

Academia

Exchange of Guidance Counsellors

Dublin 20th - 24th March

Ian McIntosh
Connexions Northumberland

This visit to Dublin was arranged as part of the EU Leonardo da Vinci funded 'Academia' Exchange of Guidance Counsellors project. This project has run for a number of years and enabled guidance counsellors from across the European Union to meet and study the guidance systems of individual member states.

Careers Europe, based in Bradford, oversees the U.K.'s involvement in Academia. My employer, Connexions Northumberland, has always supported the project both by hosting visits and allowing each year at least one member of staff to participate in a visit. Ireland was one of my original 3 choices and Careers Europe were able to confirm my place on the visit to Dublin for 20th – 24th March - sadly just missing out on St. Patrick's day!

Our hosts in Ireland were the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) and our main contact was Jane Byrne. The pre visit information provided by Lee Christy at Careers Europe and Jane at NCGE was detailed and very useful and reduced the hassle of arranging accommodation and travel.

One of our tasks as participants was to prepare a presentation on guidance within our own countries based on criteria suggested by Jane. This meant a bit of quick telephone/email liaison with Joanne Meehan from Careers Bradford, the other UK participant, to put together a powerpoint presentation prior to our arrival in Ireland.

[Sunday 19th March](#)

Arrived at Dublin Airport just before midnight as the only flight from Newcastle was a late one and then it was delayed. The plane was full of Irish supporters of Newcastle United who had been across for the match that afternoon so by the time I arrived in Dublin I was getting familiar with the local accent.

[Monday 20th March](#)

Met Joanne in the reception of Wynns Hotel, our base in Dublin and caught the bus to the offices of NCGE (having initially caught the right bus going in the wrong direction!).

We met Jane Byrne and the other participants who were:

Ilse, Marianne and Bogumila from Denmark

Kaja and Inga from Estonia

Tuula and Marika from Finland

Ignacio and Marta from Spain

Veronique and Isabelle from France

The group were guidance practitioners working with different groups of clients and with different professional backgrounds. Some worked with secondary school age young people, some with FE students and some with adults/unemployed. Several of the group were trained as teachers – either secondary or vocational/FE.

The morning consisted of a round of introductions, the programme for the week and then **presentations on NCGE , the Irish guidance system and the Irish education system.**

NCGE

This agency of the Dept. of Education & Science was set up in 1995 to support guidance practice in all *education* settings and to inform Dept. policies re guidance. Acting director is Eileen Fitzpatrick and there are 8 staff including Jane Byrne. Education settings include primary, secondary, third level (H.E.) , adult education and Youthreach.

Guidance in the labour market comes via the Dept. of Enterprise, Trade and Employment through FAS - the state training and employment authority that operates a network of FAS centres and local employment services.

NCGE is a key member of the 30+ member National Guidance Forum in Ireland established to promote lifelong guidance.

NCGE participates in many Euro guidance projects including Leonardo and Guidenet. Relevant websites for more information are:

www.europa.eu.int/ploteus/portal/home.jsp

www.euroguidance.org.uk

An example of the work of the NCGE is the production of 'Planning the School Guidance Programme' 2004. This publication came about following the Education Act 1998. This requires a Board of Management of a school to develop a school guidance plan to "ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance" and that this guidance plan be part of the overall school development plan.

Guidance

There is no formal guidance provision at Primary Level but there are elements of guidance in the curriculum and supporting programmes e.g., Stay Safe Programme

Guidance becomes integral in Second Level Education. Guidance activities include counselling, assessment, information, advice, PSD programmes, careers education and transition programmes. Guidance counsellors in second level education are teachers – a clear difference with the Connexions Personal Adviser system in England albeit a few PAs are qualified teachers. The Irish Dept. for Education use criteria to allocate a number of guidance counsellor hours per school. NCGE provide all guidance counsellors with a handbook.

