

Submission to the Department of Education and Skills/Department of Social Protection/Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation on behalf of *The Institute of Guidance Counsellors*

Introduction

This submission proposes to illustrate:

- The need for strategic planning around labour market policy as a matter of urgency
- The link between Mental Health issues and long-term unemployment
- The sobering statistics for youth unemployment and mental health issues in Ireland at the current time
- The pivotal role played by the guidance counsellor to job seekers across the lifespan, in addressing these issues and saving the tax payer money
- How youth are calling out for more time with their guidance counsellors

Skill Mismatches

A recent OECD report (OECD Economic Surveys: Ireland 2013) highlights how skill mismatches are currently in evidence amongst the labour market force. There is an urgent need to address these skill shortages in the short-term if Ireland is to claw its way out of this recession. According to this report, currently 50,000 of potential employees are immigrating here annually and 80,000 of Irish nationals are emigrating to find gainful employment.

This OECD report outlines how according to a poll conducted by the National Youth Council in October 2012, 1 person out of 2 aged 18-24 was considering emigrating. (OECD, p54). This is a staggering statistic reminiscent of the brain-drain of the eighties. We know from the same report, that from 2010 emigration of Irish nationals surged and today more than half of our emigrants are Irish nationals. (OECD, p54). This OECD report highlights how: “Younger workers introduce new skills & innovative expertise – raise overall productivity level” (p51) The tenet of this report is that a direct knock on effect of hiring young employees would result in an increase in the overall productivity level. If we are to retain our young, who are according to this report an invaluable asset to the economy, it is necessary to: “better align the content of educational & training schemes so that they provide skills required by expanding sectors” (OECD, p11). Presently we are haemorrhaging our best and brightest to foreign shores.

Policy

The OECD report is critical of current government policy vis-à-vis labour market issues and calls for a “more strategic approach to youth unemployment” (OECD, p67) criticising the present practice as “fragmented”. (OECD, p67). This report states categorically that: “Labour market policies are moving in the right direction but new policies still do not focus enough on long-term unemployment”. (OECD, p10). One key recommendation from the OECD is to establish Outreach programmes and engage in early

intervention for our youth in particular. For this to happen co-operation between the public employment service and the education system is essential. This report lauds the dual system of apprenticeship and vocational training in operation/existence in Switzerland, Germany and Australia as best practice for Ireland going forward. In these countries “all key stakeholders (employers, social partners, experts from vocational schools) are engaged in developing the vocational training curricular frameworks.” (OECD, p72). This ensures an excellent match between supply and demand of skills whilst accommodating flexibility to react to the fluidity of labour market requirements.

Here in Ireland, we are experiencing unsustainably high levels of dependency on passive measures of income support. Beneficiaries of passive income support were at “10% in 2007; now 30% of the youth labour force is supported by passive measures equalling the highest rate in Europe”. (OECD, p63). This report posits that: “Job search assistance yields favourable results.” (OECD, p61). Previous OECD reports have demonstrated that the ratio of people available in employment offices to provide job search assistance and monitoring relative to unemployed jobseekers is well below that in other advanced economies. The 2013 report highlights the urgent need to ameliorate the apprenticeship system and effectively deploy internships if we are to: “break the circle “no experience – no job”. The recommendation here is that a specialtrack should be established for youth. (OECD, p72). As the risk of poverty of 16 – 24 year olds has increased from 26% in 2007 to 40% in 2011 (OECD, 2013) this is a problem which requires an urgent solution. “SOLAS and the Department of Social Protection should establish channels to monitor attendant Training schemes.” (OECD, p70). A new type of progression beyond the present system is needed to resolve this issue. This report favours an: “Emphasis of vocational schemes – specialized courses providing the participants with high level skills relevant in potential growth areas in labour market and job placement ”. (OECD, p70).

It is the view of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) that both realistic and viable options in Vocational Training have to be developed and presented attractively to young people. In the City and Guilds report “Young People and Vocational Choices in Ireland” (June 2013) it emerged that respondents required more information available in schools to help them judge whether vocational education can support their career choices; according to this report students currently perceive vocational training to be less challenging and less prestigious than academic education. The transferable skills which can be learned in vocational education need to be emphasised and the concept of Lifelong Learning must be inculcated in our system. The IGC strongly agree that the apprenticeship system in Ireland needs a major overhaul, this point is affirmed in the recent OECD report (OECD Economic Surveys: Ireland 2013) which calls for a shift in focus from “bricks to brains” in terms of training objectives, this report emphasises the need for engagement at national level with a knowledge based economy.

