



## **NEXTSTEP GOES TO BREMEN**

### **LEONARDO DA VINCI ACADEMIA PROGRAMME PLACEMENT REPORT - BUNDESAGENTUR FÜR ARBEIT, BREMEN 15 MAY – 19 MAY 2006 MO OSBORNE, NEXTSTEP MANAGER, HERTS CAREERS SERVICES**

#### **Introduction**

Although I had known for a number of years about the Leonardo exchange programme organised by Careers Europe, I first considered applying for a placement after hearing from my colleague Sue Claydon in Cambridgeshire about her time in Iceland in 2004 and subsequently meeting her Czech and Irish visitors. My first choice was to visit Germany – Austria would have been even better but it was not a partner in the Academia programme. In fact, a visit to find out about adult guidance in any country would have been fascinating.

My objectives for the exchange were:

1. to discover how information, advice and guidance (IAG) are delivered to low-skilled adults and to gain new ideas which might be applied to our nextstep contract in Hertfordshire;
2. to find out how ICT is used in IAG which might lead to some additional developments to our Hertfordshire nextstep website;
3. to observe how IAG is delivered to the workforce and how employers regard this practice;
4. to compare issues of providing IAG to adults, identify common themes and to find new ideas to adopt in Hertford;
5. to build links with potential partners for future transnational projects.

In addition, I had asked that the placement be conducted in German rather than English as a means of improving and enhancing my own language skills. The visit took place in between my oral and written AS German exams so it provided a golden opportunity to learn by experience about education, training and the world of work in Germany, key themes which were covered in my course.

#### **Bremen**

Bremen is a very pleasant university city, stretching for about 40km along the River Weser, with a population of about 550,000. The city is the German version of a unitary authority being both a city and a state. It was once a major port but around 60% was destroyed in the Second World War and the dockland area has been extensively redeveloped. Bremerhaven, a few kilometers further north, is now the key harbour in the area. Bremen is one of the four Hansestädte, towns that were members of the mediaeval Hanseatic League. The others are Rostock, Lubeck and Hamburg, which is about 50 km away.

Bremen has a number of large multi-national companies including Kellogg's, Kraft Foods and Becks Beer. There is a large Mercedes plant, which employs around 15,000 people, and also a big Atlas

works. Bremen has high levels of crime and social problems and its unemployment rate is roughly the same as the rest of Germany at 11%. Petrol prices are very high but it is much easier to go outside Bremen by car than by public transport. Travel around the city is very easy as there is a network of trams. The Bremen-Hamburg autobahn attracts a lot of foreign drivers passing through the country who are new to German roads and the local people try to avoid them!

The countryside in this part of North Germany is very flat but attractive and attracts a large number of tourists for cycling holidays. The area between Bremen and Oldenburg has ones of Germany's biggest centres for poultry and eggs and was currently coping with the effects of Vogelgrippe (bird flu). A little further away is a state-of-the-art centre for pig farming and many fields were planted with rape for biodiesel. There are also many wind farms in the area, all statements of Germany's commitment to the environment as is one of the local training programmes for unemployed people which recycles leaves and other organic matter for fertiliser.

Bremen is also famous for the town musicians in the Brothers Grimm story *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten*. There is a modern statue commemorating them in the city centre.

Oldenburg is about 40 km from Bremen. It is a small but very attractive town with a good university and many walks.

### **Bundesagentur für Arbeit**

The Bundesagentur für Arbeit (Federal Employment Agency) is the German equivalent of Jobcentre Plus. It was until 1998 the key publicly funded institution authorised to deliver IAG in Germany. Since then there has been an expansion of career guidance delivered by the private sector. The Bundesagentur für Arbeit offers a seamless IAG service for clients from school age to 65. Advisers provide full career guidance rather than focusing just on employment options and they are split into specialist teams working with different client groups. University students and graduates are supported by their own institutions, although the latter maintain close links with the Bundesagentur für Arbeit.

In 2004 the Bundesagentur für Arbeit merged with the German equivalent of the Benefits Agency to form one integrated service. Any unemployed individual claiming benefits is required to use the Bundesagentur für Arbeit's guidance and job placement services and benefit payments can be reduced for missing appointments without good reason.

Each new claimant is assessed to establish their skills and qualifications, in particular in German, maths and ICT. The assessment is done online and the client receives a copy of it as part of their benefits and training contract. Every appointment, intervention and activity is recorded on a central database so that a complete dossier is built up about the client. The database currently holds about 15m records. At the time of my placement colleagues were awaiting the roll out of an upgraded system the following week.

My placement was hosted by the Zentralstelle für Arbeitsvermittlung (ZAV), the Central Placement Office of the European Service and the Bundesagentur für Arbeit's equivalent of Careers Europe. Their office in Bremen is one of 15 regional centres, the others being in München (Munich), Nürnberg (Nuremberg), Stuttgart, Rastatt, Frankfurt, Berlin, Pirna, Hamburg, Rostock, Köln (Cologne), Erfurt, Dortmund, Magdeburg and Trier/Saarbrücken. The head office is in Bonn.