Vocational Guidance in Higher Education (or Third Level) institutions such as universities and institutes of technology is provided by the Careers Service established by and within each institution. The main areas of work undertaken by such careers services include vocational guidance and career management, careers education, provision of information (electronic/paper) and facilitating employment contacts and opportunities. This seems a similar service to those provided by English

Higher Education Careers Services . It was pointed out, however, during a subsequent visit to Dublin City University, that their ratio of guidance advisers to students was higher than the average in England.

The vocational guidance in Irish H.E. is delivered by:
careers group sessions; within subject curriculum; website/library facilities and individual guidance although the scope for individual guidance is limited because of the number of students per adviser.

Other forms of guidance, advice and information are available to H.E. students through the institution's Student Services e.g., counselling, chaplaincy, health.

The AGCSI is the association for Third Level careers guidance practitioners.

The development of guidance in adult education is a more recent initiative. The importance was raised by the Adult Education Guidance Initiative in 2000. Initially guidance was only provided to those on courses and there was no formal guidance pre-entry to these programmes but this is beginning to change.

The 80 Youthreach centres which offer vocational training to young people are at present allocated 2.5 hours per week for guidance.

Education

There are three main levels of education in Ireland: First Level (Primary), Second Level and Third Level (Higher Education) . Adult and community education courses run in addition to these main levels. The Department of Education & Science oversees the education system.

Education in Ireland is compulsory from 6 to 16 or until students have completed 3 years of Second Level education. In effect, however, most children start school at 4 years of age. Prior to this preschool education is mostly privately funded childcare.

Upon completion of First Level (Primary) education students will usually start Second Level education at 12. Second Level can be completed at a community school, a comprehensive school, a vocational school or a voluntary secondary school. While the ethos and management structures of these schools can differ much of what they actually do is similar.

Students follow a three year Junior Cycle with the Junior Certificate taken at the end. Students may then take a Transition Year. This is optional in some schools and compulsory in others. Upon completion of the Junior Cycle (or Transition Year if taken) students take a two year Senior Cycle programme leading to the main school qualification – the Leaving Certificate – usually taken at 17 or 18. There are three forms of this:

- the traditional Leaving Certificate;
- the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)
- the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)

The Third Level (H.E.) sector comprises mostly of the universities, institutes of technology and colleges of education (teaching). The universities offer degree programmes at Bachelor, Masters and Doctorate level. Students apply via the CAO system – similar to UCAS in the U.K.

Courses can be researched , amongst other ways, on the main national course website www.qualifax.ie

Full details of the Irish Education system can be accessed via www.education.ie or www.educationireland.ie

In the afternoon each of the participating countries gave presentations on the guidance system within their own countries . The presentations can be accessed via Jane at NCGE.

In the evening we went out as a group to the Temple Bar area and, after finding many of the restaurants full, enjoyed a good meal and a couple of people sampled the local Guinness although it proved not to be to every one's taste.

Tuesday 21st & Wednesday 22nd

The group was divided up for these two days of work shadowing activities. I was on my own for a placement at Moyle Park School for boys. I caught the bus from Aston Quay on the south side of the River Liffey for the 55 minute journey to Clondalkin just outside Dublin. Moyle Park was established as a Catholic Secondary school in 1957 by the Marist brothers and has around 750 boys.

I met Sandra Murray and Aisling O'Malley two of the guidance counsellors at the school and we discussed the programme for the two days. Sandra works parttime and Aisling fulltime.

Aisling introduced me to a first year class and then I met Brother PJ McGowan the other guidance counsellor at Moyle Park and former Principal. He explained that guidance counsellors in Irish schools are teachers. The counsellors in Moyle Park are all expected to deal with careers/vocational issues and wider guidance issues – in some schools counsellors may deal with careers or non careers issues. In practice Brother PJ tends to get the majority of the individual careers referrals as works a lot with the senior cycle and sees all the students in 6th year.

Brother PJ also told me about their links with other professionals chiefly the educational psychologist, welfare officer and social worker (eg for child protection issues) .

He also explained how they use the on-line CAO admissions system to support applications to the Third Level institutions and promote the use of the Qualifax website to students.

