

FURTHER EDUCATION & TRAINING

In line with NCGE's stated strategic objective to provide quality information, resources and materials to support guidance provision and practice, in this issue we have published 'A Day in the life' of a College of Further Education (CFE) Guidance Counsellor. Guidance in Colleges of Further Education is based on the needs of the students in that college and provision is allocated in accordance with relevant Department of Education and Skills Circulars. The majority of students enrolled in CFE's in Ireland are engaged in Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) programmes. PLC courses are aimed primarily at students who would like to develop vocational or technological skills in order to enter an occupation, or go on to higher education.

A Day in the Life of a CFE Guidance Counsellor

Sonia Hoey is a Guidance Counsellor at Cavan Institute since 1999 and with CMETB from 1997. She graduated from University College Dublin with the Higher Diploma in Guidance Counselling in 1997 after completing her BA (Hons) Degree in Psychology and the Post-graduate Diploma in Business Studies in the Michael Smurfit Graduate School of Business - UCD.



Aoife Ward is a Guidance Counsellor at Cavan Institute since 2007. She graduated from University of Ulster with BEng (Hons) Degree in Engineering and worked in the Medical Device Industry for 5 years before returning to education. She completed a Post Graduate Diploma in Adult Guidance in 2006 and a Post Graduate Diploma in Further and Higher Education in 2011.



One of the things we like about being a Guidance Counsellor in a College of Further Education is that there isn't a "typical day" in the sense that there is such a wide variety of tasks inherent in the job description that no two days are the same. In a very busy college of 1200 students with over 80 courses, the Drop-In Service is inundated with queries as it provides students with an opportunity to have their questions answered, with no appointment necessary. We deal with numerous and diverse queries, for example, finance, HE progression, mature student progression, CAO, UCAS, Eunicas, job search etc., this is just the 'tip of the iceberg'.

Even when we schedule tasks several weeks in advance, we are always ready for 'unscheduled' concerns to be dealt with and therefore, prioritising and multi-tasking is a significant part of our daily role. Our students come from various backgrounds and cultures and range from Leaving Cert, QQI Level 4 graduates to mature students returning to education. These students present in September each year apprehensive but feeling positive, motivated and passionate about their chosen course. Our role is to support them through each phase of the year and help them to build their career plans for the future.

September is always 'hectic' as students make their transition to Further Education. There's such a buzz as they navigate the college, get their timetables, find their feet and make new friends. We suppose you could call this the 'settling in' stage as students familiarise themselves with their course, tutors and their surroundings. During this time, we get flooded with queries around course changes and options, grants & financial issues, QQI course progression and personal problems. Representatives from some of the UK Universities are scheduled to present to the students and the commencement of careers fairs and school visits get underway.

October/November brings a more settled college environment as students find their feet and they become more confident and career focused. The Guidance Service is very busy with class visits, UCAS Workshops, Personal Statements, HEI visits, Career Interest Inventories, school visits and careers fairs in addition to one to one work with students in areas such as courses changes, financial issues, counselling referrals and crisis support. It is inevitable that our day will not go as planned and we are always conscious of the fact that a student may present with issues where we have to drop all the other tasks and focus solely on their welfare. This is a difficult but very significant part of the role.

In December and January our main focus is to support students and facilitate their application to further and higher education in Ireland, UK and Europe. Our students have access to wide and varied progression options however often this is a very overwhelming time for them (and us!!) as they make sense of the progression routes available and the different applications that need to be completed. In addition to this important career planning we would usually see a surge in referrals for guidance counselling around this time. It is vital that we take a holistic approach which means always prioritising and reprioritising our work depending on the issues presented by the student.

Once CAO and UCAS deadlines have passed, our focus turns to supporting mature students and QQI Level 6 students as they apply for advanced entry. We assist them with preparing for aptitude tests, interviews, portfolios and personal statements. Again students completing their QQI Level 6 award have excellent opportunities to progress into second year in a cognate area in an Institute of Technology. Also we are seeing an increased number of students availing of excellent opportunities to study courses abroad when they are excluded from high points courses here in Ireland. The PLC qualification is very valuable for those who are willing to research and avail of programmes in the UK and Europe for example in Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Radiography, Nursing, Psychology and Social Work. The progression links are developing significantly in Ireland too with the Universities offering excellent links to Science, Business, Law, Arts, Social Science, Nursing, Sport, Computers and Teaching programmes to name but a few.

Moving into spring, our work is very varied and the focus broadens to include employment opportunities and supporting the students with job search, job application, CVs and interview techniques. Thankfully we are seeing an increase in job opportunities for students after the years during the downturn where it was much more difficult to secure employment. Our students have completed their work placements and are displaying job readiness and improved employability skills. They just need some

encouragement and belief in their abilities and that is where we come in – coaching them, motivating them and helping them to become more self-confident. The Drop In service is still extremely busy with student queries on SUSI, accepting UCAS offers or dealing with unsuccessful applications, late application to CAO, scholarships, distance learning and part time courses, progression links, apprenticeships and traineeships, crisis support and personal issues.

Ongoing throughout the year are again school visits and careers fairs where we get the opportunity to meet with secondary school students and mature students planning to return to education and discuss the many options open to them. This is important work as it raises awareness of the amazing progression opportunities available to students with a QQI Level 5 or 6 award. One of the highlights of the job for us is seeing the transformation of our students as they go from being apprehensive about the PLC route to the reality that they can access the progression opportunities of their dreams. Past beliefs around what careers are open to them are challenged and they begin to plan their career route and believe that the world is their oyster!

As you can see the Guidance role in a Further Education College is wide and varied and comes with its challenges. It is a role that offers great variety with unexpected and unforeseen events every day! Working with PLC students is very rewarding and enjoyable. We meet wonderful people every day and we thoroughly enjoy supporting and facilitating their personal, educational and vocational growth and development. As always there is pressure on resources, time constraints and many other issues that crop up during the year however the day flies in and we leave each evening feeling we have contributed to improving the well-being of our students and our learning community.

References

- 1 CAO – Irish Central Applications Office – www.cao.ie
- 2 UCAS – UK, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service - www.ucas.com
- 3 Eunicas - European Universities Central Application Support Service - www.eunicas.ie
- 4 QQI - Quality and Qualifications Ireland, responsible for Irish National Framework of qualifications - www.qqi.ie
- 5 HEI -Higher Education Institutes – www.heai.ie/higher-education-institutions/?v=1
- 6 Institute of Technology - <http://theai.ie/>
- 7 SUSI - Ireland's national awarding authority for all higher and further education grants – www.susi.ie