Youth require guidance and counselling

Two of the key recommendations of this report are that we: “Prioritise the engagement with long-term jobseekers and increase the number of caseworkers supporting them through internal redeployment” (OECD, p11). Currently, case workers dealing with the unemployed have been reduced to a fire-fighting service where: “Each caseworker oversees approx 800 jobseekers”. On the ground this translates to roughly 15 minutes per client. In a similar regressive move, in our second level schools the guidance and

counselling service has been halved by the removal of the ex-quota allocation in the budget of December 2012. The OECD report states categorically that: "Youth require more intense & comprehensive Job search assistance and counselling." (OECD, p66). People and problems require time and the input of appropriately trained professionals. In the adult arena little or no care is taken to address the holistic needs of individuals seeking gainful employment. There is insufficient time allocated to respect the dignity of the jobseeker, to meet the client where they are on their life path or to nurture them into a frame of mind where they may pluck up the confidence to return to education or strive to upgrade their employment status.

A further OECD report entitled: "OECD 2 Local Job Creation: How Employment and Training Agencies Can Help" (OECD 2013) expounds on how: "The Adult Guidance Enhancement Initiative is a service for adults experiencing difficulties in accessing further education but coverage is patchy. The absence of an overall strategy for ensuring access for all adults to guidance, job search and job matching is keenly felt." (OECD 2, p57). Recommendations made by the OECD include the need to: "Ensure adequate career guidance and information on pathways is available for both youth and adults, informed by labour market intelligence". (OECD 2, p89). Yet with the embargo on public service recruitment Adult Education Guidance Initiatives services throughout Ireland are short of staff because they are not considered to be front-line public service positions. Instead of having access to a guidance service in the proven model of the Adult Education Guidance service, unemployed people are steered into vacant positions, a quick-fix which may bear no relationship to their skills, aptitudes or life experience. Ironically the OECD report highlights the pivotal role of the guidance counsellor to younger clients in particular: "The number of caseworkers in Intreo should be further increased – through internal redeployment, to provide long-term unemployment with appropriate engagement and support". (OECD, p66).¹

Relationship between mental health issues and unemployment

According to research published by RCSI (Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland) on October 10th 2013; "one in five young Irish adults aged 19-24 and one in 6 young people aged 11-13 were experiencing mental disorder at the time they took part in two HRB-funded studies on mental disorders among Irish youth. The research also found that experiencing mental ill-health in early life places young people at increased risk of further episodes of mental ill-health during their adult years." (One in Five Young People in Ireland is Experiencing a Mental Disorder: RCSI PERL Group Mental Health Report 10 October 2013) From the same report, Professor Mary Cannon, PERL Group Leader & Associate Professor, RCSI, commented: " For the first time in Ireland, we have evidence showing that young people who experience mental ill-health during adolescence have higher rates of mental disorders and substance misuse during their young adult years and are three times more likely to be unemployed than young adults who did not experience mental ill-health during their adolescence."

Mental health issues and their associated problems pose social and economic challenges for this country. Clearly individuals experiencing mental health issues will have great difficulty procuring and holding a position of employment. This report suggests that there is a corollary between mental health issues and the unemployment level.

¹ Paragraph by Tadhg Crowley, Adult Education Guidance Service

Pre budget 2012, the tacit knowledge which guidance counsellors had of their students empowered them to pick up on mental health issues early on, nip early stage problems in the bud by addressing key issues, providing short and long-term counselling as required and referring more chronic cases out to health care professionals. Now that guidance counsellors across the country have been relocated to the classroom, many mental health issues will go unnoticed until they morph into very serious issues that require long-term expensive healthcare intervention. Left untreated these issues can become so entrenched in the person's psyche that will become part and parcel of their personality, a fait accompli and/or prohibitively expensive to treat.

The Minister for State at the Department of Health & Department of Justice, Equality & Defence, Ms Kathleen Lynch T.D. responded to this report by saying: "We should, for example, be alert to the signs and signals of distress." Guidance counsellors across the country are highly sensitized to the "signs and signals of distress". We have taken the time to complete a post graduate diploma in guidance counselling, we upskill continuously in a broad range of therapeutic interventions. Most of us have completed a guidance related Masters Degree at our own expense. We participate in professional supervision. We are trained to respond to mental health issues, we were there in place ready to respond to critical incidents in a heartbeat prior to Budget 2012.

