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National Centre for Guidance in Education

SOLAS
An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
Further Education and Training Authority



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Summary Report on ETB AEGS Case Studies



2019



Rialtas na hÉireann
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On behalf of the Department of Education and Skills and SOLAS.

<https://www.ncge.ie/ncge/adult-educational-guidance-services>

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Introduction

The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) is an agency of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) with responsibility to inform the policy of the Department on guidance in the education and training sector and to support the development of quality guidance practice in post-primary and Further Education and Training (FET). NCGE represents the DES and Ireland at EU Commission level on the development of EU policy on lifelong guidance and was directly involved in the development of the guidelines and publications of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN).

It is the role of NCGE to work in collaboration with stakeholders to support and develop quality guidance practice. The aims, objectives and Strategic Plan for NCGE are determined by the NCGE Management of Guidance Committee and agreed with the Department. Since the establishment of SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), the ETB Adult Educational Guidance Services (AEGS) are managed by the sixteen Regional ETBs as part of their ETB Integrated FET Provision and Support Services.

At the time of these case study reports, the DES was responsible for overarching policy in the FET sector, including guidance. SOLAS is responsible for the funding of guidance within the Further Education and Training sector. Furthermore, SOLAS oversees the development and evaluation of guidance provision in FET and funds NCGE in its role to support the implementation of the strategic priorities of the FET Strategy as it relates to guidance. The Department and SOLAS agreed the designated role of NCGE in supporting ETB Adult Educational Guidance Service (AEGS) which includes:

- Informing the policy of the Department on issues pertaining to FET guidance.
- Supporting the provision of quality guidance within the AEGS services of the ETBs.
- Working on behalf of the Department and SOLAS, in collaboration with ETBI, on the development of the AEGS and future FET guidance services nationally.
- Coordinating and delivering Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme for ETB AEGS staff.
- Coordination, monitoring and management of the Adult Guidance Management System (AGMS) database, including generation and publication of AGMS reports.
- Providing qualitative and quantitative data gathered to inform NCGE, SOLAS and the Department in planning the provision of guidance to the target groups of the services.

The following document is a Summary Report of submitted case studies from 2019, illustrating the practice and delivery of ETB AEGS services gathered on the Adult Guidance Management System (AGMS) database throughout 2019.

This report does not provide data on the provision of guidance across other FET services, i.e. in Post Leaving Cert (PLC)/Colleges of Further Education (CFE) or Youthreach or other ETB based or funded guidance services.

It is important to note that this 'ETB AEGS AGMS Case Studies Report' is completed and published during the Covid-19 pandemic and does not include reference to changes in services due to the Covid-19 school and FET closures.

The AGMS data gathering system provides both quantitative and qualitative data, for example, offering information of the numbers of beneficiaries of ETB AEGS and 'key categories', 'Age Group Analysis' etc. The AGMS also offers data and feedback from services giving qualitative reports from the AEGS. Good practice guidelines suggest that staff members of each ETB AEGS inputs client and group data (Quantitative Data) on an ongoing basis and that the local ETB AEGS team complete qualitative returns annually.

To expand and further evidence examples of good practice, innovation, to share practice and to acknowledge challenges, ETB AEGS are encouraged to input case studies offering direct examples of how the services operate. Collection of case studies is underpinned by several core values and quality practices which are encompassed in the holistic model of AEGS provision. The case studies offer further evidence of service engagement with core principles of guidance, including informing, advising, enabling, advocating, networking, providing feedback and managing, all of which underpin the delivery of a quality guidance service.

The case studies also give tangible evidence of different types of service delivery and the differing levels of engagement pursued by AEGS staff and the AEGS team in their effort to meet the needs of clients, education providers and relevant agencies in the delivery of dynamic, productive, quality guidance. Case studies detail the unique client/practitioner relationship which is central to the whole guidance process. They demonstrate the creative, collaborative and innovative practice of practitioners in their response to learner needs, while also giving strong evidence of inter-agency collaboration, ETB wide cooperation, productive outreach, quality information provision, appropriate advocacy and service improvement.