The guidance counsellors are also involved in administering DAT aptitude tests with 5th year students that test various abilities e.g., verbal reasoning, spatial awareness and

use the results to inform careers/options guidance. Work Experience is only given to those students on the Transition Year (optional at Moyle Park) or the Leaving Certificate Vocational/Applied courses.

Guidance is delivered in class sessions and I sat in on a 5th year guidance lesson on interview practice and CVs with Aisling and then a class discussion with Sandra on issues affecting young people such as bullying and drugs. Referrals to the counsellors for individual guidance can be made by teachers, parents and the students themselves.

I then spent some time with Siobhan and 3 first year students. Siobhan works with children from traveller families to help support them to attend and integrate into the school.

I left the school at lunchtime and spent the afternoon at the Youthreach centre in Clondalkin who kindly provided my lunch courtesy of their chef and catering trainees.

Graham Warren and his staff explained the work of Youthreach. It is for young people 15-20 who have left school often without their Leaving Certificate and want Vocational training and personal development support to help progress on to other courses or apprenticeships/employment. A range of vocational courses was on offer as well as other certificates e.g., the Presidents Award. Youthreach is funded by the Dept. for Education via local Vocational Education Committees.

Returned to the hotel for 5.30 and in the evening the group all met up again to discuss our various visits over a meal & drink.

I returned to Moyle Park on the Wednesday. I joined in a guidance lesson and then met Eugene, the Special Needs co-ordinator / teacher. The SN provision did not sound as comprehensive as in England but changes are in hand to make it more similar to our own. The school can only access either Learning Support (in a group) or Resource Support (more 1-2-1 work) via an educational psychologist assessment. Funding is, however, limited and schools cannot always fund all the assessments they would like to undertake. Moyle Park is able to fund a few extra assessments via support from the religious order that founded the school.

The school currently has no learning support assistants as most secondary schools in England have. Eugene also explained that IEPs (Individual Education Plans) that all secondary students in England have are to be introduced in Ireland.

I spent the afternoon with Aisling. She explained the Trinity Access Programme that the guidance team help implement. This is a programme similar to 'Aiming High' and the university/schools liaison work in the U.K.. Students are targeted from Year 1 if they come from families with no history of H.E. or from a low income family that is unlikely to be able to offer adequate financial support.

Various activities supported by Trinity College and other universities in Ireland e.g., student shadowing, computer clubhouse. Some Year 6 students can also benefit from HEAR (Higher Education Access Route) under the Trinity Access Programme. This

can result in them being offered a place with an offer of up to 20% less points needed than usual.

Aisling then outlined the role of the guidance team, mainly herself and Brother PJ, in supporting students and parents in subject choice. Before students start Year 1 they sit an entrance aptitude test and then students and parents are met. This is, partly, to discuss any learning issues and potential need to arrange an assessment by the educational psychologist. The student also brings along their subject choice form to discuss their options for their Junior Certificate. They must take English, Maths and Irish (Irish can be dropped in limited circumstances).

Students choose their Senior Cycle options e.g., Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied, Transition Year before the end of the Junior Certificate. Students then, of course, have decisions to make at the end of the Senior Cycle e.g. applying for H.E./Third Level.

During the day, Aisling and Brother PJ had also been supporting 6th year students upset at one of their number being severely injured in a hit & run accident and another whose mother had died.

Returned to Dublin by 4.30 for a quick bit of sightseeing around Trinity College and Grafton Street.

[Thursday 23rd](#)

We were back together as one group for the rest of the exchange. Jane Byrne met us at the hotel and we walked to Talbot Street to take a bus to the offices of FAS employment services in Coolock to the north of Dublin. FAS Employment Services is the Public Employment Service in Ireland and has responsibility for the development and delivery of a vocational guidance and placement service. FAS employs 2300 staff in over 80 locations in 8 regional areas.

