

**Report – Estonia Guidance Exchange
14th – 18th May**

Background

I attended the Guidance Exchange Programme in Estonia... in Tallinn (and Tartu) in May. The visit was well attended by participants from all over Europe. There were twelve of us in total from namely, Sweden, Denmark, Italy, Spain, France and England. I was the only representative from Connexions Birmingham and Solihull (the other UK delegate was from Connexions Coventry and Warwickshire).

The aim of the visit was to experience the “guidance system for young people” in Estonia and take part in an exchange of how careers education and guidance exists in other parts of Europe. This was done by means of presentations and professional discussion throughout the week.

Luckily, the placement was in English, so I didn’t have to brush up on my Estonian and/or Russian. Although, I did manage to learn a few phrases of Estonian while I was there!

I will give a brief synopsis of my day to day activities and include findings I found particularly interesting. I will try to offer the cultural experience, as well as the academic in my write up... as I felt, that to truly appreciate Tallinn and its development in Careers Education and Guidance... you have to be aware of the cultural movement as well.

Estonia emerged from the First World War as an independent state after a brief German occupation and the War of Independence, the Second World War took Estonia to the Soviet Union for half a century. Independence was restored in 1991. The country, and city of Tallinn, in particular, is still very much in a state of change.

In fact, just the week before we flew out there, there were riots following the removal of the “bronze soldier” statue from downtown Tallinn. The riots stemmed from angry Russian Estonians who saw the monument as a tribute to Red Army soldiers who died fighting the Nazis; however, many ethnic Estonians consider it a painful reminder of hardships under Soviet rule.

We saw evidence of the riots on our visits around the city. Many office windows were broken and décor damaged. It was apparent that they targeted government buildings like the employment offices (equivalent to our job centre).

Russian speaking Estonians already complain of discrimination in Estonia where strict language laws make it hard to get jobs or citizenship without proficiency in Estonian. Some Russian speakers who were born in Estonia are either unable or unwilling to become citizens because of the language requirements.

The removal of the statue fuelled ill feeling further and peace was interrupted.

Day to Day

Our week was fundamentally organised via the “Foundation Innovee” where it all started on **Day 1...**

Foundation Innovee supports the notion of Life Long Learning, in particular, the route of VET (Vocational Educational Training).

The framework strategy for the centre is as follows;

- To promote the vocational route for employers and individuals in order to increase participation in VET
- To achieve high levels of quality and innovation in VET systems in order to benefit all learners
- To link VET with the labour market requirements

Activities for the centre include;

- developing innovative learning methods
- applying new training models
- organising the quality award for vocational schools
- developing the guidance system
- co-ordinating various projects
- implementing policies and practices

On **Day 2...** we woke up in Tartu – the university town! We'd set off late on Monday night and the 186km journey was made by coach with no stops! (We quickly learnt that Estonians don't believe in comfort breaks!)

After a late night in a converted beer cellar doing Karaoke and singing songs in Estonian... it took us a while to get up to speed on Tuesday morning... but we began by visiting the "Vocational Education Centre of Tartu". It's the biggest of its kind and was very impressive in its structure, set-up, organisation and achievements. In essence, it's our equivalent to a vocational training / learning provider for students on or aiming to get onto an apprenticeship! The interesting thing I found was that unlike here, it's almost guaranteed to get a place if you were to apply for an apprenticeship, even in the most popular areas of industry like construction and plumbing! There are even places, every year that go unfilled!! It's ironic how the situation can differ from country to country which no doubt has an impact on the economic state, i.e. unemployment figures. Our NEET figures are no doubt influenced by lack of / unsuitable provision as well as lack of applications by young people.

The occupational areas of industry are varied, namely, Servicing and IT, Industrial Technology, Construction and Woodwork, Light Industry and Domestic Services, Food Tech and Tourism!