It is expected that the AEGS team, led by the Adult Educational Guidance Coordinator, input data to the AGMS Qualitative Reports on an annual basis. The AGMS Qualitative Reports offer insight into ongoing service provision, new and innovative approaches to delivery of Guidance Information and Guidance Counselling services. Through gathering Qualitative data, ETB AEGS AGMS reports offer insight into opportunities, challenges and the management of new and ongoing developments.

In the context of ETB AEGS reporting in 2019 the NCGE '*Summary Report of the Adult Guidance Management System 2019*' focused on the Quantitative Reports and did not include Qualitative Reports. It is vital to note that the Qualitative reports and case studies continue to facilitate reflection on these reports to inform policy, provide briefing on good practice, to develop resources and to inform provision of CPD to ETB AEGS staff.

Summary Report on ETB AEGS Case Studies 2019

In order to share the practice, delivery and innovation of the ETB AEGS team, NCGE present this 'ETB AEGS Case Studies' report, drawn from the ETB AEGS AGMS system 2019, yielding substantial and contextualised insights into the work in the AEGS nationally. The case studies are detailed and to ensure anonymity of both clients and services, the case studies presented in this report have been anonymised by removing any identifiers.

This AGMS Case Studies Report 2019 was generated from the case studies as reported by the 37 ETB Adult Education Guidance Services of the 16 ETBs nationally, through the AGMS in 2019.

In total, 19 case studies were submitted on the AGMS for 2019, however, 3 of these case studies submitted by 3 ETB AEGSs were the same, as the project they undertook involved all 3 ETBs jointly responding to a local need, namely Bord na Móna's transition, diversification and restructuring plans.

For the purposes of this report, 19 case studies in total were analysed. Ten case studies related to guidance with individual clients, whilst the remaining nine were related to various group work and workshops delivered.

The client categories targeted were diverse and included clients who were: working with basic skills, Unemployed (Activation Priority), Early School Leavers, Long Term Unemployed, Substance Misusers, Not Working and Ineligible for Live Register. One case study reported was aimed at reaching people who live in a 'difficult to reach' rural area where education provision is widespread and widely dispersed, while two other case studies were based on support workshops for jobseekers, one with guidance information and skills identification and one with interview techniques.

Of the 19 case studies, 10 reflected group work all of which included inter-agency work and collaboration with numerous stakeholders and experts in various areas.

Other common factors included assisting participants to 'explore education and training opportunities', be 'aware of their rights and entitlements' to 'identify supports available to them' and encouraging engagement with these services and with 'upskilling'. The workshops delivered were aimed at helping learners to identify their skills and competencies through the use of psychometric testing, improving their jobseeking skills by creating CVs, cover letters and job interview techniques.

Other common factors included building confidence, motivating learners, building relationships and trust, and inclusion aimed at those who felt 'left behind' when it came to participating in education and training and those with addiction issues.

Group Case Study

One group case study submitted focused on a pilot 'Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Project'. The ETB concerned developed a (RPL) programme, known as the TOBAR Project in partnership with the Irish Defence Forces. The purpose of the programme was to provide Irish Defence Forces Personnel considering retirement or career change with an opportunity to have their competencies and skills considered for recognition on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The RPL process would engage the applicants in applying for either a single award or a major award under the nationally and internationally recognised, quality assured National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) up to Level 6. RPL is a formal process whereby recognition is given to a person's learning which has been previously obtained in formal, non-formal and informal learning environments. The development of RPL by ETBs is identified in the National SOLAS FET Strategy 2014-2019:

'The validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competence acquired through non-formal and informal learning (RPL) can play an important role in enhancing employability and mobility'. A broad range of stakeholders can play a role, these include "the QQI, SOLAS, employer organisations, individual employers, trade unions, employment services and bodies involved in and approved in recognising and certifying professional qualifications.'

The TOBAR Project, operating one day per week, started in April 2019, with nine RPL applicants. The programme was delivered over a twelve-week period, concluding in early July, with a second programme starting in September. This pilot programme targeted certain members of the Defence Forces by providing formal QQI certification in respect of prior learning, formally acknowledging skills and competencies that learners had acquired in formal, informal and non-formal learning environments.

