbjor had done her PhD at the University of Hertfordshire under the direction of John Kileen. While her dissertation had been on occupational choice by different social groups, she has an interest in all aspects of guidance.

There has been training for counsellors at the University of Iceland for a number of years, but the first MA programme will begin this Autumn. They carried out a very effective distance learning scheme, which was requested by the Employment Service for their staff outside Reykjavik. While this was well received and evaluated, it like many projects fell foul of the continuing funding problem.

She discussed some of the issues that they are now tackling. One is the growing number of immigrants to Iceland and so multicultural counselling is now part of all training. In 2001, they had a Fulbright Exchange and that person raised a number of issues on equality that have now also been incorporated into programmes.

The use of websites etc. is gaining acceptance. Gudbjor explained that Iceland is such a small society that when things change, they do so very quickly. Her example was that in 1995 there were only 400 non-Icelanders living in Iceland. There are not 10,000 and the majority of them will become citizens. This effect must be reflected in the services (and the training to deliver those services).

The new MA will be offered in two parts. Those who have undertaken the previous diploma training will be able to enter the second part of the MA directly. This will be an option until the 160 trained counsellors have all had the opportunity to do an MA, but will then be phased out. A course in employment counselling will be compulsory to strengthen the idea in schools and others. There will also be a course in methods and an optional course (ethics, family in modern society, psychology, multicultural society etc.) and then a dissertation. The MA has been very oversubscribed and this is seen as a positive commitment by all counsellors to raising the standards in the profession.

Leonardo Projects. We visited to places where Leonardo Projects are being delivered.

The first of these was the **NEMA Code**. This new interpretation method of the Holland-RIASEC-model was designed by Ast Ragnarsdottir. It is meant to 'fill the gap' between the results of inventories and the individuals' perception of him or herself. Over recent years, the use of various psychometric tools have been used as part of the delivery of adult guidance services in the UK. We were given a very thorough explanation of how this approach could help people to see what type of employee they were. It has implications for workplace use, as well. The UK is one of the partners in this project and beta testers will be recruited and trained this Autumn. It is planned that on-line testing via a software package will be part of the development.

Spiderweb is a project based at Reykjavik University. It is looking at how students at risk can be identified and supported. This is to counter the dropout rate. With retention as a major issue in the UK, the application of this approach could be of great interest. Being able to detect the factors that predict dropout is the first step. There are then two programmes – WATCH (What Alternatives? Thinking, Coping, Hoping) and AT (Assertiveness Training). Handbooks are being developed to support both these programmes and once they are in usable form, I would be very interested to see them, as there is a need to look at fresh ways to approach adults who are not coping with return to learning. While this issue is being looked at in terms of university and other students, it is clear that in encouraging those adults who have never gained a formal qualification to come into learning (and making it a requirement in areas such as childcare) many need the additional support that Spiderweb is hoping to define.

The teaching of English.

As already mentioned, English is spoken by everyone, or at least so it seems. It is taught from the age of 10 in schools. There is, however, a considerable demand for learning outside the state school provision. My last visit of the tour was to the Enskuskolinn (School of English). This is run by Julie Ingham as private provision. There is a programme of children's courses (age 5 to 15), which are mainly on Saturday mornings. There are courses organised for companies and some general adult courses. The latter of these is mainly for older learners, usually in their 50s and 60s. A satellite programme is offered through the Lifelong Learning Centre on the South coast.

I was interested in how they ran their provision. There is a free interview to assess the level of competence and to advise on a learning programme. This includes the reading of a short text and then discussion on what has been read. In some cases the learning needs may be very specific and therefore one-to-one tutorials may be more appropriate than a group. Surveying is done throughout the course to ensure that progress is being made and there is a final interview to discuss next moves. Without saying it this sounds very like pre, oncourse and exit guidance!!

All the tutors at the school are native English speakers and there is no shortage of those wanting to come to Iceland to teach!

Summary

I went to Iceland with a very open mind. I knew very little of the society or economy. My main thought was how does a country with a population of 280,000 (with 70% located in one city) and the size of England offer guidance to adults?

After a very full week I can firmly answer that question with my view that Iceland offers guidance to adults enthusiastically, developmentally and professionally.

My experience of this study tour was personally informative and stimulating. It has encouraged me to look at a number of things and take some specific actions. These include:

- Staff from three of the Partner organisations in the IAGP for Cambridgeshire are interested in training to be beta-testers under the LEONARDO Nema Code project this October.
- An invitation has been sent to Iceland with a free place at the NAEGA Conference in Armagh in October.
- I will be displaying information about Careers Europe and encouraging those involved in the delivery of guidance to adults in the UK to take up exchange offers.

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