

Reflections: Visit to Paderborn University – CORVET Project 1st to 3rd November 2011

The CORVET partnership got off to a good start as Italy, UK, Turkey and Germany met for the first time in the lovely and vibrant city of Paderborn from 1st to 3rd November 2011. The host, Prof. Dr. Marc Beutner of Paderborn University made sure everyone was informed before, during and after the meeting about the concept behind CORVET and how we wanted the partnership to progress in the future.

The visit began with an informal evening dinner at Le Petit Gallerie where all participants were present and eager to exchange information about themselves. During the evening, we were introduced to German beers and learned how different beers were developed in each region in Germany, and how fiercely loyal the locals are to their own home grown beer companies.

On Tuesday, 2nd November, Marc Beutner, Coordinator of CORVET, talked through the very important part of administering the project and outlined the objectives and responsibilities of each partner in the project together with dates for hosting future meetings. Marc described the Project Cycle, emphasising the 4 Key Requirements of achieving the aims and objectives of the project, completing the mobilities, monitoring and reporting, and the tools to be used for dissemination, especially the BCSW Server developed by the Paderborn University.

Access to the BCSW server was also granted to each partner and key members of the partner organisation. For dissemination, guidelines were given for connecting to the BCSW server and how to post reports and other information. The project will also be shared and disseminated among members and partner EU countries via the European Shared Treasure (EST) network.

A short introduction was also made by the Vice President of Paderborn University who formally welcomed the group and encouraged more international co-operation between the University and external stakeholders. Although a young university, (around 17 years old), Paderborn University has become a leading educational institution in Germany with around 17,000 students and 1000 lecturers, professors, support and administrative staff. As the leading University in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) of teachers and students, it plays a central role in developing VET concepts and learning across Germany.

A tour of the University and its different faculties on the way to the Main Refectory area revealed the interesting architectural intricacies upon which this maze of buildings have been built and continue to be built. Lunch was a delight, with plenty of choices from simple, healthy salads and soups to gourmet Chinese, German, Italian dishes, all reasonably priced at between five to eight Euros (roughly £7) that included a soft drink. At such prices, we were told, the students need never worry about spending precious time on preparing healthy, wholesome food for themselves - and washing the dishes afterwards! They could dine quite economically if they purchase a pre-loaded cash card that discounts students' meal at the check-out. Perhaps the intention is for the students to focus on their learning!

During the meeting, other VET systems were also discussed and there seemed to be many variants among the countries of Italy, UK and Turkey compared to how VET is approached in Germany. The German VET system is rather unique in that learners can transfer between the vocational and academic systems quite freely depending upon ability, interests and grades after certain examinations. While there may be differences and variations in the Landers (regions), the ability (or rather the acknowledged right) to transfer between the systems in any region, should a learner and their family physically move their residence, is ingrained in the law. Perhaps this flexibility, among many other factors, explains the lowest unemployment levels in Germany compared to other partners in the CORVET partnership. According to the International Labour Office in 2010, Germany had an unemployment rate of 6.1% compared to 7.8% in UK, 8.4% in Italy and 12.4% in Turkey (ILO, Nov 2010).

The discussions also showed that all countries have a compulsory education either for 10 or 12 years. For example, in UK, by 2015 compulsory education will be increased to age 18. Nursery education in all countries vary, and starts from age 3, the Kindergarten level in Germany, while in UK some parents opt to send their children to nursery either from age 2 or 3, depending upon family circumstances and the availability of facilities in their area.

While in UK and Turkey, learners are faced with options after the primary stage, the options in Germany and Italy seem to matter at a later stage of a student's educational life. The UK's 11-Plus examination decides for a learner the type of secondary education a student can follow, although there are differences according to the learner's place of residence and catchment regions. A small number of counties, notably Kent and Lincolnshire, maintain Grammar schools while in most other Local Authorities (LA), students go to either Comprehensive, Voluntary Aided or Faith schools. All these schools follow the prescribed National Curriculum (NC) so all learners study the same core subjects with options being

offered, depending on the specialism supported by the schools from Business, Art & Media, Technological to Science and Mathematics.

In Turkey, the learners from primary stage seem to have three distinct options:

- 1) academic institutions where students are prepared for higher education
- 2) vocational and general education institutions where learners are prepared for either higher education or professional routes and
- 3) the vocational institutions that prepare students for vocations or self employment.

In Italy, the learners face their options at age 14 having completed their Lower Secondary Education and have the choice of entering into a Lycee (Grammar) where they are trained towards a First Degree. Alternatively, the Italian education system offers the Technical or Vocational Institution route that can lead to professional qualifications. The Italian system, combined with some aspects of the German method, is reminiscent of the system that existed in the UK prior to NC, especially from the '60s to late '70s, when there was a more skills-based approach of guiding learners through their career choices from academic to vocational routes and where the professions were rigorously pursued at Polytechnics that churned out qualified British Carpenters, Mechanics and other such well-trained people! It was when Britain still had a manufacturing base and could support all kinds of skills, unlike in current times when the focus is on retail and service, both of which are quickly exposed to the economic cycles of boom and bust.

The meeting continued with discussions about the different stages of the project during the two-year period and responsibilities of each partner. Marc provided us with the agenda for the next two meetings: Turkey in March 2012 and UK in September 2012. Everyone was given the opportunity to give feedback of the events and input ideas and thoughts for the agenda during the coming 12 months. The visit ended with a tour of Paderborn city and its interesting historical development through wars and other difficult times since the days of Charlemagne. We even had the opportunity to serenade in the oldest building (almost 1000 years old) in Paderborn where budding singers often practice with their vocal chords before gaining fame and celebrity status!