The TOBAR Pilot RPL Project established a Management Group consisting of a number of stakeholders, two members of the Defence Forces, a specialist expert in RPL, a broad representation from the ETB, including the AEGS, the Quality Assurance Department and the Adult Literacy Service.

The Adult Education Guidance Counsellor delivered two formal group guidance inputs during the course as well as one short group follow up session. Topics covered included self-awareness exercises, career planning, career transition/management, and general information sessions on the QQI progression system. Each participant had an opportunity to attend for two one-to-one guidance sessions and a short follow-up session.

Initially, the focus of the RPL was to accredit participants prior learning at NFQ Level 4, but it became clear as the course progressed that this needed to be broadened to include modules at Level 5 and Level 6. Up to December 2019, five programmes were delivered and a further three are planned for 2020. At the time of the case study, participants were exploring a broad range of progression options as noted in the following quote:

‘...Participants are exploring a broad range of progression options including the Skills for work Programme, Manual and Computerised Payroll, L6 Clean Room Technology/Biomedical, HR Management.’

This pilot programme is one of a series of pilot programmes being delivered by 10 ETBs nationwide. Three of the Adult Guidance group sessions were delivered on site, whilst the others were delivered at various local training centres, venues and hotels.

The aims and objectives of all group work were clearly similar. They included:

- Providing impartial and clear information.
- Inclusion, motivation and encouragement for all learners and participants including those living in rural areas, those with mental health and addiction issues.
- Support, encouragement and confidence building for all.
- Reflection to inform ‘Skills audit’, upskilling and recognition of prior learning.
- Encouraging engagement with other services and stakeholders.

One to One Case Studies

Of the nine case studies with individual clients, five were with young clients between 18 and 25 years of age. Two experienced mental health issues - one of whom had dropped out of school, while the other had sat his Leaving Certificate, had continued to NFQ Level 5 but did not sit those exams. Another client had no formal education beyond primary level and had been home schooled. One had a learning difficulty (impaired ability to process information) whilst one other was living in homeless accommodation.

The other four case studies with individuals, ranged in age from 26 - 49 age groups. Of these, two were seeking a career change, one of whom was working with basic skills needs and the other was unemployed (activation priority). Another client had a Specific Learning Difficulty (SLD), namely dyslexia and one had been a homemaker, wishing to return to work, or retrain.

While there is no one clear theme among the case studies with individual clients, they all bring similar issues and challenges for both the Guidance Counsellor and the individual.

For the individuals, lack of confidence, confusion, lack of clarity and direction, mental health issues, lack of education and learning difficulties were the main stumbling blocks to progressing in education and training. However, as reported in the case studies, with the support and expertise of the Guidance Counsellor, all were successful in engaging with further and higher education.

Good Practice

Inter-Agency Collaboration:

There are numerous fine examples of good practice and expertise in all the case studies. Inter-agency work and collaboration with other Stakeholders (Local Employment Service (LES), Dept Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP), potential employers, experts in various fields, Higher Education Institutes, ETBs, Tutors and Coordinators etc.), is particularly evident throughout. These collaborations have clearly been successful in productively engaging clients engaging with other agencies: helping the clients to identify their skills; to upskill; to acquire knowledge with regard to their rights and entitlements; helping to build their confidence and giving them the motivation and encouragement to follow their unique educational and career path and to reach their potential.

A very good example of inter-agency work and collaboration can be seen in the response to a local need, namely the Bord Na Móna case study submitted by one ETB AEGS. Bord Na Móna had been going through a period of transition, diversification and restructuring over several years. Employees were offered the opportunity to apply for voluntary redundancies as part of this and Bord na Móna approached the training centre managers in three ETBs to provide staff with information on their rights, entitlements and the options available to them. The three ETB Adult Guidance and Information Services concerned liaised and were involved in the design of a skills 'audit', while also planning delivery of information sessions for the Bord na Móna employees, onsite. These sessions were attended by representatives from the three ETBs, a Higher Education Institute and DEASP where employees were informed of supports available in the region and training/employment opportunities in the area.

