

Aspire2 Alumni

Summary Report on Young Critical Thinkers Erasmus+ Project

January – October 2019



Introduction

We are the Young Critical Thinkers. Our aim is to create an examination system that helps eliminate "unnecessary stress", pressure and barriers that Irish young people face today. Our journey began back in 2015 during our 5th year in school, where a handful of us were chosen to be a part of a student support programme in our schools, known as the Aspire2 Youth Advisory Panel. We acted as a support system for our year group where we passed on messages and any issues that arose during our leaving certificate. This really helped us relax knowing that there was support out there. It's because of Aspire2 that we came up with the idea to end this pressure for all students around Ireland. From looking into our idea we saw that too many students were struggling due to pressure of the state examination structure, so we wanted to know if our system was failing and if other systems with different approaches have more success rates. We wanted to get an understanding of other countries final exams and hopefully have a good influence on the Irish Leaving Certificate system. It took us two years to get our project up and running. We had to change our project from a national to an international project by applying for a KA2 Erasmus+ instead of a KA3. This meant that we were able to work with our partners Finland and Macedonia to explore their models of education. By learning from shared experiences we hope our learning will result in influencing change in education policy in Ireland, particularly around the leaving cert structure and curriculum.

Irish Survey

When we first started this project I don't think any of us believed we would get this far. We knew from our own experience of the Irish education system that something had to be changed. The Irish leaving cert is one big memory test, for two/three years you learn 8-10 subjects and sit one big exam at the end of them years. If you're good at rote learning then you'll fly it but most people aren't so therefore when it comes to the exam you can't remember what you've learned over the past number of years and because of this one exam you can't go to university and for some people that's a defining moment for them, if they don't get into university they may not progress onto third level at all. Who's to say that's the type of person you are, maybe you just had a bad day that day, should that decide the type of person you are for the rest of your life. So we all decided that something had to change, we just didn't know how to change it, so this project was formed.

We got the funding for this project and picked our partner countries we decided on Finland, as we had heard so much wonderful things about their system and we picked Macedonia as we thought that being a eastern country they would be very different to us. Our first meeting as a group was in Finland this is were we started to discuss how we could get the most people's opinions the easiest way. We decided we would do an online survey as we felt this was the best way possible. When we decided on that we started to discuss different questions we could ask. We wanted to try keep the same questions in the three countries so we discussed these questions in groups while the three countries were mixed together to make sure we were all on the same page.

When we started design our survey loads of people had different ideas of what questions should go into it and at first it was very difficult to narrow down the questions from all the groups into one survey so each group picked the questions we thought were most important. Then we just thought about what we most wanted to find out and worked backwards from there.

Macedonia and Finland Surveys

As part of our project, we went on a trip to Finland in April and Macedonia in June. While there, we were given the opportunities to have a tour of the schools. These tours really helped us understand the types of education received by students in these countries. In Finland, we could tell that education is highly valued. There are no private schools in Finland. Education is equal across the country and nobody gets a better education based on wealth or location. The government pays for schools all over the country to ensure everyone gets the same quality of education. Furthermore, in Finland, we believe people have more incentive to stay in full time education. People are not eligible for social welfare if they are not in full time education. This is the opposite in Ireland, here, a person is not eligible for social welfare unless they have been out of education for 6 months. Also, in Finland, we learned that people can take exams in their own time. This reduces pressure for students that struggle to learn on a schedule.

Similarly, our trip to Macedonia taught us a lot about the different types of education systems in the world. Like Ireland, Macedonia has both public and private schools. However, the divide is not as obvious in Macedonia. Education is also free in Macedonia for public schools. And in Macedonia, students start learning a different language as young as 6 years old.

From our visits, we have been able to draw some very clear contrasts between the Finnish, Macedonian and Irish education systems.

Suggestions

From doing our survey we found that 241 of our 276 participants said that they thought Continuous Assessment and projects as a form of examination would be better. We also found that the current system only suits "academic" learners. The NCCA (National Council for Curriculum and Academic) published a report early this year on this exact topic stating that an agreement was reached among these consultations (of 2,500 participants) that "a much broader array of assessment methods such as projects, teamwork and assessment" should be introduced into the curriculum. Looking to our Finnish partners, we see individuality arise, this idea of individuality is an attractive feature of the Finnish Education system. Studies also show that students learn better when teamwork is involved, this is another very attractive part of the Finnish system, teamwork is a big part of their education system. Then on the other side of Europe we found that Macedonia education system had some attractive features. In Macedonia only 40% of their final exam goes towards their diploma, the other 60% is based on their grades from the past 4 years. If we implement CA into our current system and we involve students in proactive learning appealing to more than just the "academic" learner, students could achieve more. 92.6% of participants agreed that the leaving cert does not meet the needs of all learners, while no size fits all the system only fits a minority of learners.

Statistics

If you fail	
Finland	3 chances to repeat. If you pass you can repeat the exam as many times as you like till you get the grade you want
Macedonia	2 chances to repeat
Ireland	Have to repeat the whole year

Exam Structure	
Finland	The grades they need from their final exam depends on what you want to study and where you want to study. They do an entrance exam for university and the results get combined with their grades from their final exam.
Macedonia	60% of their grades for their diploma is combined with their grades from their 4 years in school. The other 40% is based off their final exam.
Ireland	One final exam based on what they have learned over the past 2/3 years. If you miss your exam you can't repeat till next year.

Education System	
Finland	One school for everyone, they just go to whatever school is nearest to them and its free.
Macedonia	Only 2 international schools that are private and one public school for everyone
Ireland	5 tiered education systems. We have private, semi-private, public, DEIS and FAS