Now, in sharp contrast, the government has removed us from our posts and we are not now afforded the time or the opportunity to pick up on the "signs", to "promote good coping skills" because we are busy teaching subjects we qualified in one or two decades ago. This is a source of personal distress and professional frustration to a profession who have in effect been disempowered, demoted and sidelined to allegedly save money. It is precisely because we are sensitized to the "signs and signals of distress" that it is a huge source of personal stress to guidance counsellors when we are powerless to attend to these triggers as the powers that be have deemed we are more valuable confined to a classroom and that the self-harming student, the highly anxious student the victim of psychological, physical, sexual or emotional abuse must fend for themselves. If we are not available to answer the knock at our office door when it comes, there is no guarantee that the student who needs help today will come back tomorrow to ask again. For some students in severe distress there may not be a tomorrow if they have no one to turn to at that critical juncture in their lives. Some of these cases will now not be picked up on or referred out at the appropriate life stage. Anybody who works with young people will understand that they do not think long-term, they think in the present tense and feelings when they come can be overwhelming especially during adolescence. What is the cost to maintaining our "lost generation" (OECD, p 60) on Social Welfare for the rest of their natural lives? What is the cost both human and financial of all the victims of theft, vandalism, violence, rape, murder, drug/alcohol abuse, homelessness, suicide which culminate from the actions of those caught in the poverty trap and those who according to the OECD report are socially "excluded"? "The research also reveals that almost 1 in 5 (19%) had thought about suicide." These are sobering figures, if you consider that of every 30 students sitting in front of you, according to this data 6 have considered taking their own lives.

The RCSI PERL Group Mental Health Report clearly articulates the need to reinstate the ex quota hours of the guidance counsellor in schools across the land with immediate effect. Speaking at the conference guest lecturer Professor Pat McGorry, Professor of Youth Mental Health, University of Melbourne

warned: "This research should be the only wakeup call that people need. This research tells us very clearly that there is an urgent need to enhance the services, supports and policies which underpin the mental health services available to young people in Ireland. There is a need for specialist mental health services catering to young people between the ages of 15 and 25. These young people do not fit well into the current adult services. Without access to appropriate support services at the right time, a young person's chances of operating and functioning well in society as adults are severely limited."

Young people call for more one to one time with their guidance counsellor

In the City and Guilds report cited below "Young People and Vocational Choices in Ireland" (June 2013), second level students were asked for their opinion about the current provision of guidance and counselling in our schools. Our nation's adolescents responded by identifying what their needs are and how they may be best addressed.

- Career guidance, information and advice to be accessible to them in school at an earlier age - ideally at 13yrs or earlier
- Continued availability of individual appointments with a guidance counsellor about career paths and qualifications

The young people consulted for the City & Guilds report have flagged their need for face to face appointments with a dedicated Guidance Counsellor; careers information at an earlier age and they have requested careers speakers in schools to be organised by their Guidance Counsellor. Surely this sends a clear message to our government that the recent cutbacks restricting the amount of time Guidance Counsellors can dedicate to this work are misguided and are preventing the development of our young people's lives and ultimately damaging to our economy in the long-term.

Conclusion

Guidance counsellors engage in vocational, educational and personal counselling attending to their students/clients in a holistic manner. One cannot separate personal counselling from vocational counselling especially as the individual moves through the life stages. An adult client returning to work will probably require ongoing emotional support, a training needs analysis, ongoing therapeutic intervention, work around motivation and vocational goal setting as they progress through an individually tailored step by step plan. The holistic guidance and counselling model carries the long term benefits of a proper fit of employee to job. The existing practice is a quick fix which may tick a few boxes in the short term but will yield as yet unforeseen problems and tax bills in the future.

As guidance counsellors, our role matching suitable candidates to apprenticeships from as early as second level school is the key to economic recovery in this country. Forfás carry out comprehensive and costly research which clearly identifies where the current skill shortages are in Ireland. They create comprehensive PowerPoint presentations that few students are going to see now that the guidance counsellor has been relocated away from the career guidance function to the classroom. When the IGC met with City & Guilds last term, they wanted to know what the skill shortages were, where the jobs would be next month or next year so that they could create training courses to address emerging labour

market needs. So basically we have all the information available, and the qualified careers professional best equipped to impart it, identify appropriate students to take up apprenticeships and guide them into the optimally matched course for their skill set. Unfortunately this may not happen because the qualified guidance counsellor no longer has the appropriate access to the student requisite to complete this process.

Guidance counsellors are proud to act as the voice of their students because our students represent the future. Our students have honoured us by trusting us with their stories, by sharing their hopes, their dreams and their fears with us. They are grateful for our time, our honesty, our nurturing of them and our praise. They have the courage to ask for help when they need it. They are worth fighting for and their sense of decency makes us want to fight harder on their behalf. Lately they are losing confidence, their fear is palpable. It is becoming more challenging to fan the flames of hope for our next generation a scenario compounded by our increasingly limited access to them. One of the most remarkable qualities of this generation of young people was their lack of fear, and their inner confidence. We need those qualities to get this country back on its feet; decision makers of Ireland extinguish the hope in our young at your peril.

References:

“Young People and Vocational Choices in Ireland” (City & Guilds, June 2013)

OECD Economic Surveys: Ireland 2013 (OECD, 2013)

OECD 2 Local Job Creation: How Employment and Training Agencies Can Help” (OECD 2013)

RCSI PERL Group Mental Health Report, 10 October 2013 (RCSI, 2013)

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