With support by the ETB AEGS, an in-depth skills audit was carried out to determine the requirements in relation to education, training and skills and in order to maximise redeployment opportunities in the region. Data gathered was used by local education and training providers to further inform them on education/training needs within a large and diverse organisation. Almost 300 employees had a 30-minute one-to-one appointment with AEGS staff, during which the skills audit and an impartial guidance interview was completed.

The announcement of the closure of the peat plant had a huge impact on Bord na Móna employees, creating a highly emotive atmosphere on the sites. Here, the key skills of the guidance staff came into play and as well as completing the skills audit, they were able to offer reassurance and empathy.

Overall, the process proved to be a very positive one. The feedback from Bord na Móna management and staff was positive. Bord na Móna employees subsequently made appointments with the ETB AEGS, while some have since started ETB programmes to upskill and retrain. Since the skills audit, several training courses have been delivered on the various Bord na Móna sites and the employees have been engaging in this process.

Due to the fact that the Adult Guidance and Information Service staff were involved in the process of completing the skills audit, the employees additionally received an impartial and

confidential meeting with a professional guidance service and are able to follow-up with this service for further support and assistance as they transition either with Bord na M6na or into other opportunities that arise.

The key outcomes from the Bord na M6na project are very positive:

- collaboration between the three ETBs fostered a great working relationship
- increased uptake on courses ran by Bord na M6na
- increased interest in Further Education and Training
- referrals to the Guidance Services from the Bord na M6na employees

Bord Na M6na employers went on to say:

‘The feedback so far has been exceptional ... and all of your staff have been extremely professional, understanding and insightful in helping our employees consider their future options during this difficult time and no doubt, they will go on to reskill and upskill through the ETBs as we move forward.’

Social Inclusion:

The delivery of AEGS in the context of social inclusion is also apparent, in the case studies of those clients with addiction issues, mental health issues, learning difficulties, immigrants, those facing unemployment and redundancy and those living in remote rural areas. These case studies show the Guidance Counsellors enabling participants to engage, gather and access the information and skills to proceed with their chosen path, through collaboration and inter agency work, information sessions, outreach work and structured and relevant workshops:

‘Participants gained a better understanding of the job search process.....progression options were successfully explored and identified.....through the use of psychometric instruments, participants were able to identify possible areas of personal interest, courses, training and employment.’

Follow-up by the Guidance Counsellors and clients is also very evident throughout the case studies:

‘Clients were given the opportunity for one-to-one guidance following group sessions, with a Guidance Counsellor or other Agency staff.’

Provision of Impartial, Accessible Adult Education Guidance and Information to 'hard to reach' clients:

The 2019 ETB AEGS case studies gives ample evidence of the significance of the provision of unbiased, impartial information and the importance of outlining options available to clients. This allows clients to explore and choose what best suits their needs in their quest for future education, training and career possibilities. From the case studies reported, several ETB AEGS examples of such practice clearly shows care and support for clients progressing whilst encouraging and supporting them throughout their journey, allowing clients to take responsibility for their own research and choices, evidencing the 'Client Centred' priority of guidance provision.

Outreach sessions with clients or delivering guidance out in communities is vital in provision of service to clients and groups experiencing marginalisation or who are 'hard to reach'. Such clients and groups reported on by ETB AEGS in the case studies reports may be persons in recovery or active addiction, living in hard to reach rural areas, migrants, people who face unemployment or redundancy, early school leavers, all interested in accessing impartial guidance and information. The case studies report 2019 shows good examples of ETB AEGS effectively reaching and supporting these clients and groups, engaging referral systems and supports and collaborating across agencies.

The ETB AEGS facilitates clients and groups developing their job seeking skills, understanding their education and training opportunities and the implications of funding rights and entitlements and how their choices will impact their future career options. Recognising the guidance role in meeting the needs in a community, collaborating and responding to that need is very evident in the case studies submitted.

Inter-agency group sessions clearly proved to be very successful in bringing guidance and information out to communities. The guidance group sessions and guidance workshops provided impartial information and guidance, skills audits, interview techniques, CV and cover letter writing skills, speakers and expertise from different areas for example on 'rights and entitlements'. The case studies noted that people within the communities showed great appreciation to the services that came to them offering them access to services, options and support.