The centre has its own career counselling service where young people can access guidance and job seeking support. Support offered on site includes, career counselling, lectures, seminars, workshops, pre-vocational training, career days and visits, employer visits and one-to-one guidance.

We also visited the University of Tartu, arguably, the most prestigious in Estonia where students apply from all over Eastern Europe. The university will this year, celebrate its 375th anniversary and thrives on its excellence in education in medicine, economics, history and of course, English. Its provision of education is comparable to the universities of Western Europe and its results and employment trends of graduates reflect this.

Without going into too much depth, I would like to add one fact that I thought was interesting. The majority of graduates who complete a degree at the university are almost guaranteed to continue onto a post grad course like a Masters degree. It is very rare for a student to end

their education after their first degree. This is most unlike in England, where only the minority go onto post graduate courses.

Due to the large volume of students, careers guidance and counselling cannot be offered on a one-to-one basis. Actually, as shocked as we were to learn that vocational training centres have their own guidance service, we were equally shocked to learn that in the whole of the university where thousands of students study... there are only two qualified guidance practitioners (one of which is part time). Instead, a lot of ownership lies on students to do their own research. Having said that though, it seems to be working pretty well... if they're not continuing their studies; graduates tend to find full time employment quickly!

For further information, please visit www.ut.ee/index.aw/set_lang_id=2 -

Having survived the return journey from Tartu... (We managed to persuade them to stop at an idyllic "wind mill turned restaurant" to have pancakes and tea)... we arrived back in Tallin late on Tuesday night.

So, on **Day 3...** we made our own way to Innovee Centre... how we managed that, I don't know. A peculiar method of buying tram tickets, before actually boarding the tram is the norm... luckily, we never missed our stop, easily done as it is in Tallin (it's scarier than London)!

We visited the "Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre" which was probably one of my favourite visits of the placement. It's provision for those young people with learning difficulties and /or disabilities. The enthusiasm and commitment from staff was the most impressive I've encountered. It was clear that they genuinely had the young people's interests at heart. The centre was established in 1996 and is still the only one of its kind in Estonia. It boasts a modern learning environment, boarding school facilities for up to 56 students, a canteen, a cafeteria, library, sports hall and an indoor pool.

The main goal of the centre is to contribute to the social coping of people with special needs and to support their transfer to the open labour market. It does this by a combination of social, educational, vocational and physical rehabilitation services.

The study options given include vocational courses in baking and confectionary, joinery work (woodwork), computer services, home economics and national handicraft.

As it's the only school of its kind... it's not a surprise that there are far more applicants than there are places to accommodate them but school policy is not to just turn students down but to assist them in finding alternative provision. The centre has a good quality careers guidance survey where they endeavour to find suitable alternative provision. It's often the case that regular local schools and colleges can provide the course and support that is needed for some students who have less severe learning difficulties or disabilities.

The careers service in the centre is excellent in its approach to provide a facility to overcome the barriers to learning for students who can't access education in a typical college or establishment like a gymnasium.

NB. In Estonia, "Gymnasium" is the term used for our equivalent of a "secondary school".

The centre was clean, well equipped with up to date and modern décor (classrooms, workshops and accommodation inclusive).

We spent the remainder of the day introducing the careers education and guidance systems in place in our home countries. I was first up and nervous on my pre-prepared Power Point slides and handout... however, I was pleasantly surprised on the general interest and questions raised from the audience. After a much deliberated discussion, I received an applause and requests for additional info. I took this as a good sign.

We continued our professional discussion until all participating countries had, in turn, delivered their presentation.

It was a very worthwhile exercise and thoroughly enjoyable to learn about the differences and similarities that exist in other countries' education and guidance systems.

I am not going to go into any specific detail re: each country (we'd be here forever)... however, should the reader have any specific interest in finding out more about a particular country, then, I could arrange for a copy of the participant presentation!

On day 4... we were left to our own devices to make our own way from the hotel to the Innovee.