Through the Eures programme, ZAV has a national target to find European jobs and placements for at least 12,500 individuals and each regional centre has a pro rata share of this. Because of high unemployment, there is a heavy demand for opportunities outside Germany. The pressure to find placements is compounded by the fact that clients frequently do not have the qualifications required for the jobs on offer and it becomes a problem trying to match them to something appropriate

## **Other Information**

There is around 11.5% unemployment in Germany and a similar rate in the Bremen area. Bremen itself used to have a large number of traditional craft workers. However, they are being driven away or out of business because of the high cost of wages, tax etc whilst being undercut by large chains.

There is an intensive programme of training and re-training for unemployed people which is linked into the benefits system. I was told that there was a vast range of schemes covering an extremely wide range of activities. The majority last for about six months. The main difficulty is finding a permanent position at the end and many people sign up for a further six months. I asked what happens if someone can't find a job at the end of their training entitlement and the answer was that it's a problem that hasn't yet been resolved. Germany has the largest number of long term unemployed people in Europe (I wasn't given the actual figure) and there are particular problems for people over 50 who are too old find new employment but too young to receive their pensions. People from abroad with a poor command of German also have difficulties in finding jobs.

There is also widespread concern in Germany about the decline in educational standards and a drop in the skills levels of school leavers. This was highlighted in the 2001 PISA Study, which ranked Germany's young people as 20<sup>th</sup> in mathematical competence and 21<sup>st</sup> in reading competence out of 31 participating countries. The UK was placed 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> respectively. This adds to the overall unemployment problem as employers are in a position to be more selective about who they recruit.

## **Diary of Activities**

### **Monday, 15 May**

- 8.30am Introductory meeting with Heike Borgmann, Eures Adviser, and Inke de Pedraza, Team Leader, and discussion of the week's programme
- 9.00am Visit to Canada Place Weiterbildungszentrum (Adult Training Centre), Oldenburg. The visit was to the opening of a new 10 week intensive Dutch language programme for 16 unemployed people. Students come from all over Germany and receive a monthly allowance and travel expenses. At the end of the course they will be placed in appropriate jobs in the Netherlands. The students were mainly in their late 20s to late 30s. Canada Place offers a wide range of training programmes for unemployed adults in purpose built premises on the outskirts of the town. Students stay in lodgings nearby.
- 2.30pm Meeting with Geschäftsführung (Executive Director) Herr Stern. This was a courtesy meeting with the overall manager of the Bundesagentur für Arbeit in Bremen.
- 3.00pm Discussion with Inka de Pedraza about the approach to adult guidance including observation of an interview with an adult client. Discussion of targets and achievements of each of the Bundesagentur für Arbeit regions
- 4.30pm Tour of city centre with Heike Borgmann
- 5.30pm Close

### **Tuesday, 16 May**

- 8.00am Depart for BAGIS Ost in official car
- 8.30am Visit to BAGIS Ost hosted by Kerstin Heike, Training Placement Adviser working with school leavers. Observation of six interviews with unemployed young people seeking training. These clients were broadly similar to Connexions NEETs. One interview included an online assessment prior to identifying a suitable programme. Young people who are unsure about which occupational pathway to follow take part in a two week taster programme to help them come to a realistic decision. They are then placed in a six months training scheme with a view to finding a job at the end. Trainees receive benefit and one condition is that they should make at least five

applications per month otherwise they lose 30% of their allowance. Training advisers have a caseload of up to 75 young people. Finding work for long term unemployed clients is a serious problem, as in the UK

3.30pm Close

### **Wednesday, 17 May**

7.30am Meeting with Christine Schöttler, general placement host.

Day visit to Psychologische Dienst (Psychological Assessment Service), hosted by Frau Neubarth, Occupational Psychologist. The day comprised observations of initial interviews with five clients who had been referred by BAgIS advisers as they had a variety of issues which had made them unable to find or hold down a job or training placement. After the first interview, the clients then took a battery of tests. I was able to sit in and take three or four of them. The tests were the Oxford Psychological Tests which were devised in 1938. Despite their age, they're still highly regarded. The clients then met Frau Neubarth again to discuss the results and the implications in terms of job/training prospects. It was interesting to hear that although the service was free for unemployed people, if they miss their appointment for no good reason, their benefits are cut. If people in employment need psychological assessment, the fees are paid by the German equivalent of National Insurance.

5.00pm Close

### **Thursday, 18 May**

8.30am Visit to Akerdemikerteam (supporting clients with higher qualifications) observation of interviews with Hans-Jürgen Lüschen. The sessions focused on finding opportunities rather than delivering vocational guidance. Jobs, apprenticeships and other training schemes are listed on a database of opportunities which clients can access themselves, although not the full details. There are a range of different databases for different client groups eg school students, school leavers seeking their first appointment, adults etc. Many of the vacancies are supplied by the Handelskammer Bremen (Bremen Chamber of Commerce). They are also published in a hard copy for clients with explanations of the process for applying, tips for good applications and a blank application form. The clients observed did not receive an action plan at the time. It was interesting to note that nearly all jobs for academic young people needed English language skills.