Challenges

Each group, individual client, outside agency, and stakeholder bring unique challenges to the ETB AEGS and it is through collaboration, sharing resources and information, and discussion and clarity that these are managed. The case studies submitted indicate myriad challenges. Particularly evident for clients were issues attached to poor self-image and confidence, lack of formal education and qualifications, past unfavourable experiences of education/work, fear regarding returning to education and lack of belief in the client's capacity to be successful in academic pursuits. Most prevalent across the case studies was simply a lack of direction, focus and attendant motivation.

Other issues presented include clients 'being out of touch' with the education system, individuals with mental health issues, individuals with learning difficulties, homeless clients, those with limited education and IT skills, and those in active addiction or in recovery from addiction and those socially isolated in rural areas, where there is no public transport and where education/training provision is widespread and dispersed.

From the case studies it is notable that, group work and workshops are time consuming, from planning, co-ordination and organisation to delivery and evaluation. This places extra demands on the ETB AEGS and in turn can present a wide range of challenges for all involved. With good time management, collaboration of all the relevant stakeholders and a clear understanding of roles and duties, the case studies show that these challenges were managed effectively.

Further to that ETB AEGS note that the diversity of groups in age, education levels, interests and expectations posed challenges for the Guidance Counsellor. Designing relevant and beneficial guidance workshops and group sessions suitable for the range of participants is noted as being extremely challenging as a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate. Nonetheless, all ETB AEGS managed groups and workshop events were reported successful in their aims and objectives. Collaborating with outside agencies and departments and getting them 'on board' or to 'buy in' to projects, setting up central and suitable venues and dates to accommodate all are other challenges

Course availability and waiting times for courses to start also posed some concern for the AEGS with one service noting that:

'Another challenge was the Guidance Counsellor's frustration at course availability/waiting times etc and worry that the client's progress would come to a halt'.

Emerging Challenges

ETB AEGS case study reports noted that the lack of specific programmes across the Further Education and Training sector to 'motivate clients with mental health issues and those suffering from anxiety' is increasingly challenging. Finding solutions to these challenges is not an easy task, but by providing up to date, accurate information on options, clarity about funding and practical considerations, and offering reflective space to consider these options, good support is offered. Coupled with good interagency collaboration and intervention these significant difficulties could be managed and often resulted in useful outcomes for the client.

Outcomes

Notwithstanding the challenges faced, the outcomes reported in all case studies were very satisfactory and successful. Overall, the confidence, self-esteem, mental health, motivation and belief in academic ability of participants improved and was reported in all case studies. Identification of personal areas of interests, progression to Further Education and Training or to employment was also noted throughout. Strong links and inter-agency networking are also noted leading to consistency in information and services available, forging positive relationships, willingness to respond to the needs of clients, implementation of future programmes and active social inclusion.

It is also noted in the case study reports that client fears and anxieties were often reported as considerably diminished following sessions and meetings with the ETB AEGS, while confirmation of raised awareness of education and employment pathways is indicated.

Feedback from all participants was extremely positive and heartening. They spoke about an improvement in their mental health and the positive impact of guidance regarding the information and clarity they received.

Some Examples

Individual case study:

This case study submitted to the AEGS AGMS outlines the Guidance Counsellor's work with a young man struggling with mental health issues. In this case, the young man was referred to the ETB AEGS by the local ETB 'Back to Education Initiative' (BTEI, Part Time Programme) Coordinator within his first month of attending a QQI Level 4 General Learning class. He describes his decision to leave school the previous year:

'I started into 6th year, fine up until October, when I had a mental breakdown and stayed out of school for two months before I went back in and I felt like a complete stranger when I came back, so much so, that I would get panic attacks and I would have to leave the classrooms to try to cope with them... the Leaving Certificate was bearing down on top of me and I made the decision to drop out of school'.

Through the support of his parents who researched options for him, he went on to describe:

'...left the house for the first time in four months' to apply for a FIT course, however, following a meeting with the BTEI Coordinator who explained about Level 4 being equivalent to the Leaving Certificate, he decided to start a Level 4 General Learning programme and was referred to the AEGS during the course.