On the morning, the sun was shining so we decided to walk. I took the decision to follow the crowd. We got there, only a few minutes late!

We proceeded onto the Career Centre of Tallinn Adult Gymnasium as our first visit of the day. This was similar in its role to a Connexions Area in schools... however, on a much larger scale and purpose. It served not only the students at the school it's attached to but also neighbouring schools (or gymnasiums, should I say?), adult clients, non-attenders, and those that are unemployed but thinking about returning to education.

You can see the extent to which the service is provided, is quite large to say the least.

The centre in itself is not very big in terms of space but well organised and extremely well looked after by the staff. The centre works on an appointment basis and urges relationships to be made with the 'hardest to help' clients whom they see repeatedly if need be.

Hence, as well as careers info, it provides intensive support as well... comparable to our role of the Intensive PA and Careers Adviser.

We had opportunity to speak with some of the students who studied at the gymnasium after the visit. What struck me was the enthusiasm and general consensus to continue onto FE and HE. Most, if not all, were keen to attend the prestigious university of Tartu.

We concluded the day by attending the Tallinn Employment Office. It was a remarkable building that had unfortunately been a target during the riots the week before. Windows and doors had been smashed and vandalised, however, we received a tour and talk that gave us a feel for the place nevertheless. The Employment Centre can be compared to our Job Centres here, although again, its catchment area is much bigger than one job centre would have here.

We received an overview of the Estonian Labour Market System which was very interesting in terms of variables. LMI differs to such extremes in Eastern Europe and the UK. Building and Construction, for example, is an area that lacks labour force and foreigners are often employed to make up the short fall.

We received an overview of the guidance work with the young unemployed and this consisted of one-to-one work as well as CV workshops and employability skills.

On day 5... our first stop that last morning was to visit the Tallinn Youth Information Centre. To try and describe it, I would say it was the closest establishment to resemble one of our Connexions Area offices. I say this due to the resembling nature of work that the centre undertakes. Similarities include, the 'informal' atmosphere, young people's input into layout, flexible opening hours, no appt. necessary, the notion of duty (although not called that), range of resources and leaflets for browsing, use of phone and internet access.

We spent the remainder of the morning evaluating and concluding our experiences of the week.

Friday afternoon was given as free time... I used this as time to explore the old town and shop at local boutiques and markets. We went out that night for a meal and drinks and the night out made real the rumours of English stag do's in Tallinn.

Cheap flights, reasonable prices and good accommodation, combined with close proximity to the airport makes Tallinn a popular up and coming place for stag parties and 'lad's holidays'.

I was up very early on Saturday morning – 3am to catch my return flight to Amsterdam and then Birmingham... this time, the flights were on time thankfully, and I landed at 10am, UK time to a glorious day with loads of sun shine... where did it go?

To the reader.... pictures of my visit are available at <.....>.

Trivia...

Night mare journey on the way there...

(the flight was delayed leaving Birmingham so I missed my connection at Amsterdam – I ended up waiting and catching a flight to Stockholm which was also delayed and then finally flew to Tallinn, landing late that evening... taking me almost 14 hours to get there).

We had some good nights out... every-one got on very well and became really good friends by the end of the week. We still keep in touch now and networking still exists. For example, Denmark Careers have just launched an MSN messenger guidance chat room whereby young people can access info and support on-line, instantly! Could this be something we venture into, especially when most, if not all young people have access to and use MSN more-so than SMS text messages??

I realised just how bad I was at singing during karaoke... I won't give up my day job.

It was immediately apparent on arrival, that if you were vegetarian... you were in trouble. I was! When I explained to any-one in Estonia that I was vegetarian... they offered me fish or eggs... when I explained that I didn't eat these either... they'd look at me as if I was an alien and offered me olives and salad; which was fine for the first two days but then I grew tiresome of salad for every meal. It was actually the running joke within our group while we were there! I have not eaten olives since my return!