

Observation of Adult Guidance Practice in Finland.

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Introduction

This is a summary of my recent academia exchange visit to Finland which was facilitated by the NCGE, Ireland and CIMO, Finland. Over the course of the week, I had the opportunity to observe and experience elements of Finnish guidance provision in the education and employment sector in the Lahti region (105 kms north of Helsinki). Along with 13 other guidance professionals from a number of European countries including; Spain, France, Estonia and England, I learned about the current issues in Finnish guidance policy and practice on the ground. The report will firstly discuss educational and vocational guidance provision as observed on the exchange. It will conclude with a brief description of current guidance research activities in Finland.

Educational and Vocational Guidance in Finland

The main goal of Finnish education policy is to guarantee a high level of education for all its citizens, promote well being and ensure the continuous promotion of its skills to sustain economic growth. The centrality of work in the Finnish psyche is evident in its equal opportunities for women, progressive childcare services, and lifelong learning agenda. Guidance and counseling forms an integral part of its economic programme. In Finland, there are two established guidance and counseling systems; (i) guidance and counseling provided by education and training institutions, and (ii) vocational guidance and career planning provided by the employment services.

Provision of guidance has a legislative basis which states that students are entitled to have educational and vocational guidance during every working day at school (age 13 upwards). This is now built into the comprehensive, upper secondary and vocational sector curriculum, albeit on an ad-hoc basis. In the third level sector institutions must have procedures in place to support students to make individual study plans and develop their career management skills. The adult education system is divided into two main sectors: liberal and general adult education, and vocational training for adults. However, there did not appear to be a strong emphasis on adults returning to longterm education as full-time mature students. Those who wish to gain degrees and post-graduate qualifications tend to do so through distance learning education.

From my observations during our visits to a number of schools and a polytechnic institute (equivalent to an IT in Ireland) guidance and counseling practice is quite different to Irish practice. The main difference is in its multi-professional approach. In the Finnish education system other education professionals can provide 'guidance and counseling (non-therapeutic) support' to students without necessarily having a guidance qualification. I learned from speaking to a number of Finnish guidance counselors that there is now a concerted push towards tightening up this loose system of provision, as there is a genuine concern that there may be many education professionals with little or no guidance training providing guidance in the curriculum. Another challenge for guidance in Finland is that there is too much of a focus on school-oriented guidance which is only available during school hours. Therefore, the only option for people outside of the school system is the employment centres.

The Finnish employment office is known as Työvoimatoimisto (equivalent to FA S in

Ireland). We visited the Lahti employment office which employs 135 staff in the region. The unemployment rate in the Lahti region is 11.8%, higher than the national rate of 9.8%. Vocational guidance is provided by vocational guidance counsellors who are distinct from the employment officers in the centres. In particular, vocational guidance counselors work with adults who need high level support to return to the labour market.

Despite the high rate of unemployment, and the wide variety of training and upskilling initiatives provided in the vocational training sector to address this, there is still a big disparity between matching the unemployed with vacancies. The main reason for this is that many of the older workers from the once buoyant manufacturing sector do not want to retrain for new industries. This has led to a big skills gap which the Finnish government is actively addressing through its liberal immigration policies. The main problem experienced by the immigrant population is the difficulty of learning the native language. The Finnish support services for integration and language training are organized and impressive but still under-funded.

Industry is also directly addressing the skills deficiencies through providing vocational training and apprenticeship opportunities with local upper secondary and adult education centres. We experienced this at first-hand when we visited a large wood manufacturing plant which encourages professional development of its employees from the shop floor to management level.

Conclusion

One of the reasons I wanted to visit Finland was to learn more about quality assurance in its guidance provision. During my visit, I had the opportunity to meet with a vocational guidance counsellor in the employment centre who had carried out an evaluation of the impact of career counselling services in the Lahti region (2005-2006). More importantly, I observed the client data management system used to maintain client records and track clients' longterm progression. The Lahti system is linked to the national employment data management system in the Ministry of Labour which monitors employment activities countrywide. In June 2007 a national research study (quantitative and qualitative) on cost-effective employment/education oriented counselling was instigated at government level. The report is due out in the summer of 2008.

Finally, the importance of guidance in the Finnish education and employment system is evidenced by its impressive research activities. The University of Jyvaskyla Research Centre has recently established a cross-sectoral research centre for lifelong guidance policy and practice with activities structured according to chapters of Career Guidance Handbook for Policy Makers (OECD, 2004). In recent months it was established as the centre for the European Policy Network for Lifelong Guidance and is now the national focal point for the ICCDPP. In June 2009 it will host the IAEVG General Assembly Conference on '*Coherence, Co-operation & Quality in Guidance and Counselling*'.