During the initial session with the ETB AEGS Guidance Counsellor, it became clear that the young man had a 'natural flair' for IT. He was already doing online IT courses from home and had identified his goal of completing a Computer Science Degree. The Guidance Counsellor explained about QQI Level 5 courses, and the Higher Education Links Scheme as an alternative route to college. Following exploration of eligible Level 5 courses he chose to apply for a Level 5 Computer Science course. He attended the open day and met the course coordinator prior to his interview, he was subsequently offered a place subject to successful completion of his full QQI Level 4 Award.

Strong collaboration between the ETB AEGS Guidance Counsellor and the BTEI Coordinator and support by the client's tutors meant that he would be the first learner in the centre to attempt to complete his full Level 4 Award in one academic year. He also had great family support:

'Mam and Dad never gave up.'

'My guidance meetings were very beneficial in regard to information and clarity but also positively impacted my mental health....'.

The young man achieved his full QQI Level 4 General Learning Award with Distinction and was due to start on his QQI Level 5 Computer Science in September 2020. He also had his progression route outlined and had this to say:

'My hopes for the future to continue my journey in education and obtain a Level 8 bachelor's degree of Computer Science which I am already on the way towards, thanks to completing my Level 4 General Learning Certificate.'

Conclusion

Nineteen case studies were submitted to the Adult Guidance Management System (AGMS) in 2019 and were analysed for the purpose of this report, three case studies submitted were the same from three ETBs as they were all involved in responding to the Bord na Móna restructuring plans in the Midlands. Ten case studies were on groups and workshops and nine on individual clients. The range of clients were diverse and included most of the 'client categories' listed on the AGMS.

The practice of collaboration and inter-agency work, sharing information and resources is clearly apparent from the case studies. The use of group work and workshops to convey impartial information, bring guidance to marginalised groups and those living rurally is inspirational. It is encouraging to see this collaboration and inter-agency work throughout all the case studies and the quality of work and best practice from each guidance service is to be highly commended.

With appropriate guidance support, the Recognition of Prior Learning Project, (RPL) allowing participants to achieve a single award or a major award under the National Framework of Qualification (NFQ) up to Level 6 is innovative, collaborative and facilitated the learners to have improved 'ownership' of their skills.

Recommendations

Having carefully considered the case studies for 2019, the following are some recommendations that might be considered into the future, so that the ETB AEGS can maintain and improve its quality practices, which are encompassed in the holistic model of ETB AEGS provision:

- Continued and improved inter-agency work and collaboration, sharing of information and resources across departments, is crucial for successful and sustainable outcomes. Teamwork helps get things done faster and better and if teamwork happens the way it is supposed to, it can lead to incredible outcomes.
- The case studies would suggest that there is a need for more FET based General Learning Programmes specifically for youth presenting with mental health and addiction issues. Case studies suggest value in provision throughout the year rather than confined to a traditional 'academic' year and shared between centres and ETBs.
- Noting the success of the case study outlining three ETBs who jointly responded successfully to the Bord Na Móna restructuring plan, similar 'joined up' thinking and action nationwide would assist in dealing with youth with mental health and addiction difficulties.
- From the ETB AEGS case studies reports there is some evidence that 'RPL Pilot Programme' builds confidence and self-esteem for the learner, providing a recognised qualification allowing learners, Further and Higher Education Coordinators and FET-based Guidance Counsellors the opportunity to engage useful alternative provision to facilitate learner progression. If the 'Recognition of Prior Learning' Project (RPL) is to be rolled out across all sixteen ETBs, the clear role appropriate integration of guidance before and during the programme delivery is vital.
- Participation by more ETB AEGSs in submitting case studies though the AGMS Qualitative report structures must be encouraged. It is important that qualitative data be harnessed and shared, so that outside agencies and departments are aware of the value and success of the ETB AEGS and its benefits to clients.
- Sharing the actual case studies more widely across the guidance community is vital to support the further development of professional guidance practice.
- Such actual case studies could provide excellent learning opportunities for those completing guidance counselling qualifications who wish to enter the profession.