We were given a comprehensive presentation by Caroline Rownan and Josephine Rogers. They provide employment and jobsearch support to a whole range of jobseekers and jobchangers including additional forms of support for those with disabilities, vacancy matching and other services to employers and deliver a range of training and community initiatives.

The labour market has changed significantly in Ireland in the last 12 years. Unemployment and long term unemployment have had major falls and Ireland now has net immigration and there has been a big rise in the number of women active in employment and the labour market.

Employment Officers advising clients must have a basic qualification in counselling and experience of employment services. There are also internal guidance modules and some experienced staff can go on to take the NUI Maynooth Certificate in Guidance Counselling or Diploma/Higher Diploma in Adult Guidance & Counselling. I.T. tools used in advice and guidance include 'Careers Directions' an interest inventory and information database, 'Qualifax' the national course database and EURES for vacancies overseas via the European Employment Services.

We were given a tour of the operational side of the local employment office to see the vacancy boards, the touch screen kiosk facilities, client registration area and client database.

Useful websites for further information are:

www.FAS.ie and
www.europa.eu.int/jobs/eures

We then enjoyed an enjoyable lunch at the Crowne Plaza hotel courtesy of FAS.

In the afternoon we visited Dublin City University in the north of Dublin. DCU is the newest university in Ireland becoming a university 25 years ago. We met Muireann Ni Dhuigneain , head of the Careers Service in DCU, for a presentation and discussion. Muireann is also joint chair of the Association of Graduate Careers Services. We were made very welcome by Muireann who asked each member of the group for anything they wanted her to cover.

There are only 2 main careers advisers with 2 more on specific contracts – one for students with disabilities and one for access and mature students. In addition there is clerical support and two support staff working on a community employment scheme. The Careers Service is part of the Student Affairs department. They are also a member of FEDORA – an organisation of European guidance practitioners.

The Careers Service has to provide information, advice and guidance to 5,700 undergraduates and 2,300 postgraduates. This means that there is very limited time for 1-2-1 guidance although there are also 1 hour drop in sessions. Guidance is also delivered in group sessions through specific careers education sessions and classwork embedded in the curriculum. They also promote the use of the website www.dcu.ie/careers . This website also includes a vacancy board.

Their main areas of work are : vocational guidance and career management; careers education; information resource provision; facilitating employment prospects e.g., running recruitment fairs. They also publish an annual graduate destination survey.

In general, they offer a service that is similar to those of university careers services in the U.K. but they have a great deal of work to do for such a small number of advisers and stress the importance of utilising IT.

In the evening the group went out with Jane for a meal and typical Irish music and dancing which everyone enjoyed.

Friday 24th March

The final morning of the trip and we returned to the offices of NCGE for the final presentations and evaluation in a complete downpour.

Eileen Fitzpatrick, the NCGE Director explained about a new Virtual Learning Environment project that can support guidance counsellors to develop a whole school approach to guidance. This three module course (review of guidance, action planning and evaluation) is supplemented by workshops. One of these workshops is for headteachers. Eileen hopes to get the course accredited within the Irish National Qualification framework.

Marika and Tuula then gave their presentation on guidance in Finland that we did not have time for on Monday. The website www.cimo.fi can be used to access the brochure on 'educational and vocational guidance in Finland'. Just click on an English language option when in the website.

The final part of the morning was spent on reflection and evaluation. We discussed the activities we had done, those of most and least interest and general comments on the exchange as a whole. Everybody had enjoyed the exchange and felt that it was worthwhile. The cultural aspects and benefits of meeting people from across Europe were felt to be of interest and importance as well.

Most of the group felt that it would be difficult to apply much of what they had seen to their own daily jobs as so many of the differences were structural but the value of reflecting on guidance practice was acknowledged.

We ended with lunch and the group broke up. Some were leaving almost immediately for the airport, others including myself that evening and a few over the weekend. I came home with an unwanted present from Ireland – flu.

This Leonardo da Vinci Academia guidance exchange to Ireland was well organised by NCGE and Careers Europe and I would recommend other guidance practitioners to apply for similar visits across Europe if they get the opportunity to do so.