1.00pm Visit to Eingangzone (benefits section). Observation of new claimants registering for the first time and discussion of the process they go through to obtain benefits. Between 20 and 100 clients sign on each day. Benefit claimants must sign a contract agreeing to look for work and must also agree to return for an interview with a benefits adviser. It was interesting to note that clients were interviewed in an open area rather than in a private room.

2.30pm Observation of U25 (under 25) interviews (two) with Olaf Janietz. The U25 team are the equivalent of pre-Connexions school careers advisers. The careers education and guidance programme for school students covers the same ground as CEG in England. The advisers have their own schools to visit and work closely with the German version of a careers co-ordinator. The programme includes group sessions, individual interviews, organisation of work experience and careers conventions.

4.30pm Observation of two client interviews with Christine Schöttler. These were young adults seeking employment in Europe and the discussions focused on the issues of working abroad.

6.30pm Evening meal with the team

### **Friday, 19 May**

8.30am ZAV team meeting. This is a weekly event to enable team members to discuss issues with colleagues and to share information. The key topic was the new database which

was going live the following week and the different concerns everyone had. There was a general concern that the system would not work on Monday and colleagues would not be able to manage without it. It sounded very much like déjà vu!

10.30am Final session with Christine Schöttler and Heike Borgmann. It was at this time I tried to explain the complexity of nextstep and the English IAG system.

12.00 Close of placement

## **Overall Impression**

The greatest impression left on me after my week in Bremen was the simplicity of the IAG infrastructure in Germany compared with the UK. As far as I could ascertain, the vast majority of publicly funded guidance provision is managed by one organisation, the Bundesagentur für Arbeit. There is one service providing IAG and clients of all ages are referred into it. The Bundesagentur für Arbeit's advisers in turn support a wide range of clients, with specialist teams looking after particular groups, such as school students, people with learning difficulties or disabilities, clients with Abitur (A levels) or higher qualifications etc.

As the nextstep Manager for Hertfordshire I found the contrast with the English system startling. In trying to explain our key target group, who delivers nextstep information and advice and how support for other clients is financed, the system that we work within sounded extremely complex and bureaucratic. I didn't even attempt to clarify the difference between "information", "advice", "guidance" and "enhanced services" as there is just one all-embracing term in Germany – Berufsberatung (vocational guidance) – which everyone understands. When asked where do people go if nextstep can't help them, it was difficult for me to provide a straightforward answer as each separately funded programme has different conditions. The Bundesagentur für Arbeit and other agencies access ESF and other funding for various projects but they do not appear to depend upon them as we do in England.

Another fascinating aspect that I noticed was the importance placed upon vocational guidance. It appeared to be an automatic assumption that if someone didn't know what they wanted to do or if their choice of career was unrealistic, they would benefit from Berufsberatung. The value placed on guidance in Germany is a stark contrast with the situation in the UK where IAG seems to be very much a Cinderella service.

The training of the Bundesagentur für Arbeit's advisers is interesting. It would appear that there is a common foundation training for all advisers dealing with the public, irrespective of which section they work in. Thereafter, more specialist skills development is provided on-the-job by the relevant department. The training leads to an internal diploma and it depends on an individual's manager as to how much emphasis is placed on further continuous professional development. One vocational guidance practitioner working with school students said that his training had consisted of observing colleagues and then learning by experience. He said he sometimes wondered if he could do his job better if he'd had some more structured training.

I was lucky enough to observe six advisers working with a range of clients. The general style of interviewing contrasted with how we operate in the UK, reflecting perhaps our different cultures. Overall, the approach seemed to be more directive than enabling, telling the clients what they should do rather than helping them to come to realistic and informed decisions themselves. The attitude to clients was also interesting. Whilst I was always introduced, only one adviser asked them if they objected to me being there. Advisers did not divert their phones and answered them in the middle of interviews. Colleagues also interrupted sessions and no-one seemed to think this was an issue. Although each centre had a waiting area, clients were expected to find their way to the appropriate office (all had solid doors without windows), rather than advisers meeting and greeting them. These observations are not criticisms, as all Bundesagentur für Arbeit staff really cared for the people they supported, but reflections of different cultural practices.

I thoroughly enjoyed my week in Bremen although it was exhausting. I felt very privileged that an individual programme had been devised according to my own interest. My German hosts were extremely generous with their time and very patient when I didn't fully understand everything. It was a challenge being on my own and also trying to make sense of the IAG system in a different language but I certainly learnt a huge amount and went home with lots to think about. I had hoped to find out more about the Bundesagentur für Arbeit's relationship with employers and to see different ideas that might be adapted and used in Hertfordshire but that wasn't possible. However, it was fascinating to see the similarities in problems presented by clients, despite nationality and cultural differences. I would whole-heartedly recommend the Leonardo Academia programme to any IAG practitioner and manager and I would love to repeat the experience. I would like to take this opportunity to thank once more Careers Europe and ZAV colleagues for organising the placement. It was marvellous!

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